

Individuals May Improve Their Intimate Relationship by Improving Attachment, Self-esteem, and Personality

Wang Meiru^{1,a,*}

¹College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, The University of Edinburgh, 57 George Square,
Edinburgh, UK

a. 1013925455@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The current study aimed to examine the relationship between romantic relationships and three important factors: attachment, self-esteem and personality. These studies briefly described previous research on attachment, self-esteem and personality and their effects on romantic relationships, and discussed their malleability and application of the intervention. People with insecure attachment, low self-esteem and personality vulnerability have less satisfaction within their romantic relationships. High-quality relationships have a positive impact on the enhancement of those factors. Besides, those factors are malleable in response to social experiences and specific interventions. Attachment styles can shift after completing the process of EFT. CBT treatments are an effective approach to enhancing self-esteem and personality. These findings provide evidence that people could change their attachment, self-esteem and personality, which implies that it is possible that individuals could improve their romantic relationships by changing their attachment, self-esteem and personality.

Keywords: Attachment, self-esteem, personality, romantic relationship.

1. Introduction

Intimate relationship is a crucial part of interpersonal relationships. Numerous studies from medicine and psychology support the fact that long-term and high-quality intimate relationships form a strong social support network, which contributes to both mental and physical health. For instance, holding the hands of romantic partners helps reduce the experience of pain, even looking at a picture of a romantic partner has the same effects [1]. Besides, research demonstrated that married people are not only physically and psychologically healthier than those who are single but also have longer life expectancies [2]. The concept of intimate relationships is complicated. This essay will particularly focus on romantic relationships because it is a typical and closest intimate relationships for adults. Romantic relationships comprise multiple aspects. The motivation of making connection with others is universal and strong enough as a human nature, which is contained in intimate relationships and described as the need to belong [3]. People naturally seek physical and emotional closeness with partners [4]. The concept of love in romance has received considerable scholarly attention, different Love Scales were developed to distinguish different love styles, however, the composition of love varies from theory to theory. According to the famous Sternberg's triangular theory of love [5], intimacy, passion, and commitment are the three components that define love. Sternberg argued that a long-term healthy intimate relationship required all three components present, which he named

consummate love. Previous research supports the fact that individual differences, including attachment, self-esteem, and personality, have important influences on consummate love of romantic relationships. However, there is less attention paid to the issue that whether or not people could improve their intimate relationships by changing their attachment, self-esteem, and personality. Each person is a unique combination of different experiences and traits, which result in individual differences that influence our relationships. Some differences are determined by genetic inheritance, whereas some are shaped by past experiences, and since they are learned, it likely to be changed. This research is necessary for individuals to enhance themselves in order to achieve high-quality and satisfactory romantic relationships. Therefore, this essay will briefly review basic concepts of attachment, self-esteem and personality, describe their effects on the quality of romantic relationships, then discuss the malleability of those factors, and the possibility to improve them through intervention.

1.1. Attachment Theory and Effects on the Quality of Romantic Relationships

Attachment security plays an influential role in close relationships within the context of both dating and marital relationships. Developmental psychologists discovered that there is an affectional connection that infants form with their primary caregivers [6]. If the caregiver is always available and responsive to the infant and they have mutually enjoyable interactions, this infant will naturally promote a sense of attachment security, which makes the infant feel safe about the world, behaviorally, they can explore the environment with curiosity and interact effectively with others. It was later called secure attachment. After Bowlby, psychologists specified other two types of attachment styles for children, anxious-resistant and anxious-avoidant [7]. Attachment is a very powerful bond that influences one's social and emotional development throughout life.

Researchers discovered that adult romantic love is an attachment process [8]. Bartholomew [9] identified four types of attachment for adults: Secure attachment is just like the child's secure attachment. The second style is preoccupied, where people have a sense of unworthiness but a positive expectation of others, so they overly rely on the acceptance of others to make themselves feel safe. Another attachment is fearful, in which people have a sense of unworthiness and negatively view others. They try hard to avoid connections with others to protect themselves from potential rejection. The final style is dismissing. People believe they are lovable but they have a negative view of others. They tend to avoid close relationships and keep independent to protect themselves from the sense of vulnerability. In recent decades, instead of making attachment categories, most researchers tend to explore attachment dimensionally [10], two major continuous dimensions are avoidance of intimacy and anxiety about abandonment. People who score low on both dimensions are considered secure [11].

