

The role of attachment styles in shaping proactive behavior:

An intra-individual analysis

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Abstract

Focusing on the intra-individual variation of proactive behavior, the authors propose that curiosity, core self-evaluations, and future orientation are states that influence proactive behavior at a given time at the within-individual level and these within-individual associations are moderated by attachment styles at the between-individual level. For a sample of Taiwanese students ($N = 58$), the results showed that monthly curiosity, core self-evaluations, and future orientation positively predicted monthly proactive behavior, but these within-individual associations were different depending on an individual's relationship anxiety in attachment. People high in relationship anxiety tend to behave proactively to approach future goals at a given time, but cannot rely on their self-evaluations to foster the proactive action at the same time, revealing an ambivalent attitude toward proactive behavior.

Keywords: proactive behavior, adult attachment, personality, multilevel modeling

Practitioner points

1. Strengthening an individual's states of curiosity, positive self-evaluations and future orientation can help to enhance his/her proactive behavior at a given time.
2. Cultivating a positive social environment is helpful to enhance an individual's proactive behavior, especially for people who worry about social relationships.

Individuals do not exhibit proactive behavior consistently across situations (e.g., Sonnentag, 2003). According to the cognitive-affective personality system model (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), the intra-individual variation of behavior is tied to the variation of activation in relevant states that are responsible for inducing behavior. This model further proposes that the associations between relevant states and the inducing behavior can themselves be quite stable, with personality reflecting these stable “if-then” associations.

Focusing on the intra-individual variation of proactive behavior, we aim to identify states that can evoke proactive behavior at a given moment at the within-individual level and to identify individual difference factors at the between-individual level that can govern these within-individual associations. This investigation helps to delineate the mechanisms behind the enactment of proactive behavior at a given time and to provide guidance regarding how proactive behavior might be stimulated in people with different dispositional characteristics.

We propose that curiosity, core self-evaluations (CSE), and future orientation are states for triggering proactive behavior at a given time. Curiosity stimulates individuals to seek information and explore opportunities when a proactive intention is formed (Frese & Fay, 2001). CSE (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003) refers to an individual’s judgment of his/her worth, effectiveness, and capability, such that

high levels of CSE provide psychological resources that help an individual to face challenges elicited from proactive action (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). A future orientation contributes to considering future events and taking action in advance (Grant & Ashford, 2008), which shapes proactive action to bring changes in the future.

Hypothesis 1: Curiosity, core self-evaluations, and future orientation at a given time will positively predict proactive behavior at that time at the within-individual level.

We propose that attachment styles will moderate these within-individual associations. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) is relevant to understanding proactivity because proactivity is a general tendency to master the environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993), which is congruent with the concept of exploration that is fundamental to attachment theory (Elliot & Reis, 2003). Based on the literature provided shortly, we suggest that the two insecure attachment dimensions (higher closeness avoidance or relationship anxiety) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) at the between-individual level will mitigate the impact of curiosity, CSE, and future orientation in triggering proactive behavior at the within-individual level.

Closeness avoidance refers to the extent to which an individual is uncomfortable with closeness and dependence on others. People with higher

closeness avoidance tend to protect themselves by keeping a distance from others to avoid potential harm in social interactions (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). They also think that they may hurt others' feelings during exploration and thus have a greater desire to withdraw from exploration (Mikulincer, 1997), an investigatory action aiming to effectively interact with and master the environment (Elliot & Reis, 2003). As such, they are not motivated to act on their curiosity and ultimately try to repress unsatisfied curiosity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Accordingly, for those high in closeness avoidance, greater curiosity at a given moment does not trigger proactive behavior at that time.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the closeness avoidance of an individual at the between-individual level is, the weaker the within-individual association between his/her curiosity and proactive behavior at a given time will be.

Relationship anxiety represents the extent to which an individual is anxious or fearful about abandonment or being unloved. People with higher relationship anxiety tend to develop negative concepts of the self as being unlovable and incapable and therefore intensify their distress experiences to increase attention and care from others (Wei, Heppner, & Mallinckrodt, 2003). As such, their self-concepts are more likely to be influenced by others' responses in social interactions, so their self-concepts are lower in clarity (Wu, 2009), and their self-evaluations are

vulnerable (Srivastava & Beer, 2005). Hence, for these people, higher CSE at a given moment does not strengthen their proactive behavior at that time, because this state of CSE is unreliable and vulnerable.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the relationship anxiety of an individual at the between-individual level is, the weaker the within-individual association between his/her core self-evaluations and proactive behavior at a given time will be.

Finally, we expect that individuals who are insecurely attached, either with higher closeness avoidance or relationship anxiety, will not strengthen their proactive behavior at a given time as a result of their future orientation at that time. Future orientation involves anticipating the consequences of one's actions. People who are insecurely attached will have a deficiency in engaging in anticipatory behavior, regardless of their future orientation, because they have not had reliable interactions with caregivers that have helped them to build a clear link between actions and consequences, and thus they are not confident in their ability to predict the progress in the future based on their actions (Laghi, D'Alessio, Pallini, & Baiocco, 2009). Thus, insecurely attached individuals might think ahead about the future, but they do not translate this thinking into action.

