The State Adult Attachment Measure (SAAM): A construct and incremental validity study

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Recent studies have shown that relationship experiences and contextual factors may influence attachment security, anxiety, and avoidance. In the present study, we investigated the psychometric properties of the Italian translation of the State Adult Attachment Measure (SAAM), a personality scale aimed to assess temporary variations in adult attachment styles (Gillath, Hart, Noftle, & Stockdale, 2009). Four hundred Italian participants took a set of standardized self-report attachment scales and other measures of subjective wellbeing and mental-health. Confirmatory Factor Analysis showed an acceptable fit between the SAAM three-factor model and the data, confirming the hypothesized measurement model for security, anxiety, and avoidance. SAAM subscales also attained high internal consistency reliability, were properly related to mainstream attachment style scales, and had incremental validity in predicting psychological well-being and mental health. The Italian SAAM translation is indeed a reliable and valid measure, showing promise as a clinical assessment of short-term changes in attachment states, even in non-English cultural context.

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1. Introduction

Attachment theory was developed by Bowlby (1969) to explain the bond between child and caregivers and the critical role of this bond in shaping the infant's expectations about the responsiveness and trustworthiness of significant others. Over the past two decades, attachment theory has provided a useful framework for exploring the quality of close relationships also across the life-span (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). The proliferation of studies of adult attachment is partly due to the development of self-report scales. This approach was pioneered by Hazan and Shaver (1987), who proposed a three-factor model of adult attachment, conceived in terms of security, anxiety, and avoidance, that follows the infant attachment patterns identified by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978).

Briefly, *attachment security* is confidence in the emotional availability of attachment figures, who are perceived as a "secure base" (Bowlby, 1988) for restoring emotional balance in times of distress and need. *Attachment anxiety* is characterized by a perceived failure to handle threats autonomously, which intensifies need for interpersonal closeness, love and support, notwithstanding the inconsistence of attachment figures (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Attachment avoidance is characterized by discomfort with interpersonal intimacy, reluctance to trust others and an emphasis on autonomy and independence, which is aimed at preventing the emotions evoked by rejection by others (Bartholomew, 1990).

Attachment is deemed to be fairly stable across the life-span (Waters, Weinfield, & Hamilton, 2000). In keeping with this, self-report scales typically assess adult attachment styles as relatively stable personality dimensions. The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) and the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994) are examples of mainstream adult attachment scales that have been used extensively during the past decades (for a review see Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya, & Lancee, 2010). Research has nevertheless shown that attachment styles are also influenced by relationship experiences. For example, individuals who form a new steady relationship are likely to report increases in security and decreases in insecurity (Feeney & Noller, 1992); similarly, normally secure individuals are likely to be classified as insecure after experiencing a relationship breakup (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, and Koh-Rangarajoo (1996) argued out that changes in attachment styles are possible because several representations of the self and of the others coexist simultaneously within the individual. These representations are thought to be hierarchically organized, with stable dispositions and abstract representations of attachment relationships at the higher levels and information about specific

relationships and interpersonal events at lower levels (Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003).

A parallel research stream originating in contemporary social psychology has shown that specific attachment contexts can prime attachment styles, which subsequently affect motivations and emotions. It was shown, for example, that priming participants with a security-enhancing attachment figure was associated with increased willingness to self-disclose on a subsequent task (Gillath et al., 2006). Simply asking people to imagine their partner as either responsive and sensitive or unresponsive and insensitive affects their responses to relationship-related scenarios (Gillath & Shaver, 2007). These sorts of changes in temporary attachment states seem to override stable attachment dispositions, and influence immediate perceptions, expectations and behaviors (Gillath, Hart, Noftle, & Stockdale, 2009).

The State Adult Attachment Measure (SAAM; Gillath et al., 2009) was originally developed to capture temporary variations in adult attachment. The SAAM provides a multidimensional individual profile of attachment security, anxiety and avoidance. A novel feature of the SAAM is that, unlike mainstream attachment scales, it is intended to elicit a *state*-related response, as respondents are asked how they feel in a given moment (e.g. 'I really need to feel loved *right now*' or 'If something went wrong *right now* I feel like I could depend on someone').