It is proposed that the concept of attachment provides a comprehensive basis for understanding many aspects of the closeness and distance with partners that underlies romantic relationships. People with secure attachment learn from their caregivers that proximity maintenance is rewarding and interdependency is conducive to need satisfaction. Consequently, past experiences enhance their motivation to stay in a stable longstanding relationship [12]. On the contrary, both anxiously and avoidant people suffer from attachment insecurities and worries, and have much more anxiety and disturbance in their romantic relationships [13]. Anxiously attached people seek extreme closeness to their partners and present over-dependent due to fear of rejection [14]. Avoidant people deny vulnerability and the need for closeness and refuse intimacy and interdependence with their partners [15]. Generally, securely attached people obtain more feelings of intimacy, mutual satisfaction, and a higher level of commitment with their romantic partners [16].

1.2. Self-esteem and Effects on the Quality of Romantic Relationship

Self-esteem is a major part of the self-concept. According to the sociometer model of self-esteem [17], it is defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of self-worth as a person. From an evolutionary perspective, human beings become sensitive to signs indicating interpersonal rejection, gradually, interpersonal acceptances and favors make individuals like themselves, whereas rejection and indifference from others make individuals dislike themselves [18]. Particularly, self-esteem influences individuals' social motivation and behaviors [19]. As a result, people who have high self-esteem tend to have positive self-evaluation of their competence and characteristics, they have specific motivation to develop rewarding connections with others [20]. In contrast, low self-esteem relates to negative self-evaluation or self-doubt, despite the fact that they are also eager to develop social relationships to satisfy the need to belong, their motivations are strongly reinforced to avoid the pain of rejection [21].

In romantic relationships, people with low self-esteem obtain worse romantic relationship outcomes. They tend to underestimate the strength of their romantic partners' love and question their acceptance [22], as well tend to misunderstand their partners' daily relationship behaviors, inappropriately perceive acceptance-related meaning as hints of negative regarding [23] due to their self-doubts, over-sensitivities, and vulnerability. Relatively, they sense more rejected, experience more conflicts, more frequently get hurt, and become anxious and angry, since such negative conflicts, interactions and emotions usually have stronger effects compared to positives [24]. By contrast, high self-esteem people have resilient expectations of their partners' acceptance and love, even when they receive actual rejections [25]. In situations of risk, people with higher self-esteem are motivated to pursue opportunities for closeness and intimacy, however, people with low self-esteem react in a self-protected way, which is derogating their partners and their relationships [26], ultimately, such destructive reactions decrease their partners' satisfaction and cause the occurrence of real rejection [27]. Hence, people with low self-esteem experience more frequent conflicts with their partners, more self-doubt about their worthiness, and usually achieve less satisfying relationships [28].

1.3. Personality and Effects on the Quality of Romantic Relationships

Personality is the long-term traits and idiosyncratic patterns in which individuals interact with other people and the environments. Early personality theorists tried to use words from the dictionary to describe people, which consists of thousands of traits [29]. In order to develop a systematic framework of personality traits, Cattell [30] began with the idea of a multidimensional model consisting of limited variables. He created a personality assessment based on 16 traits, named the 16 Personality Factors questionnaire. After decades of studies, there is a general agreement among scholars on a particular classification of personality traits, named the Five Factor Model [31]. In this Model, five core traits are expressed along a spectrum, including openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

It is manifested that apart from openness to experience, four of the five-factor personality characteristics have a significant effect on satisfaction with a romantic relationship [32]. Extroversion refers to sociability, assertiveness and emotional expression. People with higher extroversion are outgoing, cheerful, and warm, all of these are perceived as endearing personalities in romantic relationships. Conscientiousness is associated with competence, self-discipline, thoughtfulness, and goal-driven. People with higher conscientiousness are hardworking, organized, and dependable, which makes them become reliable and committed romantic partners. Another trait that has a positive correlation with satisfaction in romantic relationships is agreeableness, which is characterized as pleasant, cooperative, and trustworthy. Surprisingly, the most essential trait that correlates with marital satisfaction is neuroticism [33], which is the tendency to experience negative emotions [34].

