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Does Self-Esteem Mediate the Effect of Attachment  
on Relationship Quality

Alexis Lee

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Masters of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### Does Self-Esteem Mediate the Effect of Attachment on Relationship Quality

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The purpose of this study was to examine the possible mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality. Previous studies have found a positive association between attachment style and relationship quality. One possible explanation for this link may be self-esteem, which has been shown to consistently predict relationship quality. Therefore, I hypothesized that self-esteem may mediate the relationship between attachment and relationship quality. A sample of 680 married couples that completed the sections on attachment, self-esteem, marital satisfaction, marital stability, and problem areas in the relationship of the RELATE questionnaire between 2011 and 2013 was used. The data were analyzed using an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) to help account for shared variance. Results found that there is a positive link between one's attachment and their level of self-esteem and their own relationship quality. However, results also found negative trend-level effects for the links between attachment and partner's level of self-esteem and self-esteem and own relationship quality. There was no mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between attachment and relationship quality.

Keywords: attachment style, internal working models, couple relationships, relationship quality, self-esteem

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## Introduction

Many studies indicate that individuals with higher-quality romantic relationships report the highest levels of happiness for their life, report more psychological stability, and have decreased health risks compared to individuals who report lower-quality romantic relationships (Smith, 2013; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997; Ren 1997). Therefore, because relationship quality impacts multiple facets of an individual's wellbeing, it is important to understand aspects that contribute to and predict relationship quality.

Among the factors related to relationship quality, self-esteem has emerged as an important correlate, where higher self-esteem is consistently predictive of relationship quality (Erol & Orth, 2014; Erol & Orth, 2013; Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Orth, Robins, & Widman, 2012; Mund, Finn, Hagemeyer, Zimmermann, & Neyer, 2015). One explanation for this link may be rooted in attachment theory, which posits that over time people develop scripts of themselves based on their life experiences. These scripts, also termed "internal working models," then impact how they view themselves in social situations (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). For example, a person may conclude that because he/she were abandoned as a child their romantic partner will abandon them as well or because he/she failed in early relationships, he/she will always fail in relationships.

Negative internal working models, which are characteristic of insecure attachment style (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Dewitte & Houwer, 2010; Fantini- Hauwel, Boudoukha, & Arciszewski, 2012; Schimmenti & Bifulco, 2015), have been linked to poor relationship quality (Lemay & Spongberg, 2014; Starks, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2015). However, there are some studies that show that internal working models are not a reliable predictor of relationship quality (Tamir, 2015; Cohn, Silver, Cowan,



Cowan & Pearson, 1992; McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). Additionally, there is a link between internal working models of self and self-esteem, such that higher self-esteem is linked with positive internal working models of self (Collins & Read, 1990, Cassidy, 1988; Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Bylsma, Cozzarelli & Sumer, 1997). Therefore, I posited that because of the links between self-esteem and internal working models, and because internal working models are a part of attachment theory, that self-esteem may be used in place of internal working models to examine the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality. Specifically, I tested if self-esteem mediates the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Assumptions**

Attachment theory says that from birth, children seek proximity to their caregivers, through which they create an attachment bond with them (Bowlby, 1969). The nature of those relationships varies depending on what the child has learned in regard to the availability and responsiveness of their caregiver.

One of the tenets of attachment theory is that individuals develop internal working models (Bowlby, 1969). Internal working models are the schemas that people have about themselves and others that have developed over time based on experiences with significant attachment figures (e.g. caregivers). These internal working models form the basis for their attachment style. For instance, a child with consistently warm and responsive caregivers would develop an internal working model that he/she is worthwhile, loveable, and/or important and that others are generally safe and caring. This would translate into a secure attachment style. A child with inconsistent, unresponsive, or rejecting caregivers might have an internal working model

that he/she is unlovable, worthless, or unimportant and that others are generally rejecting or unsafe. This would translate into an insecure attachment style (Bowlby, 1969). When applied to romantic relationships, theory suggests that if an individual has a positive internal working model of self, then he/she is more likely to view himself/herself positively while in a romantic relationship and is more likely to view the world positively (Bowlby, 1973), which may then lead to increased relationship quality (Lemay & Spongberg, 2014; Starks et al., 2015).

