

Attachment Style, Friendship Quality and the Mediating Effect of Communication Skills in Young Adults Friendship: Literature Review

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Bowlby's attachment theory (1973, 1980, 1982) postulated that the prototypes for adult attachment styles are based on their infancy experiences with the primary care-givers. Such experiences give rise to individuals' internal working models, constituting views of self and others as a consequence of their relationships history. Internal working models are rules, schemas or scripts that sum up a person's past experiences which will influence the quality of their close relationships developed later in life as these models determine how individuals interpret and react in social situations. To examine the relationship between the attachment styles of young adults and their friendship quality. This includes exploring how individuals' attachment styles can affect their patterns of communication, leading to perception of friendship quality in dyadic friendship relationship. A Systematic Review Approach has been adopted to conduct this Literature Review. Electronic databases of MEDLINE/PUBmed, EMBASE, Cochrane Library were searched using MeSH terms and keywords such as "Attachment Style", "Friendship Quality" and "Communication Skill". Boolean operator "AND" was used to join these terms to form a full search strategy which also include the use of Scholar Google. Studies linking attachment styles, friendship quality and communication skill in young adults were included in this review while others with unrelated elaborations were excluded. Securely attached individuals usually communicate better, have higher quality friendship relationships and enjoy more intimacy and satisfaction in their relationships. They tend to self-disclose more compared to insecure individuals, leading to greater intimacy in their friendship relationships. Anxious and avoidant people who have negative view of others tend to self-disclose less, leading to lower level of intimacy in their friendship relationships. Appraisal of friendship quality involves reciprocity, self-disclosure and responsiveness from both parties. It was found that individuals' internal working models can be reconstructed through experiences with their romantic partners, length of their friendship relationship and factors such as individuals' age, culture and gender. Attachment styles and ethnicity of individuals played a role in their communication skills and can lead to diverse friendship quality experienced.

Keywords: attachment styles, communication skills, friendship quality

The aims of this review are to determine (1) whether there is a relationship between the attachment

styles of individuals which were formed with their primary childhood

care-givers and their patterns of communication, including self-disclosure, with people in their later-life friendships (2) how early attachments affect satisfaction with later-life relationships and with the extent of intimacy experienced by individuals in friendships later in life, particularly in young adulthood (3) to explore if there is an association between the attachment style and the friendship quality (4) whether communication skills of individuals have a mediating effect in such association.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory dated from 1950 when the World Health Organization extended an invitation to the British psychiatrist John Bowlby to report on the mental health of the children in London orphaned by the Second World War. The theory tries to account for close relationships formation, maintenance and dissolution; likewise on short-term and long-term issues which involve emotions, cognitions and behaviours of people involved in them (Hazan, Campa & Gur-Yaish, 2004).

According to Hazan, Campa and Gur-Yaish (2004), the theory made the basic assumption that infants rely on adults for their protection and care due to their extreme immaturity at birth. By the law of natural selection, these infants developed a kind of bond with their caregiver/protector to ensure survival. This attachment system remains active across the lifespan with four behavioural features, namely the (i) proximity maintenance (ii) safe haven (iii) separation distress and (iv) secure base, defining attachment at all ages. Further, it was assumed that this system will only be activated by anxiety or fear, particularly as a consequence of

perceived threat or separation from attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1989).

Zeifman and Hazan's (1997) study on children and adolescents from age 6 to 17 found that the figures of attachment have gradually shifted from parents to peers across the age span. Conversely, study by Trinke and Bartholomew (1997) discovered that young adults with romantic relationships tend to direct attachment behaviours to their partners, followed by mother, father, siblings and best friends. Similar findings applied to those without romantic relationships but with the exclusion of romantic partners.

Further, literature search showed that much research has gone into addressing the relationship between the quality of early attachment to primary caregivers and adult interpersonal relationships, particularly romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, it is only recently that attention has turned towards understanding how attachment styles predict friendships or other non-romantic relationships (Grabill & Kerns, 2000; Kerns & Steven, 1996). A substantial amount of research has also indicated that friendship plays a pivotal role in socio-emotional adjustment and in the development of an individual's sense of self-worth (Hohmann, Furman & Berger, 2006; Ozen, Sumer & Demir, 2010).

