



## Insecure attachment and emotional distress: Fear of self-compassion and self-compassion as mediators



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### ABSTRACT

According to Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980), individual differences in adult attachment styles are based on attachments formed during infancy with primary caregivers. Adults who form secure attachments feel safe and secure in their relationships. Those who form insecure attachments do not. According to Self-Compassion Theory (Neff, 2003a, 2003b), and supported by research, self-compassion (i.e., compassionate attitudes and behaviors towards oneself) is associated with a variety of positive psychological outcomes, while a lack of self-compassion is associated with psychological distress (e.g., Barnard & Curry, 2011). Additionally, the fear of self-compassion has been negatively associated with self-compassion (Joeng & Turner, 2015). In this current study, we extend the research on attachment and self-compassion by examining how self-compassion and fear of self-compassion mediate two types of insecure attachment styles, anxious attachment and avoidant attachment, and two indicators of emotional distress, depression and anxiety, among 473 Korean college students. Structural equation modeling indicated that self-compassion independently mediated, and fear of self-compassion and self-compassion serially mediated, the paths from anxious and avoidant attachment to depression and anxiety in expected directions. Results are interpreted from the perspective of Korean culture, including the influence of Confucianism on the expression of self-compassion.

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### 1. Introduction

According to Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980), infants who do not have their physical or emotional needs met by primary caregivers tend to not form secure and trusting relationships (i.e., secure attachments) with these caregivers nor do they tend, as adults, to form secure attachments to friends or significant others. Through the emergence of internal working models (i.e., models containing the structure and content of relationships with self and others; Collins & Read, 1994), which are based on their earlier infant-caregiver interactions, these individuals believe that others upon whom they depend are inaccessible and uncaring. Indeed, they may unintentionally establish relationships as adults that mirror the unsupportive interactions they experienced as children. Their patterns of interactions within these relationships tend to be relatively devoid of closeness (i.e., insecure avoidant attachment), or

characterized by neediness, insecurity, and dependency (i.e., insecure anxious attachment) (Hankin, Kassel, & Abela, 2005). These individuals are also hypothesized to have a significantly increased risk for developing depression (Hankin et al., 2005).

Self-Compassion Theory (Neff, 2003a), and the research that has tested this theory, have suggested that if insecurely attached adults develop self-compassion, their emotional distress could decrease (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Rivis, 2011; Joeng & Turner, 2015). Yet, insecurely attached individuals may be afraid of receiving compassion for fear it would precipitate memories of unfulfilling relationships and exacerbate feelings of loneliness (Gilbert, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2011). Moreover, studies in this area have shown that the fear of self-compassion is negatively associated with self-compassion (Joeng & Turner, 2015), and that self-compassion is negatively associated with anxiety and depression (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Joeng & Turner, 2015). These mediating relationships have not been studied among adults who are anxiously or avoidantly attached. Thus, given this gap in the literature, we investigated whether fear of self-compassion and self-compassion mediate anxious and avoidant attachment styles as

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these attachment styles predict two indicators of psychological distress, depression and anxiety.

### 1.1. Attachment and emotional distress

Among insecurely attached adults, the two most common attachment styles are avoidant attachment and anxious attachment. Anxious attachment can occur in adults who have had unpredictable and inconsistent childhood caregivers (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Thus, they yearn for constant reassurance from their significant others (Wei, Mallinckrodt, Larson, & Zakalik, 2005); however, they have difficulty accepting this reassurance because they do not believe they deserve it (Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011). Avoidantly attached adults had childhood caregivers who were consistent but unresponsive. They tend to withdraw from others in order to avoid the anticipated disappointment of not getting their needs met (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Both groups tend to have strained, untrusting relationships, dysfunctional attitudes, and rigid views about themselves and their worlds. Both groups are vulnerable to greater emotional distress than are securely attached individuals (Burnette, Davis, Green, Worthington, & Bradfield, 2009; Hankin et al., 2005).

### 1.2. Self-compassion and fear of self-compassion

Self-compassion helps people who are insecurely attached experience less emotional distress (e.g., Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan, 2011). According to Neff's (2003a, 2003b) Theory of Self-Compassion, self-compassion is comprised of three dimensions: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. When self-compassionate people recognize their own failures, they exercise self-care instead of judging, berating, or belittling themselves. They recognize that their imperfections, and their experiences, even those that are the most painful, are part of the common human experience. They are also able to maintain perspective and to approach stressful situations mindfully (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007).