Theoretically, self-esteem has been defined as “the imagination of our appearance to (an)other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1902). Because the internal working model of self is how one views him/herself, it is likely that self-esteem is linked with the internal working model of self. Multiple studies show that there is a link between self-esteem and internal working models (Cassidy, 1988; Collins & Read, 1990; Bylsma et al., 1997; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Because self-esteem is linked to internal working models of self, and is a consistently reliable predictor of relationship quality (Orth et al., 2012; Erol & Orth, 2013; Erol & Orth, 2014, Mund et al., 2015; Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Erol & Orth, 2013), I hypothesized that self-esteem may mediate the relationship between attachment styles and relationship quality.

### **Attachment and Relationship Quality**

Since Bowlby’s 1969 articulation of attachment theory, many studies began to look at how attachment styles predict relationship satisfaction. For example, Pistole (1989) found that secure attachment styles are predictive of higher relationship quality and insecure attachment styles are predictive of lower relationship quality. To date, a majority of studies support this

finding (Treboux et al., 2004; Nofle & Shaver, 2006; Nosko, Tieu, Lawford, & Pratt, 2011; Hwang, Johnston, & Smith, 2007; Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013).

However, there are some studies that show that both secure and dismissing attachment styles are predictive of higher relationship quality (Collins & Read, 1990; Vasquez, Durik, and Hyde, 2002; Monteoliva, Garcis-Martinez, Calvo-Salguero, & Aguilar-Luzon, 2010). A similarity between the studies that found that secure and dismissing attachment styles are predictive of higher relationship quality was the way in which they measured attachment styles. These studies measured attachment based on Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) conceptualization of attachment styles which posits that attachment styles are best measured when based on internal working models of self and internal working models of others, such that secure attachment consists of positive models of self and others while dismissing attachment consists of positive models of self and negative models of others. Thus, it appears that the internal working model of self, and not necessarily the internal working model of others, is what links attachment to relationship quality. Further support for this notion can be found in Vasquez and colleagues' (2002) work. Using the same conceptual model of attachment styles, they tested the link between attachment styles, based on internal working models, and relationship quality. They found that individuals who report positive internal working models of self report either secure or dismissing attachments in their relationships and higher relationship quality.

Although the studies that use Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) conceptualization of attachment link it to relationship quality, they are nonetheless limited in their ability to explain the link. This is largely because they conflate attachment styles and internal working models. However, according to attachment theory, and supported by the literature (see below), internal

working models and attachment styles are actually separate constructs. Thus, their associations with relationship quality should be examined separately.

### **Internal Working Models of Self**

In the literature, positive internal working models of self have been shown to correlate with secure attachment styles (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Collins & Read, 1990). Because internal working models are linked with attachment styles, and because there is a link between attachment and relationship quality, then it would seem likely that a link between internal working models and relationship quality would exist.

While only a few studies examine this particular linkage, they generally show that positive internal working models of self predict higher relationship quality (Lemay & Spongberg, 2014; Starks, et al., 2015) However, there are some studies that show that internal working models of self are not always a reliable predictor of relationship quality (Cohn et al., 1992; McCarthy & Maughan, 2010; Tamir, 2015). Specifically, Cohn and colleagues (1992) and McCarthy and Maughan (2010) found that while internal working models were able to predict men's relationship quality, internal working models were unable to consistently predict women's relationship quality. Further, Tamir (2015) found that while internal working models were able to predict relationship quality among individuals raised in a prototypical "western" environment, they were unable to predict the relationship quality of individuals who grew up in more conservative religious environments. As such, these studies leave room for another explanation for the link between attachment styles and relationship quality.

### **Self-Esteem as a Mediator**

**Self-Esteem linked with internal working models of self.** In past decades, studies examined the possibility that self-esteem and internal working models are correlated. Whereas (Cassidy, 1988) found a moderate correlation ( $r = .39$ ) between a child's global self-esteem and their internal working model of self, Collins and Read (1990) make the assumption that self-esteem is one of several components of internal working models of self. Their examination of a construct comprised of self-esteem, interpersonal qualities and internal locus of control and its relationship to attachment provides some support that self-esteem is a part of the internal working model.