Finally, Bretherton (1990) posited that the internal working model which determined the attachment style of an individual can be modified with new experiences via new relationships later in life. Studies by Rick (1985) supported this postulation. Ricks (1985) provided evidence to suggest that individuals' internal working model can be reconstructed through the security-providing spouse, particularly

during psychosocial transition such as marriage or transition to parenthood. This suggestion was later supported by clinical data which corroborated the facilitating effect of supportive relationships (Bretherton, 1990).

Attachment Style and Friendship Quality

Friendship is defined as a kind of social dyadic relationship which involves interaction between two individuals. It is voluntary and informal with no legal obligations or formal duties attached, unlike other forms of relationships and is typically egalitarian in nature (Hartshorne, 1994; Hohmann, Furman & Berger, 2006). Thus friendship cannot be objectively identified and must be claimed by the individuals who are friends (Hartshorne, 1994).

Friendship plays a different role in different phases of a human life span. Its importance is especially prominent in the stage of adolescence when young adults strive for increased autonomy from parents, contributing to forming of close friendship involving more intimacy than just companionship as in early childhood (Hohmann, Furman & Berger, 2006).

Liberman and colleagues (1999) have stressed the importance of investigating attachment relationships among peers, as they believed it plays a crucial role as individuals move through adolescence. Markiewicz, Doyle and Brendgen (2001) also demonstrated the important link between attachment style and friendship quality, noting that secure attachment style predicts better friendship quality.

Ozen, Sumer and Demir (2010) highlighted the functional values of friendship. They posited that close

friendship with peers can act as sources of social support, satisfying needs during developmental transitions, particularly for young adults who undergo stages of identity explorations, instability, feeling in-between and developmental demands. Reis and Shaver (1988) elaborated that intimate relationships not only provide individuals with social support but also contribute to healthy emotions, social development and personality. Any deficit in intimate relationships has shown to put individuals at risk for psychological disturbances such as depression and anxiety when their psychological needs were left unmet (Evans & Wertheim, 1998; Hobfoll & Liberman, 1987; West, Rose, Verhoef, Spreng & Boey, 1998).

In addition, Collins (2003) stated that relationships involve cognitive and emotional processes which require considering of individuals' distinctive emotional responses, perceptions, expectancies, schemata and attributions regarding self, others and the relationship. It defined friendship quality as the degree to which the relationship provides generally beneficent experiences. High quality relationships possess characteristics of intimacy, affection and nurturance from partners while low quality relationships possess the characteristics of irritation, antagonism and notably high levels of conflict manifested by partners.

Studies of pre-school and school-age children demonstrated link between secure attachment with mother and individual's harmony and responsiveness in friendships (Kerns, 1994; Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996). However, research with older age people on link between attachment and friendship produced less consistent evidence. Similar studies by

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and that of Ryan and Lynch (1989) showed moderate associations between reports of attachment to parents and peers. Kobak and Sceery (1988) did not find difference between secure and insecure individuals' perceptions of social support in friendship. Kerns and Stevens (1996) found that there was association between secure attachment and feelings of social integration in daily interactions but was not related to perception of intimacy in daily interactions. Further, it was found that attachment was not related to both self-report and friend's reports of the quality of friendship relationships. Despite all the inconsistency in the literature and later findings, Hazan and Shaver (1987) contended that both romantic relationships and friendship are related to attachment style.

Overall, in all the studies with adolescents or adult dyads, attachment and friendship were assessed for only one partner. Reis and Shaver (1988) posited that in dyadic relationships, people are not only influenced by their own experience, but the experiences and behaviours of their friends as well. It was believed that attachment history and experience of both individuals are brought into exchange. In addition, studies showed that appraisal of friendship quality involves reciprocity, self-disclosure and responsiveness from both parties, Kerns (1994) contended that study of link between attachment and friendship quality should take into consideration the attachment styles of both participants in the friendship.

Moreover, Weimer, Kerns and Oldenburg (2004) argued that since the quality of friendship can be influenced by both parties in the relationship, the quality of friendship may be highest when both individuals have secure

attachment style. Similarly, most of early research corroborated this finding (e.g., Black & McCartney, 1997; Kerns et al., 1996; Youngblade et al., 1993).

