



Self-control mediates the associations between parental attachment and prosocial behavior among Chinese adolescents☆



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ABSTRACT

Previous work has revealed that secure parental attachment promotes prosocial behaviors, but its underlying mechanism is less commonly explored. Drawing upon Bowlby's attachment theory, the current study examined the role of self-control in the link between parental attachment and prosocial behaviors. Six hundred and seven Chinese adolescents participated in the study completing measures that assessed parental attachment, self-control, and prosocial behaviors. Results showed that secure maternal attachment, rather than paternal attachment, was directly related to more prosocial behaviors in total sample and girls. Importantly, self-control mediated the links between both maternal and paternal attachment and prosocial behaviors across sex. In conclusion, self-control partly addresses how individuals who report being securely attached to parents engage in more prosocial behaviors.

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1. Attachment and prosocial behaviors

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) proposes that human beings are born with several behavioral systems (e.g., attachment and caregiving systems). Attachment processes are perhaps the most important in early life, but remain active over the life course (Bowlby, 1969). Securely attached individuals develop a sense of being loved, and they perceived that the world is safe to explore. Proximity to caregivers through positive attachment processes protects an individual from danger and reduces anxiety and threats, thus permitting an individual to grow and thrive (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Thus, the caregiving system directs one's attention toward others' distress and demands rather than exclusively focusing on his/her own vulnerability, provides protection and support to those in need, and is thought to become salient and be turned into actual behavior when an individual is secure enough to take the perspectives of and care for others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). In other words, attachment security lays the important psychological foundation for a caregiving system. Securely attached individuals feel safe to understand

others' emotions and are more empathic; they also feel safe to provide help without worrying too much about the interpersonal or emotional costs of doing so. Previous research has found that securely attached individuals are more empathic (e.g., Carlo, McGinley, Hayes, & Martinez, 2011) and engage in more prosocial behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mikulincer, Gillath, Halevy, Avihou, Avidan, & Eshkoli, 2001; Mikulincer et al., 2005; Richman, DeWall, & Wolff, 2015).

2. Attachment and self-control

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), interactions with attachment figures are stored in one's memory in the form of mental representations, based on which different working models of others and the self are developed. An individual's emotions and behaviors are affected by these working models, and some constructs related to these models center on self-control (e.g., emotion regulation, Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). Previous research has found that one develops better emotional control ability, an important self-control domain, through repeated successful interactions with caregivers (Cassidy, 1994). In addition, self-control theory (Gottfredson & Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) articulates the importance of parental attachment (or parental warmth) in an individual's development of self-control. This theory proposes that parents can teach children self-control by monitoring their behaviors, recognizing undesired behaviors, and by disciplining such behaviors in a timely manner. Thus, attachment or parental warmth is a necessary precondition

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for such parenting behaviors. Several studies have revealed that secure parental attachment is positively related to higher self-control among adolescents (Li, Delvecchio, Lis, Nie, & Di Riso, 2015; Vazsonyi & Belliston, 2007).

3. Self-control and prosocial behaviors

Natural selection favors traits and behaviors that bring direct benefits to the individual (Cialdini, 1991). Nevertheless, people also care about others because helping others allows increases the likelihood that they will receive help in times of need, in turn increasing survival and reproductive success. Therefore, being prosocial is promoted by most cultures, social values, and religions. Many prosocial behaviors often benefit others but do not generate direct or immediate personal gains; oftentimes, prosocial behaviors entail self-sacrifice. This leads to competing urges between selfish desires and collective concerns. Modulating this conflict requires the application of self-control as it regulates one's own responses to align with ideals, values, morals, and social expectations (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Self-control is necessary to overcome selfish desires in order to help others. Thus, self-control plays a crucial role in prosocial behaviors. Some research has shown, for instance, that individuals high on self-control depletion are less willing to help others and less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors (DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008; Osgood & Muraven, 2015). Developmental studies have also demonstrated that self-regulation is a strong predictor of prosocial behaviors among adolescents (Carlo, Crockett, Wolff, & Beal, 2012; Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011). Finally, evidence from neuroimaging work has shown that prosocial decisions involve brain regions that are activated related to self-control (Telzer, Masten, Berkman, Lieberman, & Fuligni, 2011).