However, other studies have found that self-esteem and internal working models of self are actually separate constructs that are linked. Some studies have found small to strong correlations between self-esteem and internal working models, suggesting that though linked, the constructs are distinct (Cassidy, 1988; Collins & Read, 1990; Bylsma, Cozzarelli & Sumer, 1997). For example, Schmitt and Allik (2005) conducted a study across 50 nations and found significant correlations between self-esteem and internal working models that ranged from  $r = .06$  to  $r = .56$ . Therefore, as internal working models and self-esteem are separate but linked constructs, yet self-esteem is a consistent predictor of relationship quality, I tested self-esteem as the mediating link between attachment security and relationship quality. Before considering self-esteem as a mediator, however, it was important to examine the literature surrounding self-esteem and its associations with attachment security and relationship quality.

**Self-Esteem and attachment security.** There are quite a few studies that examine the relationship between self-esteem and attachment style, and while they all show that there is a link between attachment and self-esteem, they often differ in their findings regarding exactly which

styles are linked with higher levels of self-esteem. For example, some studies found that secure attachment style is linked with higher levels of global self-esteem (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Bringle & Bagby, 2007; Foster, Kernis & Goldman, 2007) whereas other studies found that secure and dismissing attachment styles are linked to higher levels of global self-esteem (Bylsma, Cozzarelli & Sumer, 2010; Huis in 't Ve;d, Vingerhoets & Denollet, 2011). These studies, like those referenced above, had mixed findings that could be explained by how attachment styles were measured. Specifically, the studies that measured attachment based on participants' views of both self and others (versus just the view of self) found that both secure and dismissing attachment styles had higher levels of self-esteem.

While considering self-esteem as a mediator, the possibility that the relationship between self-esteem and attachment security could potentially be reversed provided some reason for hesitation; however, there have been studies that examined self-esteem as a mediator between attachment styles and outcome variables other than relationship quality (Kamkar, Doyle & Markiewicz, 2012). For example, Suzuki and Tomoda (2015) tested self-esteem as a mediator between attachment styles and depressive symptoms and found that self-esteem did in fact mediate this relationship. These results were also found when using longitudinal data (Hankin, Kassel & Abela, 2015; Lee & Hankin, 2009). This further supported my choice of self-esteem as a suitable mediator for the relationship between attachment styles and relationship quality, by showing the directionality of the relationship between self-esteem and attachment styles.

**Self-Esteem and relationship quality.** Although the relationship between self-esteem and relationship quality could potentially be reversed (with relationship quality affecting one's self-esteem), I posited that an individual's level of self-esteem, which begins to develop during adolescence (Orth et al. 2012) prior to current relationships, leads to certain behaviors

(Baumeister, 2013) that impact the quality of the individual's future romantic relationships. In fact, there are many studies that show that self-esteem is a reliable predictor of relationship quality (Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Erol & Orth 2013; Orth et al., 2012; Mund et al., 2015). One of the studies that found this link also found –using cross-sectional data – that attachment style mediated the relationship between self-esteem and relationship quality (Erol & Orth, 2013).

While it is possible that the relationships between attachment style, relationship quality, and self-esteem may be linked in this order, I posited that because attachment styles are something that individuals begin to develop and stabilize during infancy, and because self-esteem begins to develop during childhood and continues to develop throughout an individual's life (Orth et al., 2012) that self-esteem is actually the mediating factor between attachment style and relationship quality.

### **Current Study**

As the literature suggests, secure attachment is associated with higher relationship quality and insecure attachment is associated with lower relationship quality. One reason for this may be the notion of the internal working model of self, a script by which individuals assess themselves. However, self-esteem is linked with the internal working model of self, which might explain the literature linking one's self-esteem and relationship quality. As such, I posited that self-esteem might be a mediating factor between attachment security and relationship quality. Therefore, this study sought to examine the mediating role of self-esteem in the link between attachment security and relationship quality for self and partner. Specific research questions addressed were as follows:

Research Question 1: Is attachment security associated with relationship quality for self and partner?

Research Question 2: Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality for self and partner?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study used a sample ( $n=680$ ) of married, heterosexual couples that agreed to take the Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE; Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001) between 2011 and 2013. Analyses were performed on data collected from all married couples that completed the sections on marital satisfaction, marital stability, problem areas in their relationship, attachment, and self-esteem.

On average, the age of male participants was 33.25-years-old and the age of female participants was 31.36-years-old. For the length of the relationship of participants, the median time married was 4.7 years for males and females. A majority of the sample had a high school level education or higher, 54.6% of males and 57% of females. For ethnicity, the majority of the sample used in the study was Caucasian (85.9% of men and 84.3% of women). For religion, a majority of the sample was LDS/Mormon: 55.6% of males and 55.7% of females. (See Table 1 for complete demographics).