Neurotic people easily feel anxious and depressive, they tend to express more fear, guilt, anger, criticism, and defensiveness [35]. These harmful tendencies usually cause pessimism and conflict that potentially damage a romantic relationship [36].

2. Malleability and Intervention of Attachment, Self-Esteem and Personality

2.1. Malleability and Intervention of Attachment

As mentioned earlier, individuals' attachment styles could be conceptualized as regions in two dimensions, anxiety about abundance and avoidance of intimacy. Considering the developmental changes in attachment styles, these two factors are important. According to a longitudinal study of attachment orientation conducted by Chopik and colleagues [37], attachment anxiety reached the highest point throughout adolescence and young adulthood then declined in middle age and older adulthood. Attachment avoidance generally declined across the lifespan.

Intimate relationships potentially provide a chance to enhance attachment security and may eventually change attachment orientations. For an adult having a romantic relationship, his or her partner is usually the primary attachment figure [38]. There is growing evidence that being in a romantic relationship was associated with greater attachment security, resulting in lower levels of anxiety and avoidance [39]. Besides, positive and loving interactions with a romantic partner could not only reduce an individual's distress but also serve both physical and mental health and longevity. In daily life contexts, when an individual has a relationship partner who is always evidently supportive and responsive, this individual could feel significantly valued over time [40]. With augmented security, people have more self-approval and self-confidence to interact with their partners [41]. Furthermore, those supportive behaviors promote security for insecure people, and increase their resilience, so that they can cope with life problems and difficulties more effectively and flexibly, ensuring them to expand mental resources in other non-attachment issues, broadening their perspectives, and helping them pursue self-actualization [42]. It is claimed that instead of actual interactions, even imaginary supportive interactions with a dating or marital partner could facilitate various kinds of pro-relational cognitions, behaviors, moods, and psychological functions contributing to the overall quality of relationships and other social relationships [43].

The theoretical ideas and research findings provide a foundation for applying attachment theory to the field of couple and marital counseling. Johnson [44] developed a particular intervention method for couple relationships based on attachment theory, named Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). It conceptualizes relationship distress as the result of a rigid insecure attachment bond [45]. Insecure partners usually have difficulty recognizing and expressing their attachment needs, and more importantly, have difficulty expressing attachment-related emotions [46], which significantly determines their beliefs and behaviors in intimate relationships. EFT is carried out in three stages [47]. The first stage is cycle de-escalation, the therapist needs to help couples recognize their negative cycle of conflict, and acknowledge attachment needs and fears that provoked relationship conflict. The second stage is restructuring attachment interactions, couples are encouraged to express their own attachment needs and emotions and respond to one another. The final stage is consolidation and integration, aiming to help couples rehearse to respond with greater responsiveness to each other, daily life context

In EFT, therapists strive to help couples be aware of and expose their actual vulnerabilities, resolve their attachment injury [48], have the acknowledge underlying attachment needs, explore and express primary emotions [49] and improve their ability to be supportive and available to their partners [50], develop new positive interaction cycles. There is growing evidence that attachment styles can shift after completing the process of EFT, with positive long-term outcomes [51]. It is proved the effectiveness of EFT to help people significantly attenuate relationship-specific attachment anxiety

and avoidance [52]. Moreover, couples gain greater accessibility, responsiveness, and a new pattern of engagement within their relationships, heightening the role of a partner as a secure base, which creates greater attachment security, closeness, accessibility, and positive feelings about self and other [53], eventually lead to more stable and mutually satisfactory relationships.

2.2. Malleability and Intervention of Self-esteem

Across the lifespan, self-esteem increases in adolescence and young adulthood, reach a peak in middle adulthood and decrease over time [54].

