



# The relationship between adult attachment and depression in Korean mothers during the first 2 years postpartum: A moderated mediation model of self-esteem and maternal efficacy



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined a possible pathway to better understand the relationships between attachment schema and maternal depression through self-esteem and maternal self-efficacy. Questionnaires regarding attachment style, self-esteem, maternal self-efficacy, and depression were completed by 176 mothers who visited paediatrics centres. The results showed that self-esteem fully mediated the relationship between preoccupied attachment and maternal depression and partially mediated the association between fearful attachment and maternal depression. The mediating effects of self-esteem in the relationship between insecure attachments (preoccupied and fearful types) were moderated by the mother's parenting efficacy. More specifically, mothers with high maternal efficacy (scores  $\geq 32$ , upper 10th percentile) were protected from the detrimental impact of attachment insecurity and low self-esteem on maternal depression, compared with mothers with low parenting-efficacy. Maternal depression benefits from intervention targeting the mother's parenting efficacy.

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## 1. Introduction

Women of child-rearing age are at high risk for depression, with a prevalence of 7–14.5% in the first 3 months after childbirth and 8–15% during the first year (Gavin et al., 2005; Murray & Cooper, 1997; O'Hara & Swain, 1996). Of mothers who have experienced postpartum depression, 50–60% are twice as likely to experience subsequent depression over the first postpartum year, compared with those without postpartum depression (Cooper & Murray, 1995; see Goodman, 2004 for a review). This implies that attention to postpartum depression should extend through the first 2 years after giving birth.

Insecure attachment in close adult relationships is considered a risk factor for depressive symptoms (Gotlib & Hammen, 1992; Hammen et al., 1995; Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997). However, only a few studies have examined this relationship in the context of postpartum depression. In a longitudinal study, Bifulco et al. (2004) found that preoccupied and fearful adult attachment types significantly predicted the onset of postpartum depression. Meredith and Noller (2003) reported that, when measuring adult attachment style, mothers with a preoccupied attachment type

were more prone to experiencing elevated depressive symptoms than those with secure attachment styles during their postnatal periods. Recently, Wilkinson and Mulcahy (2010) found that mothers with preoccupied and fearful attachment styles in their close adult relationships reported higher levels of depressive symptoms than did those with secure and dismissive attachment styles.

Insecure attachment might affect psychopathology indirectly via a mediating effect through self-esteem. For example, Roberts, Gotlib, and Kassel (1996) found that insecure adult attachment, mediated by low self-esteem, led to depression in university students. Similarly, Lee and Hankin (2009) showed that self-esteem mediated the relationship between anxious adult attachment type (not avoidant) and depression among adolescents. Although self-esteem could be an important psychological characteristic of the mother, only a few studies have explored the role of global self-esteem on mother's psychological well-being. As postpartum mothers, compared with non-postpartum individuals, are more likely to suffer from fewer social contacts and child-rearing stress, mothers with insecure adult attachment might be more susceptible to low self-esteem, which in turn, affects a mothers' depressive symptoms. Few studies so far have explored the possible role of mother's self-esteem on her depressive symptoms. For example, one study found that daily stressors during the postpartum period affected postpartum depressive symptoms through the mother's self-esteem (Hall, Kotch, Browne, & Rayens, 1996). Another study

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reported that, during postpartum period, mother's self-esteem significantly predicted maternal self-efficacy, which in turn had significant impact on mother's behaviours under infant-rearing distress (Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2002). Mother's self-esteem might therefore play a pivotal role in not only mother's depressive symptoms but also her own maternal behaviours. In the present study, we aim to explore the mediating mechanism of self-esteem in the relationship between insecure adult attachment and mother's depressive symptoms.

Along with mother's self-esteem, maternal self-efficacy, as defined as a person's belief in her abilities to carry out various parenting roles (Coleman & Karraker, 1998), has been considered to play a pivotal role in parenting styles, as well as in the mother's well-being. There is evidence that higher parental self-efficacy is associated with positively attuned interactive and sensitive parenting (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Bohlin & Hagekull, 1987; Donovan, Leavitt, & Walsh, 1990; Teti & Gelfand, 1991), whereas lower parental self-efficacy is related to a hostile and aggressive attitude in the face of difficult child behaviours (Bondy & Mash, 1999; Gross, Sambrook, & Fogg, 1999).