### **Procedure**

The data used in this study were taken from the Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE; Busby et al., 2001). Participants answered more than 300 questions relating to themselves and their current romantic relationships. Couples were recruited from advertising done in the community, university classes, and from referrals given by therapeutic professionals.



The voluntary survey was administered online and results were provided to couples after completion.

### **Measures**

RELATE was first created in 1997 and data from the questionnaire have been used in numerous peer-reviewed studies (Draper, Holman, White, Grandy, 2007; Larson, Blick, Jackson, & Holman, 2010; Canlas, Miller, Busby, & Carroll, 2015). The measures included in RELATE have been tested extensively and have been found to be reliable and valid, have good test-retest and internal consistent reliability and content, construct, and concurrent validity (Busby et al., 2001). The current study examined RELATE items that measure attachment style, self-esteem, and relationship quality.

**Self-Esteem.** Self-esteem was a latent construct, measured by four questions about what they think of themselves. Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Never (1)” to “Very Often (5).” An example of a question from the questionnaire is “I take a positive attitude towards myself” (Cronbach’s alpha = .87 for males and .88 for females). A higher score means more self-esteem for the participant. A lower score means less self-esteem for the participant.

**Attachment.** For this study, attachment was measured using questions from the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson, 1990; Simpson, Rholes, Phillipis, 1996), specifically questions related to avoidant and anxious attachment. Each subscale will be used as indicators of a latent construct representing attachment security. Avoidance was assessed with questions regarding participants’ comfort levels with closeness from others (e.g. “I don’t like people getting too close to me.” or “I’m comfortable having others depend on me.”). Responses were

based off a seven-point Likert scale and could range from “Strongly Disagree (1)” to “Strongly Agree (7).” (Cronbach’s alpha = .84 for males and .84 for females). Anxious attachment was assessed with questions about participants’ confidence in relationships (e.g. “I rarely worry about my partner(s) leaving me.” or “I often worry that my partner(s) don’t really love me.”).

Responses were based off a seven-point Likert scale and could range from “Strongly Disagree (1)” to “Strongly Agree (7).” (Cronbach’s alpha = .83 for males and .85 for females).

**Relationship quality.** Relationship Quality was a latent construct, measured using three scales: relationship satisfaction, instability, and problem areas in the relationship. To measure a participant’s relationship satisfaction, participants were asked to respond to questions covering multiple facets of their relationship (e.g. The physical intimacy you experience”). Responses for this sub-scale were measured using a five-point Likert scale, with participants’ choices ranging from “Very Dissatisfied (1)” to “Very Satisfied (5).” (Cronbach’s alpha = .91 for males and .92 for females). A higher score means more relationship satisfaction for the participant. A lower score means less relationship satisfaction for the participant. To measure relationship stability, participants were asked questions about whether they thought their relationship might end/ might be in trouble/ has ended but then resumed (Cronbach’s alpha= .74 for males and .77 for females). Participant’s responses where based on a five-point scale where they could select an option from “Never (1)” to “Very Often (5).” A lower score means more stability in the relationship. A higher score means greater stability in the relationship. To measure problem areas, participants were asked about the frequency of stressful/ regulatory occurrences within their relationship (e.g. parents/ in-laws; financial matters; communication; etc.) (Cronbach’s alpha = .81 for males and .81 for females). Participant responses were chosen from the same scale used to measure

relationship stability. A high score means more relationship problems. A lower score means fewer relationship problems.

**Controls.** Due to the nature of the sample, relationship length, religion, and SES were included as covariates to control for their effect on relationship quality.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Because the data were non-independent (using data from husbands and wives), and spouses' constructs may be related to each other, I had to account for shared variance. This was done by modeling an Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), in which each respondent's outcome (and mediator) was regressed on own and partner's predictor and mediator (See figure 1). The model was a structural equation model, in which latent constructs were fit using measured observed variables. This technique results in more accurate estimates of the relationship between variables as it removes measurement from the constructs of interest (Kline, 2010).

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Results**

Univariate and Bivariate statistics for observed variables can be found in Tables 2 and 3. These statistics indicate that on average, the sample reported moderate-to-high attachment security, self-esteem, and relationship quality. Correlations between construct indicators are generally moderate in strength; within-construct indicator correlations for self-esteem and relationship quality are large.