Besides that, the SAAM has the potential to empirically reproduce the structural representation of Hazan and Shaver's theoretical model of adult attachment (1987), a feature that distinguishes the SAAM from other published tools. For instance, the ECR-R lacks of an attachment security scale, thereby precluding a complete structural representation of the expected tridimensional structure. By contrast, the ASQ is characterized by an attachment security scale (i.e., Confidence), but it also has two relatively independent subscales for attachment anxiety (i.e., Need for Approval and Preoccupation with Relationships) and avoidance (i.e., Discomfort with Closeness and Relationships as Secondary). As a result, factor analytic research of the ASQ revealed a complex interplay of higher order and lower order factors (e.g., Feeney et al., 1994; Fossati et al., 2003). For instance, the most recent confirmatory analysis of ASQ items concluded that a nested model with five group factors, each representing one of the ASQ subscales, two general factors (i.e., avoidance and anxiety) and one response bias factor was barely fitting the data, while all alternative models had unacceptable fit indexes (Karantzas, Feeney, & Wilkinson, 2010).

Mainstream attachment scales such as the ASQ and ECR-R have been translated into several languages, including Italian (Busonera, San Martini, Zavattini, & Santona, 2014; Fossati et al., 2003). To our knowledge, the SAAM has only been translated into Korean (K-SAAM; Park & Lee, 2012). The Korean translation was found to have high internal consistency indexes and the three attachment factors emerged from Principal Axis Factoring. Furthermore, the convergent and discriminant validity of the K-SAAM was demonstrated with respect to selected mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and alexithymia (Park & Lee, 2012).

The present study investigated the psychometric properties of an Italian translation of the SAAM (IT-SAAM): its factorial structure, convergent validity with respect to trait measures of adult attachment, and incremental validity as a predictor of subjective wellbeing and mental health. We assessed the fit of the hypothesized three-factor model to data from an Italian community sample using attachment security, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance as correlated latent variables. We assessed convergent validity by measuring the association between IT-SAAM subscale scores and ECR-R and ASQ subscale scores. Lastly, we examined how well the IT-SAAM predicted subjective happiness, state anxiety, depression, and alexithymia, controlling for ECR-R and ASQ scores.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

Four hundred participants (157 men, 229 women, 14 undisclosed gender) completed a standard set of self-report scales (see Instruments). Participants age varied from 20 to 70 years (M = 36.45 years, SD = 11.82). Maximum education level was distributed as follows: 52 participants had completed elementary school, 180 junior high school, 166 high school, 2 undisclosed. Participants were volunteers and received no compensation.

The study was approved by the ethics committee of authors' institution (Deliberation # 23/7/2014).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. State measure of adult attachment

The State Adult Attachment Measure (Gillath et al., 2009), Italian Translation (IT-SAAM) was translated into Italian independently by the first and second authors. Differences between translations were resolved through discussion, then the items were back-translated into English by an independent bilingual professional to verify the semantic equivalence of the English and Italian versions. A draft version of the questionnaire was piloted on two small samples of undergraduate students and minor linguistic adjustments were made to align the items with an empirical three-factor structure. In this study the final version of the IT-SAAM (see Table 1) was administered according to the original instructions and uses the same response scale format as the original. Participants responded to 21 items using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*).

2.2.2. Trait measures of adult attachment

The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney et al., 1994), Italian Translation (Fossati et al., 2003) is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure adult attachment. Participants responded to 40 items, using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). Validation of the Italian version confirmed the hypothesized five-factor structure of the original; the factors are labeled Confidence, Discomfort with Closeness; Need for Approval; Preoccupation with Relationships and Relationships as Secondary.

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000), Italian Translation (Busonera et al., 2014) is a 36-item self-report instrument for measuring adult romantic attachment. Participants complete two 18-item scales, one measuring attachment-related anxiety and one measuring attachment-related avoidance, using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.3. Subjective happiness

The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), Italian Translation (Iani, Lauriola, Layous, & Sirigatti, 2014) provides a measure of subjective happiness as a global evaluation of quality of life. The SHS comprises 4 items with responses given on differently anchored seven-point Likert scales. The first item asks respondents how happy they are (1 = *not a very happy person* to 7 = *very happy person*). The second item asks respondents how happy they are in comparison to their peers (1 = *less happy* to 7 = *more happy*). The remaining two items ask respondents to what extent prototypical descriptions of a happy or unhappy person apply to them (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*). Higher total scores reflect greater subjective happiness.