

Relationship of Attachment Style and Ethnic Identity to Self-Actualization in College Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-actualization, attachment style, and ethnic identity of college students. Participants (N= 373) from a private, Midwestern university completed surveys which measured each of these variables. Results revealed a significant negative relationship between self-actualization and both avoidant and anxiety attachment styles. Results also showed a significant positive relationship between self-actualization and two subscales of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) – Self-Identification and Ethnicity, and Attitudes Toward Other Groups.

As a college student, establishing a positive identity, building close relationships, and gaining an overall satisfaction with one's life are significant goals. Understanding the connection between these variables is an important step to interventions that may help individuals achieve a better sense of self and establish greater satisfaction within their own lives. College students can have high levels of stress that frequently result from carrying a challenging academic course load, dealing with time constraints, taking care of familial responsibilities, and maintaining a job to help them pay for their college expenses. With these stressors, psychological distress and depression can often develop, and college students can become at risk of failing to complete college. However, with social support from the college/university, these individuals can develop better coping skills to help them deal with the stress (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Attachment is a particularly pertinent concept for college students who may be living away from home for the first time and having to form new social connections. A college student's attachment style influences the process of forming new relationships. A better understanding of the relationship between self-actualization, attachment style, and ethnic identity can assist college and university student affairs personnel, faculty, and other higher education administrators and staff interested in promoting personal development among college students. This better understanding will promote

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enhanced interventions to help students build strong self-actualized identities and secure relationships during their college years.

Self-Actualization

A common theory used to explain different psychological states of people is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1943) explains that one must fulfill certain basic needs before moving forward to fulfill "higher" needs. For example, basic physiological needs (food, water, etc.) must be met before satisfying emotional needs. Only then can individuals begin fulfilling needs of discovering their own identity. Once these steps are complete and all other basic needs fulfilled, individuals can find themselves at the highest level, reaching self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

According to Maslow, self-actualization is a stage in which persons reach their fullest potential and lead happier, more harmonious lives. They develop characteristics they have always wanted. Characteristics of self-actualization include building close relationships with others, becoming more sociable, having more concern for present situations, and acquiring more satisfaction and comfort in themselves as individuals (Maslow, 1943). Ramanaiah, Heerboth, and Jinkerson (1985) expanded upon these characteristics by examining assertiveness and other personality characteristics as they compare to self-actualization. The researchers concluded that more assertive individuals scored higher on self-actualization scales than nonassertive individuals and were more present-oriented, inner-directed, socially sensitive, and had closer relationships with others. Assertive individuals also thought of themselves in a more positive manner. Pufal-Struzik (1999) expanded further by applying self-actualization to characteristics and personalities held by gifted students. The study concluded that independence and a greater desire for intellectual stimulation led to more self-actualized individuals. The more self-actualized students had a greater sense of self-acceptance, higher self-esteem, and viewed themselves in a more positive light (Pufal-Struzik, 1999).

Self-actualization has been studied and related to a wide variety of variables (for example, see Ford & Procidano, 1990). For instance, self-actualization has been positively correlated with psychological adjustment and negatively with psychopathology. Self-actualization has been positively correlated to perceived social support and negatively correlated with depression and overall life stress. The process of developing self-actualization is thought to differ for men and women with women becoming more self-actualized through interpersonal relatedness by developing interpersonal sensitivity and awareness and men in the context of competence and achievement (Ford & Procidano, 1990).

Attachment Style

Establishing close relationships (attachment) with others is an important aspect of self-actualization. Attachment and attachment styles can be viewed from different perspectives. John Bowlby (1973) defines attachment as any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, usually conceived as stronger and/or wiser. His attachment theory has three general tenets about how individuals develop and maintain patterns of social interaction and emotion regulation (Bowlby, 1973). First, infants are born with a system of behaviors aimed at maintaining contact with significant caregivers who provide protection from a potentially dangerous world (Eng, Hart, Heimberg, Liebowitz, & Schneier, 2001). Second, the accessibility and responsiveness of others to one's attachment needs foster the development of expectations that are carried forward into new relationships (Eng et al., 2001). Third, experiences with significant others are internalized into a set of working models of others' dependability and the worthiness of the self as a lovable person

that can be generalized to new relationships (Eng et al., 2001). Bowlby (1973) asserted that these internalized interpersonal working tenets account for the stability of attachment styles across the lifespan and for subsequent relational cognitions and behaviors in adulthood.