A measurement model was fit in which latent constructs were allowed to covary. Measurement invariance between men and women was also tested using chi-square difference

tests. Results indicated strict invariance (factor loadings, intercepts, and residual variances were equal between men and women) for attachment security, and weak invariance for self-esteem and relationship quality (only factor loadings were equal). The final measurement model had excellent model fit:  $\chi^2(123) = 266.83, p < .001$ , CFI = .98, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .04, 90% CI: .04 .05,  $p = .98$  (see Table 4 for factor loadings).

### **Research Question 1: Is Attachment Security Associated with Relationship Quality for Self and Partner?**

I tested the first research question by regressing relationship quality on own and partner's attachment security. In two steps, I then constrained actor paths and partner paths to be equal for men and women. Chi-square difference tests indicated that path estimates were equivalent for men and women ( $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 2.65, p = .27$ ). Model fit was excellent:  $\chi^2(97) = 289.95, p < .001$ , CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI: .05 .06,  $p = .14$ . Results indicated that attachment security was associated with own relationship quality ( $b = .78, SE = .08, p < .001$ ) and partner's relationship quality ( $b = .24, SE = .06, p < .001$ ). This model explained 69.9% of the variance in wives' and 72.8% of the variance in husbands' relationship quality.

### **Research Question 2: Does Self-Esteem Mediate the Relationship Between Attachment Security and Relationship Quality for Self and Partner?**

For the second research question, I fit the hypothesized model, first allowing all paths to be freely estimated for husbands and wives. I then constrained actor paths to be equal between husbands and wives; in a second step, partner paths were constrained. Chi-square difference tests indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between men and women ( $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 5.25, p = .51$ ). The final model showed excellent model fit to the data:  $\chi^2(247) =$

549.58,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .04, 90% CI: .04 .05,  $p = .99$ . Results indicated significant actor effects of attachment security on self-esteem ( $b = .98$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and relationship quality ( $b = .96$ ,  $SE = .31$ ,  $p = .002$ ). There were also trend-level effects (in the opposite direction of what was expected) of attachment security on partner's self-esteem ( $b = -0.24$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p = .07$ ) and self-esteem on own relationship quality ( $b = -0.22$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p = .09$ ). These results also meant that there were no statistically significant indirect effects of attachment security on relationship quality through self-esteem for self or partner. The model accounted for 48.7% of the variance in wives' and 40.5% of the variance in husbands' self-esteem. It accounted for 73.6% of the variance in wives' and 78.6% of the variance in husbands' relationship quality.

### Discussion

Research suggests that individuals with higher quality romantic relationships report the highest levels of happiness for their life and report more psychological stability compared to those individuals who report low quality romantic relationships (Smith, 2013; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). Within the literature, it is suggested that attachment style is linked with an individual's relationship quality (Nofle & Shaver, 2006; Nosko, Tieu, Lawford, & Pratt, 2011; Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013). Literature also suggests that self-esteem is linked with both attachment style (Bringle & Bagby, 2007; Bylsma, Cozzarelli & Sumer, 2010; Huis in 't Ve;d, Vingerhoets & Denollet, 2011) and relationship quality (Erol & Orth, 2014; Erol & Orth, 2013; Orth, Robins, & Widman, 2012; Mund, Finn, Hagemeyer, Zimmermann, & Neyer, 2015). Therefore, this study sought to determine if attachment security is associated with relationship quality for self and partner and if self-esteem mediated the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality for self and partner.

All results in this study were the same for men and women. One possible explanation for the lack of gender differences in this study may be that attachment is a universal construct, representing basic human needs that do not differ by gender. Thus, attachment security's relationship with self-esteem and relationship quality would be the same for men and women. Similarly, the basic concept of self-esteem may be the same across genders; thus, its association with relationship quality would be similar for men and women. Still, the behavioral manifestations of these basic underlying needs and expressions may vary across genders. Thus, future research should seek to disentangle effects of attachment needs and self-esteem from their behavioral manifestations.

