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Mother-Daughter Relationships in Adulthood: Attachment, Self Esteem and Illusory Superiority

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Abstract
Nature as well as nurture can influence the emotional and cognitive growth of a person. Nurture includes the level of emotion being shown toward an individual, which is then reciprocated. One way that nurture is often measured is through attachment levels. Research suggests that different forms of attachment often contribute to the lifestyle and morals of adults. In the present study, attachment levels between mothers and daughters were examined, in relation to self-esteem and illusory superiority. With a basic knowledge of mother-daughter attachment and self-esteem one could safely assume that the two are positively related. No research to date has examined illusory superiority with the aforementioned variables. Therefore, I hypothesize that mother-daughter attachment, self-esteem, and illusory superiority are positively related. In this study, adult women who reported a strong attachment to their mother did not have a higher self-esteem, which differed from what was hypothesized. However, the findings suggest that adult women that reported a strong attachment to their mother had higher levels of illusory superiority. Also findings show that women that reported higher levels of illusory superiority had lower levels of self-esteem. The relationship between a mother and a daughter could be related to how a daughter views herself in relation to others.

Key Terms:
- Attachment
- Self-esteem
- Illusory Superiority
Some young girls cannot wait to grow up to be like their mothers. Some daughters are always getting caught playing in their mom’s makeup and high heels. The innocence of this moment in a young girl’s life is the foundation for what could turn out to be a healthy growth into adulthood. This healthy growth from childhood to adulthood would be considered the change that takes place which allows young girls to develop into independent and content women, resulting in a high level of self-esteem. One could assume that when a young girl wants to be like her mother, she demonstrates a strong sense of mother-daughter attachment. These simple connections make mother-daughter attachment and self-esteem a highly researched question. Since attachment to a mother can influence a young girl’s self-esteem (Barber, Ball, & Armistead, 2003), I predict that self-esteem is then related to a young woman feeling superior to others.

Attachment can occur in various forms and requires a detailed explanation, defining both negative and positive aspects. Attachment is an emotional bond that surpasses a physical connection an individual has with another. Bowlby (1969/1982) defines attachment as a “psychobiological system that individuals are born with that allows one to feel the need for closeness or proximity to another” (as cited by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005 p. 150). Attachment style is the name given to the level of openness or, as stated before, emotional proximity that an individual exemplifies. Several studies (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) give a simple depiction of different attachment styles in a romantic relationship. An individual that reports feelings of distrust toward their partner would be identified as having an attachment avoidance style (as cited by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005 p. 150). An individual that reports worry that their partner will not be around for support in the time of need would be identified as having an attachment anxiety style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). The forms of avoidance and anxiety are negative and weak attachment styles. Berry, Wearden and Barrowclough (2007) add that if an individual finds it hard to communicate and interact with others, that person is also exhibiting a negative attachment style. An example of positive attachment is a person who reports low levels of avoidance and anxiety (as cited by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) also define a positive attachment style as secure attachment, which is when one thinks positive of oneself and is comfortable with intimacy (Kilmann et al., 2009). The attachment style of an individual can affect a person’s involvement in various personal relationships, such as romantic, platonic, or, for the purpose of this study parental relationship (Berry et al., 2007).

When speaking of parental relationships, the dynamics of a mother-daughter relationship give clear examples of how different attachment styles and personality characteristics of a mother can influence a young woman, especially her self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as how a person either positively or negatively defines themselves. Blyth and Traegar (1983) define self-esteem as the cognitive influences and developments that affects how one thinks of oneself. For example, an individual that reports having high levels of insecurities may lead to low self-esteem (Kilmann et al., 2009).
As mentioned before, some young girls see their mother as being the ideal framework of the woman they wish to become when they are older. Cait’s (2005) findings show the primary caregiver in a young woman’s life has the most importance and impact in that young woman’s life. For the purpose of this study, the primary caregiver will be assumed to be the mother based on history and western societal views on the role of a mother. Therefore, the mother and the particular attachment style of both mother and daughter can lead to either the positive or negative psychological wellness of the young woman. The characteristics that a daughter finds in her mother can determine the outcome of how the young woman later identifies herself (Kilmann et al., 2009).

When exploring the effects of negative mother-daughter attachment, we find that if the mother is not willing to communicate and develop a foundation for a healthy attachment style and relationship with her daughter, then the young woman will develop a negative outlook on relationships and attachment. Kilmann et al., (2009) supports that claim and believes that “avoidant attached mothers may be more likely to transmit attachment insecurities to their daughters” (p. 565). That form of mother-daughter interaction would be one depiction of an unhealthy and weak attachment of a mother-daughter relationship. Consequently, this may lead to a problem with the self-esteem development of the daughter. In contrast, a positive mother-daughter relationship would be similar to the findings reported by Hayden, Singer and Chrisler (2006), who claimed that when daughters reported a feeling of being loved and receiving high praises as a child, they also reported higher levels of mother-daughter attachment. The scholars’ findings further show that these factors both contribute to the creation of a higher self-esteem for the daughter.

Besides attachment styles between a mother and daughter, another similarity between the Hayden, Singer and Chrisler and Kilmann et al. studies is how a mother’s attachment style affected the self-esteem of the daughter. The self-esteem of a young woman can be attributed to the attachment style in the mother-daughter relationship (Barber et al., 2003). When a child is able to feel accepted and shown more consistent love, the self-esteem will increase with age.