Hazen and Shaver (1987) noted that adult attachment styles reflect expectations about whether significant others are emotionally available under stressful circumstances. Bartholomew (1990) developed a model of adult attachment that describes four categories of attachment style (*secure*, and three categories of insecure—*preoccupied*, *dismissing*, and *fearful*) along two dimensions (model of self/model of others). *Securely* attached adults have a strong sense of self worth and are comfortable with intimacy (Bartholomew, 1990). They consider themselves as worthy of the concern, care, and affection of others; perceive significant others as being accessible, reliable, trustworthy, and well-intentioned; and tend to have relationships characterized by intimacy and trust (Eng et al., 2001).

Adults with *preoccupied* attachment styles lack confidence and self-esteem, but yearn for closeness, and become preoccupied with seeking validation from others (Bartholomew, 1990). Their relationships are characterized by worry of abandonment, hyper-vigilance, and jealousy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). *Dismissing* adults are self-reliant and independent and do not seek out intimacy (Bartholomew, 1990). *Fearful* individuals are highly dependent on external validation, but expect rejection and therefore fear close relationships (Bartholomew, 1990).

Since Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall's (1978) work on attachment styles was completed, research has found that conceptualizing attachment into different dimensions rather than categories is a more effective arrangement. Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) concluded that all primary research and self reports on attachment, including the work of Ainsworth et al., are based on the notions of *avoidance* and *anxiety*. Understanding the extent of these two dimensions is crucial to discerning individual differences in adult intimate attachment. The *avoidance* factor includes avoidance of intimacy, discomfort with closeness, and self-reliance. The *anxiety* factor represents worry about relationships including jealousy, fear of abandonment, and fear of rejection (Brennan et al., 1998).

Maslow's theory suggested that more self-actualized people find more satisfaction in their interpersonal relationships. A study on attachment styles in secure and insecure adolescents found that more secure adolescents were more interdependent and had stronger friendships with more interpersonal rewards than adolescents who were less secure in themselves (Mikulincer & Selinger, 2001). In support of these findings is a study by Hale, Hannum, and Espelage (2005) on the importance of belonging in which results indicated that individuals who experience a connection to others are more likely to have secure attachment styles and are capable of recognizing and utilizing this support to help them in times of stress or need. The researchers noted that a positive correlation between security and more satisfying relationships could be attributed to greater self-actualization in these adolescents.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity can be defined as a feeling of belonging to a group and identifying with the beliefs and behavior of that particular group (St. Louis & Liem, 2005). Having greater awareness of and comfort in one's ethnic identity could result in a higher level of self-actualization.

Parham and Helms (1985) investigated self-actualization in African American youth at various stages (pre-encounter, encounter, immersion, etc.) of establishing individual Black Identity. The researchers found that those in the encounter stage, or the stage in which they become comfortable with their identity as a Black individual, were more present-oriented and inner-directed (characteristics of a self-actualized individual). Whereas those in the pre-encounter

stage, or the stage in which they favor White culture and perspectives, showed fewer characteristics of self-actualization (Parham & Helms, 1985). The results of these findings imply that maintaining a strong ethnic identity is another important aspect of becoming more self-actualized. However, it is important to understand specifically how ethnic identity is developed. Quintana (2007) examined many of the developmental theories surrounding ethnic identity, concluding that longitudinal research studies support the idea that adolescence in particular is a time of ethnic identity exploration, later followed by identification. In addition, research also supports the theory that experiences with discrimination can contribute to the growth of an established ethnic identity (Quintana, 2007). Many of these findings were supported in a study conducted by Syed and Azmitia (2008), who examined the importance of ethnic identity development in emerging adults or college students. Researchers compared scores on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) with participants' own narratives of a time when they became aware of their ethnicity. Results indicated that a stronger ethnic identity typically develops more in ethnic minority groups than in ethnic majority groups. In the personal narratives, most participants who were part of an ethnic minority group described experiences of prejudice that made them more aware of their own ethnicity, indicating that such experiences may contribute to a more salient ethnic identity development (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). The result is not to say that experiences of prejudice and discrimination are not challenging to the individual, but that positive social support following the event can help foster the connection to one's own ethnic identity which suggests that perhaps attachment style is in fact related to ethnic identity development. Brondolo and colleagues (2009) examined coping strategies in dealing with racism and discrimination. They concluded that in addition to several factors, social support plays a large part in dealing with experiences of discrimination by helping the individual understand the experience and by enabling the individual to put the experience within a collective context, which can help build the connection between the individual and his or her own ethnic identity.

