



Attachment, perceived parental trust and grandiose narcissism: Moderated mediation models



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ABSTRACT

The present article explored the effect of attachment on grandiose narcissism via perceived parental trust through a cross-sectional investigation using moderated mediation models. The Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory, Perceived Parental Trust Questionnaire, and Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire were administered to 2260 middle school students of China (1094 seventh and 1166 tenth grade students). Results indicated that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety exert distinct influence on narcissism's self-enhancement (i.e., admiration) directly, while both attachment anxiety and avoidance foster self-protection (i.e., rivalry) directly. Furthermore, the strength of the indirect effect of one attachment dimension on narcissism via perceived parental trust is stronger when the other is lower, or when the grade is younger.

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1. Introduction

Large body of current researches have focused on the relationship between attachment and grandiose narcissism (henceforth narcissism), but failed to reach consistent conclusions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Moderated mediation models with perceived parental trust as the mediator are used to clarify the association between attachment and narcissism.

1.1. Grandiose narcissism and NARC

Grandiose narcissism is a personality trait in the general population involving self-assuredness, aggression, exhibitionism, and dominance (Miller et al., 2011), which is characterized by its paradoxical social consequences and processes (Back et al., 2013). On the one hand, narcissists' grandiose self and charming self-assured behaviors fascinate others, whereas on the other hand, their aggressiveness and lack of empathy make people distant from them (Ahn, Kwolek, & Bowman, 2015; Leckelt, Küfner, Nestler, & Back, 2015). Recently, Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC) model clarified the two distinct trait dimensions of grandiose narcissism: admiration and rivalry, which holds that the contradictory intra- and interpersonal consequences of grandiose narcissism are the products of two separate social strategies:

assertive self-enhancement for gaining social admiration (admiration) and antagonistic self-protection for preventing social failure (rivalry, Back et al., 2013). Both strategies are characterized by separate cognitive, affective-motivational and behavioral processes, which can be activated by narcissist's grandiose self and situational cues. However, little empirical research has addressed the role of personality on the preference of admiration and rivalry yet.

1.2. Attachment and grandiose narcissism

Attachment theorists hold that human beings are driven to seek proximity from an attachment figure to eliminate threats and dangers (Bowlby, 1973). Individual differences in attachment have sometimes been conceptualized using categorical model, such as Bartholomew's (1990) four-category model (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful attachment); however, recent taxometric researches suggest that attachment can be better conceptualized as two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015; for a review, see Gillath, Karantzas, & Fraley, 2016). People with high attachment anxiety (i.e., anxiously attached people) tend to overestimate the threaten cues of relationship and fear of being abandoned; whereas people with high attachment avoidance (i.e., avoidantly attached people) tend to distance from attachment figures to maintain independence (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). People, who score low in both anxiety and avoidance, evaluate self and others positively and master constructive emotion-regulation strategies; whereas people high on both attachment dimensions fear being hurt by significant others and are avoidant of intimacy (Gillath et al., 2016).

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Attachment is thought to be related tightly with grandiose narcissism since they are both self-evaluation related constructs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). According to control-system model of attachment-system dynamics (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), anxiously attached people apply hyper-activating strategies to exaggerating their inability and gain more attention from others, which seems reluctant to use self-enhancement strategy of narcissism (i.e., admiration). Whereas avoidant people develop deactivating strategies to defensively maintain self-reliance, such as inflating self-conceptions, inhibiting thoughts or feelings of vulnerability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), which are prone to admiration of narcissism.

Moreover, both two attachment dimensions seem to be positively associated with antagonistic self-protection (Ogilvie, Newman, Todd, & Peck, 2014), which would be prompted by social failure situational cues (Back et al., 2013). According to attachment theory, such social failure cues indicating threat to self-worth and would trigger the attachment system, which in turn leads to defensive emotion-regulation strategies of insecurely attached individuals. Avoidant individuals would be averse to and deny social failure cues with more hostile and intense physiological arousal; though anxious individuals strive for attention and care from others, which in turn tend to ruminate about threats that fuel intense hostile, anger, and aggression (Shaver, Mikulincer, & Chun, 2008). In a word, both attachment avoidance and anxiety are hypothesized to be positively associated to rivalry.