To discuss the malleability of self-esteem, it is worthwhile to introduce two sub-systems of self-esteem. The first system is the belongingness sub-system [55], which monitors received social feedback about the individual's well-being, identifies its positivity or negativity, and facilitates behavioral responses to satisfy the need to belong. As demonstrated in the earlier part, this sub-system may explain why people with low self-esteem often suffer worse relational well-being [56], and their self-protective behavioral responses to their partners within romantic relationships instead lead to less sense of belongingness and poor relationship quality. The other system is the epistemic sub-system [57], which serves the great need for self-certainty and promotes behavioral response to maximize the feeling of self-certainty. It brings a sense of self-certainty when the received social feedback is consistent with an individual's chronic self-esteem, suggesting the self-verification about self. Conversely, it brings a sense of epistemic confusion and uncertainty when the received feedback is inconsistent with an individual's chronic self-esteem. The epistemic system unconsciously guides individuals' thoughts and behaviors to maintain self-views because of self-verification, even though the self-views are unfavorable for people with low self-esteem. Motivated to maintain self-certainty, they pay more attention to negative feedback that is consistent with their self-evaluation, they even have the expectations of being rejected or disappointed [58]. Thus, they act in a way that premises self-verifying reactions from interacting partners [59]. In spite of the difficulties of changing self-esteem due to the dedicated epistemic system, it is possible to change self-certainty in response to social feedback. For purpose of diminishing the discomfort and anxiety of epistemic confusion, people are likely to reduce the inconsistency between existing self-view and the social feedback by reestablishing certainty to match positive evaluations [60]. Hence, people with low self-esteem may change self-views in the face of repeated, unavoidable positive feedback over time, eventually obtaining higher self-esteem.

In accordance with sociometer theory [61], self-esteem is significantly influenced by an individual's social environment, especially shaped by social relationships and personal experiences. As one of the closest social relationships for adults, romantic relationship plays a crucial role in self-esteem changes [62]. Shared self-disclosure provides intimacy, interdependence and stability provide comfort, and partners' caring provides trust and security, as a result, making such connections with a romantic partner facilitates self-esteem and enhances attachment security as well [63]. Additionally, both successfully investing in a committed romantic relationship and getting married buffer positive effects on self-esteem [64]. One explanation for such outcome is that making partnerships with someone could be part of a personal goals pursuits, it is one of the major developmental tasks for many emerging adults [65]. Thus, they regard being in a serious long-term romantic relationship as part of the ideal self. Consequently, finding a partner indicates a step closer to this goal, reinforcing an individual's perceived relational value, such relationship transition potentially boosts their self-esteem [66]. Especially, the increasing body of evidence showed that there is a mutual development between self-esteem and relationship quality. A security bond with a romantic partner may reduce self-focus worries and distracting concerns, and promote responsiveness and attention to the partner's needs [67]. Besides, partners' positive illusions about their idiosyncrasy may be one factor that boosts their self-esteem [68], partner's continued offer of rewards, acceptance, and responsiveness makes

them feel special and irreplaceable value [69]. Also, training people with low self-esteem to correctly interpret partners' positive regard and care encourages them to place seeking closeness prior to self-protection motive [70]. Notably, being in a long-term, stable, satisfying, and high-quality relationship can increase self-esteem [71].

The association between self-esteem and romantic relationship provides a foundation for future research, such as intervention studies aimed at enhancing self-esteem in couples to increase romantic relationship satisfaction. Some studies suggest that cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) is an effective approach widely used in clinical practice [72]. Fennell [73] proposed a conceptualization of low self-esteem as an elaboration of the cognitive model of emotional disorder associated with anxiety and depression. Specifically, treatments are carried out to focus on addressing and changing pervasive negative self-beliefs and related behaviors, incorporating strategies to correct the perceptual bias of negative events and emotions, in order to establish positive beliefs about the self and boost self-esteem [74]. In line with schema therapy [75], it is important to discover the childhood origins of negative beliefs since they are the result of past experiences. Furthermore, Marigold and colleagues [76] developed interventions to enhance LES' security in their romantic relationships. It was designed to increase their confidence in accepting partners' positive regard, encourage them to maintain closeness with romantic partners, and prevent them from distancing their relationship in threatening situations. The usefulness for both improving self-esteem and social relationship quality is affirmed. However, more research is needed to document how the intervention of self-esteem moderates romantic relationships.