Although researchers in the discipline of psychology have some understanding about ethnic identity development in ethnic minorities, there is much less information about how this process functions, or if it functions at all, in the development of White identity. For this reason, it is important to explore the role of ethnic identity development in White college students in order to have a comparison to ethnic minority students in terms of establishing identity, relationships, and satisfaction during college.

Purpose and Hypothesis

The current study examined the relationship of attachment style and ethnic identity to self-actualization in college students. It was hypothesized that individuals with higher levels of self-actualization would have less anxiety and avoidant attachment styles and higher scores of ethnic identity.

Methods

Participants

Three hundred and seventy-three male and female college students from a private, Midwestern university participated in this study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 50 with the vast majority (91.4%) ages 17-22. Most participants were Caucasian (73.2%) and lived on campus (62.7%). About half of the students were currently in a romantic relationship (45.8%). See Table 1 for complete demographic information.

TABLE 1.

Demographics

		N	%
Gender			
	Male	159	42.6
	Female	207	55.5
	No response	7	
Age			
	18-22	341	91.4
	23-50	24	6.43
	No response		
Ethnicity			
	White	273	73.2
	Black	22	5.89
	Asian	14	3.75
	Hispanic	8	2.14
	Mixed	15	4.02
	Other	0	0
	No response	13	3.49
Year in School			
	First	106	28.4
	Second	117	31.4
	Third	73	19.6
	Fourth	63	16.9
	Fifth or more	11	2.9
Commuter		136	36.5
Resident		234	62.7
Romantic Relationship			
	Yes	171	45.8
	No	195	52.3
Relationship Status			
	Married	8	2.14
	Divorced	3	0.80
	Living together	15	4.02
	Single	168	45.0
	Long-term	75	20.1
	Dating	77	20.6

Measures

The *Self-Actualization Scale* (SAS; Crandall & Jones, 1991) provides a measure of Maslow's highest level of development. The SAS contains 15 items with responses in Likert format: 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Crandall and Jones (1986) have found that high scores on this scale are associated with individuals being extraverted, rational in their thoughts and behaviors, and inner-directed. Crandall, McCown, and Robb (1988) showed that this scale was sensitive to clinical interventions related to increasing personal assertiveness. The SAS had a coefficient alpha of 0.61 for this study's sample.

The *Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised* scale (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) consists of 36 statements measuring anxiety and avoidant attachment styles on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = *strongly agree*). The results from the ECR-R fall on two sub-scales, Avoidance and Anxiety. Avoidance includes discomfort with closeness and discomfort with depending on others, and Anxiety includes fears of rejection and abandonment. Three studies examining the test-retest reliability and convergent and discriminate validity found the ECR-R to be a very firm indicator of latent attachment, and very reliable (Sibley, Fischer, & Liu, 2005). The commonly used estimate of internal consistency reliability tends to be .90 or higher for the ECR-R (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The validity of the scale was supported by good correlations with previous measures of attachment style and predictable patterns of correlations with measures of family functioning and personality (Strodl & Noller, 2003). The coefficient alpha for this study's sample on the ECR-R was 0.95.

The *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM; Phinney, 1992) is a 23-item scale used to examine similarities and differences in ethnic identity across different ethnic groups. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Ethnic self-identification, ethnicity, and parents' ethnicity are used as background information. A total score and four subscale scores (affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement, ethnic behaviors, and other-group orientation) can be derived from the MEIM. Reliability for the MEIM, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, was .81 in a sample of high school students and .90 in a college student sample. For this study's sample, the coefficient alpha was 0.73.

Procedure

Before the study was conducted, investigators obtained permission from professors on campus to allow researchers in their classrooms to administer the assessments to their students. All participants were given an informed consent form to sign that explained and outlined all procedures involved in the study and made clear to the students that the study was voluntary. After the consent forms were signed, the investigators gave out packets which included the SAS, the ECR-R, and the MEIM. Once the students completed all of the tests, the assessments were scored and data were entered and analyzed using SPSS Version 15 in order to examine correlations between the existing variables.

Results

It was predicted that individuals who scored higher on self-actualization would score lower on attachment style and higher on ethnic identity. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between the total score on the *Self-Actualization Scale* and the anxiety attachment style subscale of the *Experiences in Close Relationships* ($r = -.443$; $p < .01$) as well as the avoidant attachment style subscale ($r = -.377$; $p < .01$). There was also a significant positive relationship between self-actualization and the ethnic identity subscale of the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* ($r = .133$; $p < .05$) as well as self-actualization and other-group orientation ($r = .197$;

$p < .01$). However, the results revealed no significant correlation between self-actualization and the other ethnic identity subscales. In addition, there was no significant relationship between the attachment style subscales and the ethnic identity subscales. See Table 2.