Results of the hypothesized model indicated that secure attachment is positively associated with one's own relationship quality. This finding is consistent with previous research stating that secure attachment is linked with higher relationship quality (Treboux et al., 2004; Nettle & Shaver, 2006; Nosko, Tieu, Lawford, & Pratt, 2011; Hwang, Johnston, & Smith, 2007; Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013). Results also indicated that secure attachment is positively associated with one's own self-esteem, which is also consistent with previous research (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Bringle & Bagby, 2007; Foster, Kernis & Goldman, 2007). These results provide support that secure attachment is associated with more self-confidence and better relationship quality for individuals. One reason for this may be that individuals who have secure attachment may see the value they have in their relationships with their significant other, which may increase their level of self-esteem. For example, an individual who is securely attached is more likely to think that they are loved and respected by their significant other (Bowlby, 1969), and these positive self-perceptions could translate into higher levels of self-esteem. Further, individuals who are securely attached and have these positive perceptions of self within the

relationship could lead to higher relationship satisfaction, which may be one reason why secure attachment is linked with higher relationship quality.

Surprisingly, the test of whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality yielded no significant effects for self or partner. Statistically, this is because there was no significant effect of self-esteem on relationship quality. In fact, there was a trend-level effect opposite of what was expected, suggesting that higher self-esteem might be associated with lower relationship quality. This finding contradicts previous research findings (Sciangula & Morry, 2009; Erol & Orth 2013; Orth et al., 2012; Mund et al., 2015).

One explanation for the findings that secure attachment is linked with self-esteem but self-esteem is not significantly linked with relationship quality, and actually trends in the opposite direction, may be due to the nature of the sample, which reported a relatively high level of self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to self-assess more positively than those with low self-esteem (Brown, 2014; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). For example, individuals with higher self-esteem tend to think of themselves as being more skilled in aspects of their lives (e.g. school, relationships, etc.) even though they may not be as skilled as they say. Thus, it may be that those with high self-esteem, such as those in this sample, similarly rate their own attachment security more positively.

Further, studies have found that higher self-esteem is not always a positive characteristic of individuals. Some studies have found that the higher an individual's self-esteem becomes, the more independent and less interdependent that individual becomes; also, individuals with higher self-esteem may actually be disliked because others view them as a threat (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). For example, the more independent an individual is, the less

likely s/he may be to interact with their partner, resulting in less closeness and lower relationship quality. Therefore, higher self-esteem, if manifested by a kind of detached independence, could lead to lower relationship quality, even in the face of reported secure attachment. This detached independence could also explain why there were no partner effects found in this study. It could be possible that the individuals in the sample were independent to the point that their partner's behaviors were unable to affect their levels of self-esteem or their perceived attachment security.

However, because of previous findings in the literature showing that there is a statistically significant link between self-esteem and relationship quality, another possible explanation for what was found could be that the measure of self-esteem used in this study was flawed. For example, the questions used to assess self-esteem were all based on cognitive conceptualizations of self-esteem and the emotional component of self-esteem was never addressed. Therefore, because attachment security is related to relationship quality in an emotional way, and self-esteem did not address any emotional aspects, then it follows that there was no mediating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between attachment security and relationship quality.

### **Clinical Implications**

This study supports current literature by finding that an individual's attachment security is linked with their level of self-esteem and their relationship quality. Therefore, focusing on each partner's individual attachment security during therapy may be a path to improving self-esteem and relationship quality. With the recent increase of attention towards attachment-based therapy approaches (e.g. Emotionally Focused Therapy; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988), the practice of assessing and addressing attachment style has become more common in clinical



settings. This study underscores that assessing each individual's attachment security is an essential step in therapy when couples present for help to increase their relationship quality.

In instances where self-esteem or relationship quality is low because of attachment insecurity, clinical work may be focused on restructuring interactions in the relationship (Brisch & Kronberg, 2012). One therapy approach that can be used to help create secure attachment in relationships by restructuring interactions is Emotionally Focused Couple's Therapy (Johnson & Greenberg, 1985; Johnson, 2004; Halchuk, Makinen, & Johnson, 2010). Within emotionally focused couple's therapy, therapists can help clients begin to create a secure attachment base by helping them identify and vocalize their current attachment needs within the relationship. By asking clients evocative questions and making empathic conjectures, therapists allow clients to explore their attachment needs, and possibly past attachment betrayals.