2.3. Malleability and Intervention of Personality

The increasing studies suggest that personality traits change across time, with large interindividual variability. For instance, agreeableness and conscientiousness gradually increase with age [77]. Prior research on the influences of the Big Five on romantic relationships revealed that the most important personality characteristic is neuroticism, which is the tendency to experience negative emotions. It gradually declines across the lifespan [78]. However, there is great variability in the extent of personality change at the individual level [79]. Besides, personality is strongly influenced by life events [80]. There is evidence that the socialization effects of relationship transitions alter the Big Five traits.

Romantic relationships are an important life domain, which influence a wide variety of personalities [81]. Investment in a committed romantic relationship is likely to decrease neuroticism at a faster rate compared with singlehood [82]. It is worthwhile to highlight the strong influence of social roles on personality. Occupying the role of a romantic relationship partner, individuals are supposed to adhere to the social norms and romantic partners reward appropriate behavior [83], new patterns of thoughts and behaviors are required [84], leading to change of psychological characteristics, such as becoming more secure. In addition, entering long-term relationships place pressure on individuals to achieve competency, people are motivated to undertake more responsibility, become more mature and affectionate, and respect and tolerate their partner [85]. Correspondingly, entering romantic relationships leads to an increase in extroversion and conscientiousness, and a decline in neuroticism [86]. Furthermore, social responsibility increases relationship security, couples become more comfortable in their relationships [87], which increases agreeableness. Hence, social rules and the commitment to new social roles have the potential to trigger personality change [88].

In addition to traits fluctuations, large changes in personality traits are possible as a direct result of the specific intervention [89], which challenges the original belief that traits were considered stable and inflexible across time [90]. For example, a large body of research shows that neuroticism not only changes over time but also in response to treatment. Research has found a significant decrease in neuroticism after a period of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) [91]. Therapists evaluate thoughts

and replace the negatives with more realistic interpretations, improving perceived self-efficacy to make negative emotional experiences more manageable [92]. Recently, the Unified Protocol (UP) for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorder is a cognitive behavioral intervention that particularly developed in relation to personality characteristics [93]. It is an explicit intervention targeting personality vulnerabilities [94]. Contrary to traditional CBT methods that focus on dealing with disorder symptoms, UP targets a broad range of strong emotional reactions. Instead of using avoidant emotion regulation strategies, it promotes new learning about emotions that they are temporary and tolerable no matter how bad the situation is, resulting in a reduction of the frequency of negative emotional experiences [95]. When the change is sustained, neuroticism is likely to be declined [96]. Moreover, there is a range of CBT elements addressing other personality traits. For instance, well-being therapy is effectively used to alter positive affectivity, which has large effects on extroversion [97]. Clearly, a sufficient change of cognitive and behavioral patterns for a long time can ultimately change personality traits [98]. It is a priority to develop effective treatments for individuals with personality vulnerabilities that can be applied across the range of couple and marital counseling associated with those factors.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research improves the understanding of factors that influence romantic relationships, including attachment, self-esteem, and personality. Extending our understanding of their malleability provides foundations for relationship-specific intervention. People with insecure attachment, low self-esteem, and personality vulnerability obtain less satisfaction with their partners. More importantly, high-quality romantic relationships have a positive impact on the enhancement of those factors. Besides, the present study supports the assumption that those factors are malleable in response to social experience and treatments. Thus, the present study contributes to the possibility that individuals may improve their intimate relationships by changing their attachment, self-esteem, and personality. The present research briefly reviews the applications of attachment theory in the field of couple and marital counseling domain, and the effectiveness of the EFT approach is demonstrated. It is also clear that CBT interventions can be effective in treating self-esteem and personality. However, this is a lack of specification regarding the application of self-esteem and personality to couple therapy. Further empirical evidence is needed to demonstrate whether the intervention of self-esteem and specific traits could improve the quality of romantic relationships. Future research should explore this promising possibility.

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