TABLE 2.

Results of correlation between self-actualization, attachment style, and ethnic identity scales

SCALES	SASTOTAL	MEIMETHID	MEIMAFF	MEIMACH	MEIMBEH	MEIMOTHER
SASTOTAL	$r = 1$ N= 357	$r = .133^*$ N= 352	$r = .072$ N= 353	$r = .052$ N= 355	$r = .050$ N= 356	$r = .197^{**}$ N= 356
ECRANX	$r = -.443^{**}$ N= 348	$r = -.040$ N= 352	$r = -.056$ N= 353	$r = .060$ N= 354	$r = .048$ N= 355	$r = -.033$ N= 355
ECRAVOID	$r = -.377^{**}$ N= 347	$r = -.036$ N= 352	$r = -.066$ N= 353	$r = .005$ N= 355	$r = .016$ N= 356	$r = .031$ N= 356

Key: * = Significance at $p < .05$

** = Significance at $p < .01$

SASTOTAL: Total of Self-Actualization scale

ECRANX: Anxiety Attachment Style subscale

ECRAVOID: Avoidant Attachment Style subscale

MEIMETHID: Self-Identification and Ethnicity subscale

MEIMAFF: Affirmation and Belonging subscale

MEIMACH: Ethnic Identity Achievement

MEIMBEH: Ethnic Identity Behavior

MEIMOTHER: Other Group Orientation subscale

Discussion

It was hypothesized that individuals with higher levels of self-actualization would have less anxiety and avoidant attachment styles and higher scores of ethnic identity. In support of the hypothesis, those who scored higher on the self-actualization scale scored lower on the attachment style scales and higher on the ethnic identity measure. Regarding self-actualization and attachment styles in this study, those who were more self-actualized were less likely to experience feelings of anxiety or avoidance in close relationships, thus inferring that they have more secure attachment styles. Such a finding is supported by Maslow's theory and the study conducted by Mikulincer & Selinger (2001), which both propose that those who are more self-actualized tend to be more secure and satisfied in their relationships with others.

Although previous studies have shown that those who are more self-actualized also have a greater sense of ethnic identity, this relationship was only partially supported in the current study. There was a positive correlation between self-actualization and two of the MEIM

subscales—the Self-Identification and Ethnicity subscale and the Other Group Orientation subscale. This correlation between self-actualization and the Self-Identity and Ethnicity subscale could be attributed to the idea that an ethnic identity formation is similar to that of an overall identity achievement, which involves obtaining a more secure sense of self (Phinney, 1992). Developing a more secure ethnic identity could result in an overall increase in awareness and security with one's entire identity, which is supported by the research conducted by Parham and Helms (1985) in which they found that individuals who are comfortable in their identity are more inner-directed and present-oriented. An increase in awareness and understanding of who one is while feeling secure and happy about that identity is an attribute of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

The Other Group Orientation subscale assesses attitudes and interactions with ethnic groups other than one's own (Phinney, 1992). Although Other Group Orientation is not necessarily a part of one's individual ethnic identity, the interactions individuals have with other groups can impact their own identity in terms of how they feel about others and how they feel about themselves (Phinney, 1992). The positive correlation between this subscale of the MEIM and self-actualization could mean that those who have stronger interactions and orientations with different ethnic groups are likely to have stronger and more secure relationships with others in general, which is an important attribute of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

In the current study, there was not a significant relationship between self-actualization and the other MEIM subscales. Possible explanations for this result can be derived based on the demographics of the participants. Since this study was completed at a private, Midwestern university, the majority of the participants were students between the ages of 18-22. This age group is relatively young and as previous research indicates, emerging or young adulthood is a time of identity exploration, and identification typically develops later (Quintana, 2007). Many individuals in this age group have been or are currently exploring their identity and may have not yet firmly established a salient ethnic identity. While the participants may recognize their individual ethnicity and differences among other people, they have yet to develop their behavior to match a particular ethnic group (as measured by the Ethnic Behaviors subscale of the MEIM). The other ethnic identity subscales measured identity achievement and identity affirmation and belonging. These characteristics are also difficult to establish at a traditional college age because students are still learning and trying to crystallize their identity. Therefore, they may have not yet classified themselves as achieving or even feeling a sense of belonging to a particular group. In addition to these aforementioned factors, another possible contributing factor may be the ethnicity of the participants since the majority of the participants were White. Dominant groups who have benefits and privileges do not usually question their privileges for fear of losing them. Consequently, White individuals have the choice of whether or not to proclaim a particular ethnic identity because doing so might threaten the privilege that society grants them (Adams & Griffin, 2007).