In addition, Kerns and colleagues (1996) argued that it is problematic to talk about the security of attachment of person and the quality of friendship when the security of the attachment of friends is not taken into consideration. Park and Waters (1989) corroborated this postulation with their studies on children. It was found that if both children are securely attached, they exhibit more harmonious, responsive and less controlling behaviours in their relationship when compared to relationship where a person is secure and the other is insecure. Kerns et al. (1996) obtained a similar result with their studies.

Adding to the inconsistency in the literature, Grabill and Kerns (2000) contended that friends only served as attachment figures under certain situations such as during times of emotional stress. Hence it was argued that friendships are not attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1989) unlike romantic relationships.

Attachment Styles and Internal Working Models

Bartholomew (1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) contended that attachment style influences closeness in close relationships, including friendships. They also posited that the internal working models of individuals are the mechanisms accounting for the association between attachment and friendships. Bowlby (1973) argued that working models of individuals are the reflection of their relationship history. Early interaction patterns between primary caregiver and infant become

internalized by the infant and govern relationship patterns with others, resulting in the construct of what Bretherton (1990) has called the “internal working model” of self and others in attachment relationships. Grabill and Kerns (2000) have argued that it is these working models which accounted for the links between attachment and friendship.

Bretherton (1990) has pointed out that working models are rules, schemas, or scripts that organize and summarize a person’s past experiences in close relationships. Moreover, positive experience with people who are trustworthy, understanding and responsive to one’s needs, will lead to positive view of others while relationships with rejecting and unresponsive people will lead to negative views of others. Bowlby (1977) opined that such experiences will affect the individual’s model of self as either worthy or unworthy of affection and love. Bretherton (1990) and Kobak and Hazan (1991)

postulated that working models influence the quality of close relationships that individuals develop as they affect the way individuals interpret and react in social situations.

Hollist and Miller (2005) defined attachment as the affective connection between two individuals that provides them with a firm emotional foundation from which they can interact with the world. Characteristics of this type of relationship include: supportiveness, trustworthiness, care and acceptance. This bond was believed to be the foundation for future relationships & the individuals’ paradigmatic views of themselves & others.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) conceptualized individual differences in attachment into a four-category description of attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful) based on the combination of positive and negative working models of self and others (Ozen, Sumer & Demir, 2010).

		Thoughts of Self	
		Positive	Negative
Thoughts of Partner	Positive	<p>Secure Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy</p>	<p>Preoccupied Preoccupied with relationships</p>
	Negative	<p>Dismissive Dismissing of intimacy Strongly independent</p>	<p>Fearful Fearful of intimacy Socially avoidant</p>

Figure 1 Four Category Model of Adult Attachment Proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991)

These models predict how attachment is related to intimacy in close relationship and thus the quality of friendship relationships.

Bartholomew (1990) postulated that secure people have positive view of self and others. They place moderate importance on receiving comfort from and maintaining proximity to others. Conversely, preoccupied, also known as anxious-ambivalent (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), individuals have negative view of self but positive view of others, placing high importance on receiving comfort from and maintaining proximity to others. They also tend to seek to obtain a more positive self-concept through their relationship with others. In addition, dismissing people have positive view of self but negative view of others. They place low importance on receiving comfort from and maintaining proximity to others. They tend to exhibit more autonomy in defense against sense of insecurity. Lastly, the fearful individuals, also known as avoidant (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), who possess both negative views of self and others. They tend to place high importance on both receiving comfort from and maintaining proximity to others. These people desire to form close relationships, nevertheless, their negative views of self and others deter them intimacy and interaction in close relationships.

Attachment Styles and Patterns of Self-Disclosure

Reis and Shaver (1998) defined intimacy in a relationship as a dynamic process by which individuals learn things about each other. They suggest that there are three indispensable steps to intimacy. First, person A must be willing to reveal about himself/herself

to person B verbally or non-verbally through body language. It was further believed that any revelation involved things that are not evident outwardly will lead to greater extent of intimacy in the relationship. Second, Person B must response with understanding, validation and caring. Any unresponsiveness from Person B will be perceived as uninterested and may lead to termination of the interaction. Third, Person A must perceived the responsiveness of Person B to facilitate such dyadic exchange.