4. The present study

Although substantial evidence has supported the relations between parental attachment and prosocial behaviors, limited research has examined whether this link might be partially explained by self-control. Thus, the current study aimed to address the associations between parental attachment, self-control, and prosocial behaviors among adolescents. Based on the reviewed literature, we hypothesized that securely attached adolescents would develop higher levels of self-control, which in turn would be positively associated with prosocial behaviors. In addition, previous research has found that girls in general are more attached to parents (e.g., Song, Thompson, & Ferrer, 2009) and are more prosocial (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999) than boys; therefore we were also interested in testing whether the hypothesized relations were moderated by sex.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 632 adolescents was recruited from a complete middle school¹ in Guangzhou, China. About 4% were from single-parent family. To facilitate subsequent analyses, these participants were excluded, leaving 607 students as the final sample. There were 286 boys and 321 girls (age range: 11–17 years; $M_{\text{age}} = 14.43$ years, $SD = 1.75$). We did not have access to participants' family socioeconomic status, but the school served basically middle-class family.

5.2. Measures.

5.2.1. Parental attachment

The Chinese revised version of *Inventory of Parental and Peer Attachment* (IPPA-R) was used to assess participants' cognitive perception and feelings toward parents (Li, Delvecchio, Miconi, Salcuni, & Di Riso, 2014). This scale includes 25 items measuring maternal attachment and another 25 items with parallel wordings measuring paternal attachment. All items are rated on a five point scale ("0 = never"; "4 = always"). The IPPA-R yields a total score by summing all items (with some items reverse scored), and a higher score indicates stronger attachment security. A sample item included "my mother respects my feelings." In this study, the Cronbach's α was .92 and .91 for paternal and maternal attachment, respectively.

5.2.2. Self-control

The self-restraint subscale of the *Adolescents' Self-Consciousness Questionnaire* was used to assess participants' self-control ability. This is an indigenous scale specifically developed to assess Chinese adolescents' various types of self-perception (Nie, Li, Dou, & Situ, 2014). This subscale includes 11 items rated on a five point scale ("1 = not at all like me"; "5 = like me very much"). A total score can be obtained by summing up all the items, and a higher score indicates better self-control ability. A sample item included "I can control my emotion." In the current study, the Cronbach's α was .80.

5.2.3. Prosocial behavior

The Chinese version of the Prosocial behavior subscale of the *Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998) was used to assess participants' prosocial behavior. This subscale consists of 5 items rated on a three point scale ("0 = not true"; "2 = certainly true"). A total score can be obtained by summing up all the items, with a higher score indicating more prosocial behavior. A sample item included "I usually share with others." In this study, the Cronbach's α was .71.

5.3. Procedures

The study was part of a large project that investigated the roles of parental attachment and the self on adolescents' adjustment and approved by the Ethical Committee of the university. Active consent was obtained from both parents and participants prior to their participation in the study. Voluntary participation was emphasized and no monetary incentive was offered. About 95% parents who had received a leaflet agreed to allow their child to participate; all adolescents allowed by parents were willing to take part in the study. With the help of teachers, questionnaires were administrated in a precise sequence during regular class hours by trained postgraduate students who were able to provide explanations and clarifications to anyone who had questions. Participants completed the measures and then turned them in as soon as they finished.

5.4. Data analyses

SPSS 18.0 and Mplus 7.0 were utilized to analyze the data. First, descriptive statistics were carried out to eyeball the mean level and skewness of the variables. Second, correlation analyses were conducted to capture the relationship between the investigated variables. Third, path analyses were performed to examine the association between parental attachment and prosocial behavior as well as the mediating effect of self-control. Bootstrap technique (bootstrap sample = 5000) was used and the 95% confidence interval was utilized to determine the significance of the mediating effect. Last, multi-group analysis was conducted to test whether the hypothesized model was moderated by sex.

¹ A complete middle school in Guangzhou refers to the school which covers from 7th grade to 12th grade.

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