Past research indicates that there may be a relationship between ethnic identity and attachment style. As previously indicated in the findings of Brondolo, et al. (2009), social support, especially following experiences of discrimination, can enable individuals to begin to develop a connection with their own ethnic identity. The results from the current study showed no significant correlation between attachment style and most of the ethnic identity subscales. These results suggest that although it may be true that affirmation and self-confidence can be gained from a strong identification with an ethnic group, one's ethnic identity is not the only way strong self-esteem and belonging can be achieved. Phinney (1992) concluded that ethnic identity and self-esteem were positively correlated with being a minority, but not with being White indicating that self-esteem through the development of a stronger ethnic identity and perhaps stronger identification within that group is more likely to be achieved by minority groups. Since

White people may have a hard time developing an ethnic identity, they may not base relationships and self-esteem on ethnic identification. The majority of the participants in the current study were White so this could be the result of the lack of significance between attachment styles and most of the ethnic identity subscales.

A college student regardless of ethnic background can belong to an athletic team, sorority or fraternity, a religious organization, and many other groups. Group involvement enables one to produce a sense of identity and foster self-confidence. The more opportunities a person has for involvement and group membership, the greater the chance that his or her self-confidence and identity will flourish. Therefore, even though a person may have a weak ethnic identity in some aspects, he or she may still be able to attach to others in a way that is not overly anxious or avoidant.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation to this study is external validity because the participants were sampled from a relatively small, private university. Although the results cannot be used to make generalizations about larger, more diverse populations of college students, the results do have significant implications. The results from this study can add to existing work, be reevaluated for increased validity, or serve as the basis for future studies. One way to conduct this study in the future would be to recruit people from different age groups and ethnic backgrounds representative of larger, more diverse college populations in order to have a comparison to a predominantly White, private college student population.

Another limitation in the current study could have been the scale used to study attachment style. Only negative attachment styles were examined, making it impossible to know how the other variables relate to positive attachment styles. It may be beneficial for future studies to include both positive and negative attachment styles in order to have more in-depth comparisons with self-actualization and ethnic identity. However, because most of the previous research concentrates on the relationship of self-actualization and ethnic identity to positive attachment styles and because Brennan and colleagues (1998) concluded that most adult attachment style measures are two-dimensional and based on avoidant and anxiety attachment styles (the negative attachment styles), we opted to use only a measure of negative attachment styles—the ECR-R. In addition, the current attachment style measure, the ECR-R, has questions which emphasize romantic relationships. Although the ECR-R may not be as meaningful as a measure of attachment style that emphasizes all types of relationships or attachment in specific relationships, we nevertheless chose it because of its anticipated appeal with traditional age college students.

Once the relationship between self-actualization, attachment style, and ethnic identity is more fully developed, the information can be helpful in developing programs to aid people in building strong identities and secure relationships during their college years. The information is helpful particularly because modern interpretations of Maslow's theory emphasize its importance for understanding identity formation (Sleeth, 2007; Shea, 2003), and recent research has demonstrated the impact of positive attachment in promoting healthy human functioning overall (Moore & Leung, 2002), positive clinical outcomes (e.g., Eng et al., 2001), and healthy coping and resilience (e.g., Bartley, Head, & Stansfeld, 2007). Such interventions are crucial during the college years, which have been noted as a time of change and high periods of stress. College students are often faced with many stressors, both academically and personally, and may also experience difficulties in adjusting to certain life changes and coping with these stressors. Much research has been conducted in the area of depression and college students and shows high levels of depression among college students compared to the general population. Depression in college

students becomes especially concerning because very few college students seek clinical help or therapy for their depression (Hammen, 1980).

Employing coping strategies and maintaining flexibility when faced with life stressors can decrease stress and lower the risk for depression (Lam & McBride-Chang, 2007), which ultimately contribute to maintaining and developing a stronger individual identity. Assisting college students to learn positive coping strategies can help students have a sense of control during situations that otherwise may provoke anxiety and uncertainty. Providing opportunities for young adults to achieve these aspects of their lives can contribute to the development of resilience and may ultimately assist in the path toward self-actualization.

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