Literature search showed that secure attachment was found to correlate positively with self-disclosure in short-term adult relationships and intimacy can be operationalized as self-disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1998). In addition, Grabill and Kerns (2000) stated that it was attachment style which determined the intimacy in close relationship as the attachment style of each individual will determine the level of self-disclosure in a friendship. For example, Grabill and Kerns (2000) found that secure attachment is significantly, positively related to self-disclosure in short-term adult relationship. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) discovered that preoccupied individuals usually self-disclose while dismissive individuals have low levels of self-disclosure. In addition, Grabill and Kerns (2000) found that people who have positive views of self and others are usually comfortable to disclose, while fearful individuals who have negative views of self and others, have low level of disclosure.

Self-disclosure seems to affect depth of attachment, honesty and openness in friendship (McCroskey & Richmond, 1977 cited in Welch & Houser, 2010). Individuals with positive regard of others tend to self-disclose more while

those with negative view of others tend to self-disclose less (Grabill & Kerns, 2000). Any total lack of self-disclosure tends to push attachment figures away (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991 cited in Welch & Houser, 2010). Interestingly, a moderate level of self-disclosure appears to fulfill attachment functions in the early stage of a relationship (Welch & Houser, 2010).

Attachment Styles and Friendship Satisfaction

Studies showed that securely attached friends exhibit high levels of relationship satisfaction (Bippus & Rollin, 2003, cited in Welch & Houser, 2010). Welch and Houser (2010) opined that those with positive opinions of themselves expect to be regarded well in a friendship and perceive themselves to be worth it. Conversely, dismissing individuals are able to maintain satisfaction in friendships when they are able to use enough control to manage it their own way. Preoccupied individuals crave more closeness and have self-esteem issues due to their negative views of self while fearful individuals are apprehensive of closeness and renunciation, affecting the relationship satisfaction (Welch & Houser, 2010).

Ma and Huebner (2008) found that secure peer attachments are related to adolescent's global self-esteem, academic achievement and perceived quality of life. Similarly, Nickerson and Nagle (2004) found that positive aspects like trust and self-disclosure in friendships are significantly correlated with children's life satisfaction while withdrawal from friends leads to reduced satisfaction. Moreover, peer trust is deemed to be the best predictor of satisfaction with friends.

Communication between friends also leads to satisfaction in friendship.

It has also been found (Welch & Houser, 2010) that securely attached individuals have better friendship satisfaction than the other three attachment types and that they are more apt to learn from their mistakes and ensure a higher level of relationship satisfaction and success.

The Role of Communication Skills in Friendship Quality

Bowlby's attachment theory (1973, 1980,1982) postulated that the prototypes for adult attachment styles are based on individuals' infancy experience and ascribed individuals' manner of communication to the working models of attachment.

Conversely, Freeny (2008) posited that communication is a main avenue through which goal conflicts are negotiated & attachment relationships maintained. Furthermore, it was also opined that the key aspect in determining relationship quality is self-disclosure. Secure and preoccupied (ambivalent) individuals were found to self-disclose and reciprocate more than the avoidant individuals (Freeny, 2008).

According to Burluson and Samter (1990), an individual's communication skill can be assessed in eight particular facets. Firstly, individuals can be assessed in their ability to (i) comfort friends, to (ii) resolve any conflict amicably and to (iii) initiate, maintain and terminate a conversation. Other attributes of good communication skill extend to the ability to(iv) make others feel good, to (v) change others' thoughts and behaviours as well as to (vi) convey information clearly. The final two facets assessed are the ability

to (vii) tell stories and jokes and the ability to (viii) assist someone who has violated a norm.

Conversely, attachment research done by Pietromonaco, Greenwood and Barrett (2004) found that couple conflict is associated to attachment style. Corcoran and Mallinckrodt (2000) further found that avoidant individuals have the tendency to withdraw and engage in poor communication in conflict management as they tend to have the perception of viewing conflict as a threat to their independence with possible involvement of intimate conversations and self-disclosure.

Moreover, Feeney, Noller and Roberts (1998) found that relationship satisfaction is linked to emotional expressiveness. Securely attached individuals tend to demonstrate better skill in negotiation and conflict resolution (Feeney, 1994). These people are able to self-disclose, negotiate conflicts successfully and express feelings constructively (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998). Most early research stressed the association between secure attachment and better friendship quality (e.g., Black & McCartney, 1997; Kerns et al., 1996; Youngblade et al., 1993).