However, high self-esteem can take a turn for the worse if an individual starts to use self-esteem as a way to evaluate herself in relation to other women. Having a positive outlook on one’s self is a wonderful quality that many struggle to achieve. Nonetheless, there is a fine line between high self-esteem and the feeling of superiority. Schmidt, Berg and Deelman (1999) and Hoorens (1995) see illusory superiority as being an “unrealistic optimism” approach to self-judgment. Illusory superiority is a surprisingly under studied topic. The few studies that were conducted have defined illusory superiority as attributing a greater amount of positive traits than negative traits to oneself when comparing oneself to another.

With the basic knowledge of mother-daughter attachment and self-esteem, one could safely assume that the two are positively related. No research to date has examined illusory superiority with these variables. Therefore, I hypothesize that mother-daughter attachment, self-esteem, and illusory superiority are positively related.
Methods

Participants

The 25 participants were all female undergraduate students at Xavier University of Louisiana. The majority of participants were from the Psychology Department subject pool. All participation was voluntary.

Materials

To measure the variable self-esteem, an adapted version of Rosenberg’s Self Esteem Scale (1989) was administered. The revised 10-item scale was rated on a 5 point scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Scores range from 10-50. Higher scores indicated higher levels of self-esteem. Sample items from the scale include, “I take a positive attitude towards myself,” and “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.”

To measure the variable mother-daughter attachment, an adapted version of the scale from Bhakoo et al. (1994) was administered. The revised 7-item scale was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). One item was reverse scored in order to accurately compute and report the responses. Scores range from 7-35. Sample items from the scale include, “When I’m away from my mother I am happier,” and “I feel that my mother loves me.”

To measure the variable illusory superiority, a Life Satisfaction scale from Schmidt (1999) was administered. The second 10 items rated life satisfaction in comparison with peers, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (much worse) to 5 (much better). Higher scores meant higher illusory superiority. Sample items include, “Rate your life satisfaction compared to your peers on the bases of health,” and “Rate your life satisfaction compared to your peers on the bases of your relationship with your parents.”

Design and Procedure

The non-experimental study was conducted after obtaining informed consent from the participants of the study. The 25 participants were placed in a classroom setting at Xavier University of Louisiana. They completed a packet of multiple surveys and upon completion they received a written debriefing with the option to ask questions about the study.

Results

To test the hypothesis, a series of Pearson’s Correlation analyses was conducted. The correlation between attachment and self esteem was $r (25) = .150, p (25) = .236$. The correlation between attachment and illusory superiority was $r (25) = .479, p (25) = .008$. The correlation between illusory superiority and self esteem was $r (24) = -.453, p (24) = .013$.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that mother-daughter attachment, self-esteem, and illusory superiority would be positively related. The results were partially statistically significant. There was a statistically significant relationship between illusory superiority and attachment. The relationship between self-esteem and attachment was insignificant.

The significant results imply that females with higher levels of attachment to their mother have higher levels of illusory superiority. The relationship between a mother and daughter...
could influence how a daughter views herself in relation to others. That means that while the mother is being nurturing, showing signs of acceptance and giving praise to the child, she could also be molding the daughter’s cognitive illusion that she is superior to others. The insignificant statistical correlation between self-esteem and attachment implies that, for this particular study, females that reported a high self-esteem did not report high levels of attachment to their mothers. Even though past research found significant findings, further research should be conducted to address the insignificant findings with the present study.

The significant results found between illusory superiority and self-esteem show that there is an inverse relationship between the two variables. As illusory superiority increases, self-esteem decreases. This finding implies that even though females reported that they viewed themselves to be superior in relation to others, they may be doing so in order compensate for their low self-esteem. If viewed from a more critical perspective, this over compensation of self-esteem could lead to problems with relationships with others.

There were a few limitations to this study, one being that only the participant’s perceptions of the levels of attachment between her and her mother was measured. This poses a limitation because the perceptions of the individuals involved in the study may not have been an accurate depiction of the relationship. Secondly, there was not any information pertaining to the specific relationship of the caregiver (i.e. biological mother, step mother, or another mother figure). The specific relationship that the mother and daughter shared may have impacted the results. For example, the insignificant reports of attachment and self-esteem could be due to differences in the levels of attachment a daughter has to her biological mother in relation to the attachment she has to a step mother. Thirdly, the scales were altered to fit the specific needs of this study, which may have weakened the validity and accuracy of the measure.

With the limitations of this study in mind, future research should be done on biological mother-daughter attachment and illusory superiority. Based upon past research, the relationship between a daughter and her biological mother may have a stronger influence on a daughter’s illusory superiority then unspecified mother-daughter relationships. For instance, if biological mothers and daughters are made aware of what can lead to illusory superiority, it may change the dynamics of how the two interact. Furthermore, future research may influence parenting styles which could increase or decrease illusory superiority. In addition, if this topic is further researched it could be used as a tool to help young women assess and re-evaluate their self-esteem and how they view themselves in relation to others. It would allow for young women to gain a better understanding of their self-esteem and to see if it is based in reality. Also, due to the lack of research on the topic, future studies should consider focusing on what other factors influence illusory superiority. For example how does a romantic relationship correlate to illusory superiority in couples? The findings in such studies may yield surprising results that may alter how people date and interact with their significant others. Research in attachment, self-esteem, and certainly illusory superiority can all be correlated to many different aspects of life and should be further explored.
References


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