It is important for therapists to check in with each spouse after these new ideas are explored and expressed because how each responds can also elicit change in attachment security in the relationship. Guiding partners through proxy voice is another intervention that therapists can use to help restructure attachment security by helping each to respond in a new way and allow place for the attachment security to change. Further, a therapist could help a spouse soften when their partner is expressing emotional hurts, which also could help change the attachment security in the relationship (Johnson, 2004).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are limitations to this study that should be considered in future research. First, the majority of the sample consisted of Caucasian, well-educated adults who voluntarily took a questionnaire about their relationship, thereby making the sample lack generalizability to the

general population. Additionally, a majority of the sample was securely attached and had high levels of self-esteem and therefore lacks an adequate sample of distress levels. So, even though the main effects of some demographic factors were controlled (religion, socioeconomic status, and length of relationship), future research with a clinical sample could determine whether the findings of this study are consistent with more diverse groups of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, length of relationship, and religion. Using a more diverse sample would increase the study's generalizability to the general public.

Another limitation for this study is that, because the data are non-experimental and cross-sectional, I cannot assert causation or the temporal order of the relationships between attachment style and relationship quality for self, and attachment and self-esteem for self. For example, the quality of an individual's relationship may impact how they view themselves (e.g. Since I do not have a high quality relationship then I may not be good enough for my partner), which would change their reported attachment security. Further, individuals with higher self-esteem may rate their attachment styles more favorably than those with low self-esteem. Only longitudinal data would be able to test which direction of effects is most plausible.

Lastly, all of the data were collected using self-report measures, which depend on people's perceptions of themselves. Relying on an individual's report to assess attachment, self-esteem, and relationship quality could include personal biases, which could provide inaccurate information of these variables. For example, Bollich, Rogers and Vazire (2015) found that not only are people biased when reporting their own self-perceptions, but they are also aware that they are biased and still report their biased answers unless otherwise prompted. A study in which participants are specifically prompted against bias or a study where attachment, self-esteem, and

relationship quality are observed and measured by a third party may provide a more accurate evaluation of the relationships tested.

Future research would benefit from including a measure of self-esteem that assesses more relational and emotional aspects of self-esteem, rather than the cognitive aspect of self-esteem as this study did. Additionally, it was unexpected that there was no statistically significant association between self-esteem and relationship quality (and especially in the expected direction) because previous research has identified such an association. Future research should examine these constructs longitudinally to help establish the nature of the relationship between these constructs.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the association between attachment and relationship quality for an individual and their partner. Further, it tested whether self-esteem mediated the relationship between attachment and relationship quality for an individual and their partner. I found that secure attachment is positively associated with one's own relationship quality and that secure attachment is positively associated with one's own self-esteem. I further found two trend-level effects where secure attachment is negatively associated with partner's self-esteem and self-esteem is negatively associated with one's own relationship quality.

These findings suggest that an individual's attachment security can play a significant role in influencing their level of self-esteem and their relationship quality. As such, these findings show the importance of having a dependable measure of attachment security and ways to intervene on attachment insecurity when clients present for help increasing their relationship quality.

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Table 1

*Sample Demographics*

	Men	Women
Length of Relationship		
1 month-2 years	50.6%	50.6%
3-5 years	13.8%	13.8%
6-10 years	12.4%	12.4%
11+ years	22.6%	22.6%
Remarriage	12.6%	14.3%
Level of Education		
Bachelor's of Associates degree	29.1%	33.8%
Graduate of Professional degree	25.5%	23.2%
No College Education	45.5%	42.9%
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	85.9%	85.9%
African American/ Black	4.0%	4.0%
Latino	4.1%	4.1%
Asian	1.8%	1.8%
Native American	0.7%	0.7%
Mixed/Biracial	2.5%	2.5%
Other	1.5%	1.5%
Religious Affiliation		
LDS/Mormon	55.6%	55.7%
Protestant	13.5%	16.6%
Catholic	8.7%	8.1%
Jewish	1.6%	1.5%
Other	6.5%	7.3%
No Religion	13.5%	11.5%

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Observed Variables*

	Men		Women	
	n	m (SD)	n	m (SD)
<b>Attachment</b>				
Avoidant	680	4.95 (1.03)	680	4.99 (1.03)
Anxious	680	5.19 (1.05)	680	5.12 (1.18)
<b>Self-Esteem Measures</b>				
Positive attitude toward self	680	4.04 (0.79)	680	3.90 (0.82)
Think I'm no good at all	680	1.68 (0.81)	680	1.76 (0.83)
I am a person of worth	680	4.19 (.079)	680	4.25(0.79)
I am a failure	680	1.85 (0.88)	680	1.92 (0.93)
<b>Relationship Quality</b>				
Relationship Stability	679	4.25 (0.73)	680	4.17(0.82)
Relationship Problems	680	2.30 (0.58)	680	2.33 (0.65)
Relationship Satisfaction	679	3.70 (0.87)	680	3.62 (0.98)