Crawford (1977) stated that many people have taken communication as the sole essence in defining a friend and is the single most frequent activity in which friends engage (Tesch, 1983). Conversely, Fehr (1996) found that most of the time, the root of failed friendships is due to communication breakdowns which can be attributed to lack of communications skills or discrepancies in communication patterns in individuals from different cultures or with different attachment styles.

Recent research found that the role of communication in friendship quality does not vary greatly as a function of gender, but more of the ethnicity (Samter & Burleson, 2005). Samter and Burleson (2005) communication study on same sex friends from different ethnic groups found that people from different cultures emphasize different aspects of communication as vital in determining the quality of friendships. Likewise, individuals from different cultures engage in different patterns of communication despite attachment style differences. For example, it was found that people from the western culture prefer more reserved means of expressing their negative emotion when compared to those from the east and Africa. Similarly, their study also showed that individuals from different cultures placed different values on the importance of communication skills in mediating the quality of friendship relationships.

Attachment Theory and Research

From the beginning, Bowlby's attachment theory was intended to apply across the lifespan of individuals (Bowlby, 1979). However, early research focused more on the infant-parent relationship. Little was mentioned about attachment in later life phases (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2010). It was not until 1987 that Shaver and Hazen extended the applicability of attachment theory to couple relationships mainly in young adults and later into friendship (Welch & Houser, 2010).

Furthermore, most research has been directed at dyadic attachments with little done with regard to attachment in social domains such as the work organizations, schools and societies (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2010).

Milestones of attachment research.

Literature search showed that for the last two decades, much research was directed toward attachment styles and their assessment in adults. However, there are two distinctive developments in the attachment literature which can be considered achieving milestone status of the attachment theory. First, the testing of the prototype hypothesis which focused on testing the central proposition of ascribing later quality of relationships to the effect of experiences in earlier relationships (Simpson & Rholes, 2010). Secondly, the verification of Bowlby's postulated interrelations between the attachment system and the other three behavioral systems: (a) caregiving (b) sexuality and (c) exploratory (Simpson & Rholes, 2010).

Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

Firstly, in all the studies with adolescents or adult dyads, attachment and friendship is assessed for only one partner. Studies done by Reis and Shaver (1988) and Kerns (1994) showed that appraisal of friendship quality involves reciprocity, self-disclosure and responsiveness from both parties. Hence future studies should take into consideration the attachment of both participants when exploring the link between attachment styles and friendship quality.

Simpson and Rholes (2010) suggested that future studies should explore the mechanisms underlie the attachment – exploration link and how such link is relevant to friendship quality and relationship satisfaction across individuals' life history. Obviously,

there is also a lack in previous research on testing the core normative principles of attachment theory particularly with attachment figures other than parents and romantic partners such as siblings, close friends, mentors and mentees (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson & Rholes, 2004).

Little was also found with regard to how people become attached to others with their attached figures acting as their secure-base, proximity maintenance and safe-haven. Similarly, little literature was found in relation to how detachment from attached figures could happen other than reasons of death or permanent separation (Simpson & Rholes, 2010).

Last but not least, future research should also look into how the hierarchy of attachment operates in friendship. That is, how individuals rank friendship in their general working model as Collins and Read (1994) posit that other subsumed models of individuals' general model such as those with parents, romantic partners and close friends may determine their ultimate social behavior when activated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature search has provided insight into what was found with regard to attachment style, friendship quality and the possible mediating effect of communication skills in a friendship relationship. There was a unison agreement in the attachment literature on how attachment styles of individuals can determine the patterns of communication of individuals through the operation of their internal working models. Further, earlier studies also showed that secured people are usually associated to better communication

skills which lead to higher quality friendship. These individuals also generally enjoyed greater intimacy and satisfaction in their friendship relationships when compared to the insecurely attached group.

Bretherton (1990) postulation of the reconstructability of individuals' internal working models has shed new light in attachment research. It provides suggestion on the changeability of individuals' attachment styles which can contribute to the rehabilitative work on insecure individuals by clinicians, enlightening researcher on factors which can have mediating effect in the quality of a friendship relationship; factors such as having a romantic partner, length of friendship relationship, individuals' cultures, gender and age.

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