However, though the assumption concerning anxiety has been extensively validated (Besser & Priel, 2009; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003), the consensus concerning the positive relationship between avoidance and grandiose narcissism has not been reached. Despite some supportive evidence (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003), a number of researchers reported no relationship (Otway & Vignoles, 2006) and even negative relationship (Rohmann, Neumann, Herner, & Bierhoff, 2012) between avoidance and grandiose narcissism. These inconsistent results may stem from several disadvantages in previous research. First, the unidimensional framework of grandiose narcissism hindered the effort to elucidate the relationship between attachment and narcissists' paradox social processes. Second, dramatic studies conceptualized attachment using categorical models, which provided ambiguous evidence for the role of anxiety and avoidance (e.g., fearful attached attachment, Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). Moreover, the interaction of anxiety and avoidance may exist and interfere the effects of attachment on admiration (Fralely & Bonanno, 2004). Hence the present research attempted to determine the effects of two attachment dimensions as well as their interaction on narcissism.

1.3. The mediating role and suppression effect of perceived parental trust

Perceived parental trust, a vital protective factor against interpersonal conflicts (Borawski, levers-Landis, Lovegreen, & Trapl, 2003), may mediate the effects of admiration and rivalry in achieving grandiose self. According to empowerment theory, parental trust is accompanied by a delegation of authority (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Yin, Lee, & Zhang, 2013), which make adolescents more active in the struggle for admiration and immune to antagonistic self-defense. Furthermore, taking the healthy social exchange processes into account, to maintain an intimate relationship with their parents, adolescents regarding their parents' trust as somewhat rewarding are prone to reciprocate by behaving obediently in return (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). That's, prefer admiration rather than rivalry. Though such social exchange process has not been evidenced in the parents-children context, Ma and Wang (2014) revealed the positive relationship between perceived trust and working performance in the workplace. In addition, high perceived parental trust indicates good current family relationships (Borawski et al., 2003) implying current parents-children bonds work well as the secure base and safe heaven, and elicit the broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security (Li & Yan, 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). The attachment security would foster constructive emotion regulation strategies

(striving for admiration) and reduce the use of defensive strategies (rivalry). However, little empirical evidence is available concerning such deductions.

Perceived parental trust may mediate attachment's effect on narcissism. According to social exchange theory, trust is always mutual (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Also in line with the internal working models of attachment theory, insecurely attached people not only trust their parents less (Mikulincer, 1998), but also perceive less parental trust (Lai, Singh, Alshwer, & Shaffer, 2014). Consequently, attachment may negatively influence narcissism through present perceived parental trust.

Notably, perceived parental trust may suppress avoidance's positive effect on admiration. Suppression is a particularly important causal structure because the exclusion of "suppressors" from the analysis may obscure the original empirically supportable conceptualization (Wirtz & Philip, 2007). In the present study, perceived parental trust may serve as a suppressor since the indirect effect of avoidance on admiration through it is negative while the hypothesized direct effect is positive. To our knowledge, underlying mechanism linking attachment to narcissism through perceived parental trust has not been explored.

1.4. Grade difference

The impact of perceived parental trust may decrease in size as adolescents grow from seventh grade to tenth grade. Theories of socialization claim that parents become less influential during adolescence since the issue of popularity is especially significant in adolescence (Bukowski, Brendgen, & Vitaro, 2007; Stone & Brown, 1999) and the amount of time adolescents spend with friends increases whereas the time they spend with family decreases (Barnes, Welte, Hoffman, & Dintcheff, 1999). Consequently grade difference is tested here.

1.5. The present research

This study examines the effect of attachment on grandiose narcissism via perceived parental trust using data from seventh and tenth grade middle school students with moderated mediation models wherein the interaction of anxiety and avoidance as well as grade difference is examined (Fig. 1). Following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Both anxiety and avoidance positively predict rivalry directly; avoidance positively predicts admiration directly, whereas anxiety negatively predicts admiration directly.

Hypothesis 2. Both anxiety and avoidance have negative indirect effects on admiration but have positive indirect effects on rivalry by decreasing perceived parental trust.

Hypothesis 3. Given the contradiction of hyperactivation strategy and deactivation strategy, the effects of one attachment dimension may decrease in size as the level of the other dimension increase.

Hypothesis 4. The impact of perceived parental trust on narcissism decreases in size from seventh grade to tenth grade. The grade difference in effect of attachment is tested without specific assumptions given attachment orientation's relative stability (Fralely, 2002).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Our sample comprises 2260 students (incl. 1093 boys) from four randomly selected middle schools in Xi'an, a middle-sized city in the central part of China. The sample consists of seventh grade ($n_1 = 1094$) and tenth grade ($n_2 = 1166$). The average age was 12.27 ($SD = 0.53$) and 15.17 ($SD = 0.63$) for seventh and tenth grade respectively. The age and sex distribution is in Table 1.

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