Table 3

*Bivariate Correlations of Observed Variables- Males & Females*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Avoidant	1.00	.36**	.34**	-.24**	.36**	-.26**	.31**	-.33**	.32**
2. Anxious	.30**	1.00	.38**	-.32**	.41**	-.34**	.51**	-.42**	.48**
3. Positive attitude toward self	.30**	.25**	1.00	-.55**	.76**	-.60**	.19**	-.23**	.29**
4. I think I am no good	-.22**	-.29**	-.56**	1.00	-.64**	.74**	-.18**	.15**	-.18**
5. I am a person of worth	.34**	.28**	.76**	-.59**	1.00	-.61**	.25**	-.25**	.32**
6. I think I am a failure	-.27**	-.29**	-.56**	.67**	-.58**	1.00	-.19**	.19**	-.21**
7. Relationship Stability	.23**	.49**	.12**	-.17**	.17**	-.16**	1.00	-.66**	.73**
8. Relationship Problems	-.29**	-.43**	-.22**	.25**	-.25**	.23**	-.59**	1.00	-.74**
9. Relationship Satisfaction	.29**	.51**	.23**	-.20*	.27**	-.24**	.68**	-.68**	1.00

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Male correlations are on the lower left half below the diagonal and female correlations are on the upper right half above the diagonal.

Table 4

*Unstandardized and Standardized Factor Loadings for Latent Measurement Model*

	Men		Women	
	b (SE)	$\beta$ (SE)	b	$\beta$ (SE)
<b>Attachment Security</b>				
Avoidance	1.00	.45 (.03)	1.00	.52 (.03)
Anxiety	1.51 (.10)	.64 (.03)	1.51 (.10)	.71 (.03)
<b>Self Esteem</b>				
Positive attitude toward self	1.00	.78 (.03)	1.00	.80 (.03)
Think I'm not good at all	-0.92 (.06)	-0.71 (.03)	-0.92 (.06)	-0.72 (.02)
I am a person of worth	1.05 (.03)	.81 (.03)	1.05 (.03)	.88 (.03)
I am a failure	-1.02 (.06)	-0.72 (.03)	-1.02 (.06)	-0.72 (.03)
<b>Relationship Quality</b>				
Relationship Stability	1.00	.79 (.02)	1.00	.81 (.02)
Relationship Problems	-0.80 (.03)	-0.78 (.02)	-0.80 (.03)	-0.81 (.02)
Relationship Satisfaction	1.33 (.05)	.87 (.01)	1.33 (.05)	.90 (.01)

*Note.* All factor loadings are significant at  $p < .001$ .

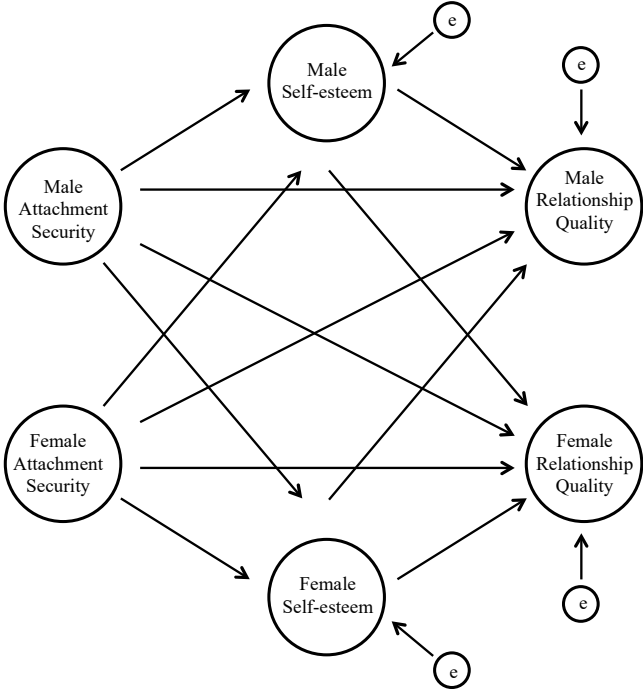


Figure 1. Hypothesized Mediation Model