Research has found that parental self-efficacy is associated with maternal depression (Cutrona, 1984; Leahy-Warren, McCarthy, & Corcoran, 2012; Surkan et al., 2008). For example, Porter and Hsu (2003) found that the prenatal anticipated maternal self-efficacy and 1-month maternal efficacy were associated inversely with concurrent depression. Studies have shown that parental efficacy mediated the effect of infant difficulty or social support on postpartum depression (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Haslam, Pakenham, & Smith, 2006). However, research considering parental efficacy as a moderator is sparse. Bolten, Fink, and Stadler (2012) found that high maternal efficacy, measured during the mother's third trimester, buffered the postpartum effect of prenatal stress on the infant's crying, suggesting the importance of intervention on maternal self-efficacy in parenting programs.

In sum, previous studies have shown that insecure attachment, especially fearful and preoccupied type, was significantly associated with an increased risk of postpartum depression. The mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between attachment insecurity and depressive symptoms has been reported in university students and adolescents, but not in mothers under a stress condition of postpartum period. The present study aims to investigate the possible mediating effect of mother's self-esteem in the link between mother's insecure attachment and depressive symptoms. On the other hand, there has been evidence that mother's self-esteem significantly predicts maternal efficacy which has also been associated with postpartum depression. Following a recent study that considered maternal efficacy as a moderator (Bolten et al., 2012), the present study, for the first time, proposes the moderated mediation model of self-esteem and maternal efficacy in the relationship between mother's insecure attachment and depressive symptoms. More specifically, we investigated whether the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between insecure attachment and maternal depression would be moderated by maternal efficacy.

The specific hypotheses examined were as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Self-esteem mediates the relationship between insecure adult attachment (preoccupied or fearful attachment) and maternal depression.

**Hypothesis 2a:** The inverse relationship between self-esteem and maternal depression is weaker in mothers with high maternal efficacy than in those with low maternal efficacy.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Maternal efficacy moderates the positive and indirect effect of insecure adult attachment (preoccupied and fearful) on maternal depression via self-esteem. Specifically, self-esteem mediates the relationship between insecure adult

attachment and maternal depression when maternal efficacy is low, but not when it is high.

Figure 1 outlines the moderated mediation model proposed here.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were recruited from two paediatrics departments in Seoul, Korea. Since previous studies have reported that many depressed mothers in the early postpartum weeks continue to experience depression 2 years after delivery, we expanded the time frame of the study beyond 1 year postpartum. The study recruited 178 mothers, but two were excluded due to missing data (e.g., skipping at least one item in a scale or a lack of reliability). The final data included 176 primi- and multiparous mothers with 1–4 children each. The mean age of the mothers was  $32.84 \pm 3.45$  (range 19–42) years (mean  $\pm$  SD), and that of the children was  $9.89 \pm 7.08$  (range 0–24) months. The education level of the participants ranged from 9 to 18 years: 1.1% (2/176) completed elementary and middle-school only, 35.8% (63/176) received high-school educations, 58.0% (102/176) had a university degree, and 5.1% (5/176) had postgraduate degrees. All mothers were married and came from the same ethnic background. Of the women, 53.4% (94/176) worked full or part-time, and 46.6% (82/176) were stay at home mothers.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Demographic information

Demographic information such as the ages of the mothers and infants, education level, marital status, and job status was obtained using a brief self-report questionnaire.

#### 2.2.2. Adult attachment style

The mothers' attachment styles were assessed using the validated Korean version of the Relationship Questionnaire (K-RQ) (Jang, 1997), which was developed originally by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). The RQ is a single-item measure consisting of four short paragraphs, each describing a prototypical attachment pattern as it applies in close adult relationships. Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*doesn't describe me*) to 7 (*describes me very accurately*). Prototypes A–D correspond to the secure, fearful-avoidant, preoccupied, and dismissive-avoidant attachment patterns, respectively. The original and Korean versions of RQ have been shown to possess good psychometric properties in correlational analyses in both Western and Asian countries (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), although Cronbach's alpha cannot be calculated due to its single-item nature.

#### 2.2.3. Self-esteem

The self-esteem of the mother was assessed using the validated Korean-Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Jeon, 1974), which was

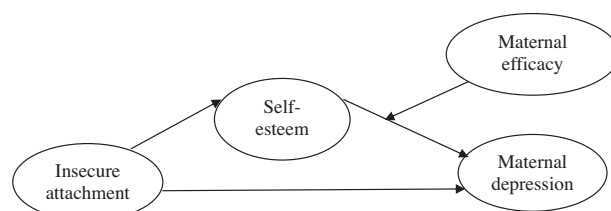


Fig. 1. Model of moderated mediation.

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