When people fear self-compassion, they resist being compassionate towards themselves (Pauley & McPherson, 2010; Rockcliff, Gilbert, McEwan, Lightman, & Glover, 2008). Individuals who have experienced abuse or neglect as children, which may be analogous to the emotional environment experienced by insecurely attached children, tend to develop a fear of self-compassion (Gilbert et al., 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Given these findings, and the theory and research that undergird them, an examination of how the fear of self-compassion and self-compassion serially mediate relationships between insecure attachment styles and emotional distress is an important next step in our quest to understand what initiates and maintains depression and anxiety among insecurely attached adults. To date, however, there is a lack of research that has examined these effects.

### 1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this current study was to examine the mediating roles of fear of self-compassion and self-compassion in the relationships between avoidant and anxious attachment, and emotional distress, represented by anxiety and depression. Based on theory and on prior research (e.g., Joeng & Turner, 2015), we hypothesized that 1) self-compassion would mediate relationships between the attachment and emotional distress variables, and that 2) the fear of self-compassion and self-compassion also would exert a serially mediating effect upon the emotional distress variables as they were predicted by the attachment variables.

To examine these relationships, we built and tested a model using a two-step approach of evaluating the measurement model and then evaluating the structural model. The aim of this procedure was to ascertain convergent and discriminant validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959), and

to increase the nomological validity of the structural model (see Anderson & Gerbing, 1988 for a fuller explanation of the two-step modeling approach). Given that we used cross-sectional data, wherein neither causality nor directionality can be assumed, we also constructed an alternate model in order to test and compare the efficacy of the hypothesized model against another theoretically plausible model. The alternate model was based on Pauley and McPherson's (2010) findings that people with higher levels of depression and anxiety are concerned that they cannot develop self-compassion because of their emotional distress. In this model, depression and anxiety mediated relationships between anxious and avoidant attachment and fear of self-compassion; and, depression, anxiety, and fear of self-compassion mediated relationships between anxious and avoidant attachment and self-compassion.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 473 college students from three South Korean universities. Of the participants, 288 (61%) were men, and 185 (39%) were women. Mean age = 25.26 years ( $SD = 3.78$ ).

### 2.2. Procedures

Participants were recruited through university email lists and websites, and from psychology classes at their respective universities. These participants voluntarily completed demographic information and online self-report surveys, of which 473 were completed.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Attachment styles

The 18-item Anxious Attachment and 18-item Avoidant Attachment subscales of the Korean version (Kim, 2004) of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Scale (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was used to measure adult attachment styles. Items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items are "I worry a lot about my relationships" (Anxious Attachment), and "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down" (Avoidant Attachment). In a psychometric study of the Korean version of the ECR-R (Kim, 2004), the wording of items, and expected vs. observed rates of responding were similar to the English version, as were the number and dimensions of the latent constructs. In this current study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$  for Anxious Attachment and  $\alpha = 0.79$  for Avoidant Attachment (Anxious Attachment  $M = 69.46$ ,  $SD = 13.85$ ; Avoidant Attachment  $M = 54.82$ ,  $SD = 18.67$ ).

#### 2.3.2. Fear of self-compassion

Fear of self-compassion was measured using the Korean version (Joeng, Choi, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2015) of the Fear of Compassion for Self Scale (Gilbert et al., 2011), which is one of three scales comprising the Fears of Compassion instrument (Gilbert et al., 2011). Of the three scales comprising this instrument, the Fear of Compassion for Self Scale was the only one that bore directly on our research. This scale consists of 15 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *don't agree at all* to 4 = *completely agree*). A sample item is "I worry that if I start to develop compassion for myself, I will become dependent on it." By using back-translation methods, it was found that the Korean version accurately assessed the concepts measured by Gilbert et al.'s (2011) original English version (Joeng et al., 2015). Fear of self-compassion measured by the Korean version was positively related to self-criticism, and negatively related to self-compassion (Joeng et al., 2015). In this current study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$  ( $M = 34.52$ ,  $SD = 11.83$ ).

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