Hypothesis 4: (a) The higher the relationship anxiety of an individual at the

between-individual level is, the weaker the within-individual association between his/her future orientation and proactive behavior at a given time will be; (b) The higher the closeness avoidance of an individual at the between-individual level is, the weaker the within-individual association between his/her future orientation and proactive behavior at a given time will be.

Method

Fifty eight undergraduate students (22 male) in Taiwan participated in a repeated-measures study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years ($M = 20.55$, $SD = 1.96$). The surveys were completed at four time points across a semester. At Time 1, participants completed questionnaires for demographic information, adult attachment and proactive personality. For Time 2 to Time 4 with one-month interval between adjacent time points, they reported on their CSE, curiosity, future orientation, and proactive behavior over the previous month.

A ten-item adult attachment scale (Wu, 2009) was used to measure relationship anxiety (e.g., “I often worry that others don't really love me”) and closeness avoidance (e.g., “I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others”). Proactive personality was included as a control variable because it is a strong dispositional antecedent of proactive behavior (Fuller & Marler, 2009). It was measured using a

six-item scale (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Parker, 1998). The same items were also adapted to measure monthly proactive behavior (e.g., “In the last month, when I saw something I didn’t like, I fixed it”).

The Core Self-Evaluations Scale (Judge et al., 2003) was revised to measure monthly CSE (e.g., “In the last month, I determined what happened in my life”). The Curiosity and Exploration Inventory (CEI) (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004) was revised to measure monthly curiosity (e.g., “In the last month, I would describe myself as someone who actively seeks as much information as I can in a new situation”). Finally, three items were constructed to assess participants’ monthly future orientation (e.g., “In the last month, I imagined what I could be in the future”). Except for closeness avoidance ($\alpha = .62$), Cronbach’s alphas for all measures were greater than .70.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics. The proportion of intra-individual variance of monthly measures of curiosity (31.7%), CSE (29.9%), future orientation (47.9%), and proactive behavior (40.8%) suggested that individuals differed across months in these states.

Insert Table 1 Here

Using multilevel modeling, monthly proactive behavior was regressed on monthly measures of curiosity, CSE, and future orientation at Level 1, and the intercept and the three slopes at Level 1 were regressed on relationship anxiety, closeness avoidance and control variables (i.e., proactive personality, sex, and age) at Level 2. The intercept at Level 1 was specified as having a random effect, and the three slopes at Level 1 did not have random effects because they were not significant. Variables at Level 1 were centered on group mean, and variables at Level 2 were centered on grand mean, except for sex (female = 1 vs. male = 0).

Table 2 presents the results. Monthly measures of curiosity, CSE and future orientation positively predicted monthly proactive behavior (p s < .05). Closeness avoidance negatively (p < .05) and proactive personality positively (p < .01) predicted monthly proactive behavior.

Relationship anxiety negatively interacted with monthly CSE (p < .01) and positively interacted with monthly future orientation (p < .05) in predicting monthly proactive behavior. Specifically, monthly CSE had a stronger positive effect on monthly proactive behavior among people low in relationship anxiety ($B = .93$, p < .01) than their counterparts ($B = .46$, p < .05) (see Figure 1). Monthly future orientation had a stronger positive effect on monthly proactive behavior among people

high in relationship anxiety ($B = .26, p < .05$) than their counterparts ($B = .10, p > .05$) (see Figure 2). Sex negatively interacted with monthly CSE in predicting monthly proactive behavior ($p < .05$). Female participants ($B = .25, p < .05$) tended not to attune their monthly proactive behavior due to their level of CSE, compared to men ($B = .69, p < .01$). Results of attachment variables were the same in an analysis without including proactive personality, sex, and age at Level 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

Insert Figure 1 Here

Insert Figure 2 Here

Discussion

Our study demonstrates the role of curiosity, CSE, and future orientation in shaping proactive behavior at the within-individual level, suggesting that it is possible to induce an individual's proactive behavior at a given moment by strengthening

his/her states of curiosity, CSE and future orientation at that time.

However, we found that for individuals high in relationship anxiety, higher states of CSE are not, but higher feelings of a future orientation are, associated with more proactive behavior at a given time. These seemingly contradictory findings might reflect their ambivalent attitude toward external worlds such that they appreciate feelings of mastery during exploration (Mikulincer, 1997), but they do not perceive themselves as having enough capability to sustain this exploration or cope with potential distress (Wei et al., 2003). Likewise, our findings suggest that for these individuals, behaving proactively might be a good way to approach future goals, but the fragility of their self-concepts does not help them to sustain proactive actions. The latter finding is perhaps most important because it suggests that, for these people, enhancing proactivity in the workplace will not occur through boosting core self-evaluations alone.

One potential strategy for boosting their proactivity is through cultivating a positive social environment, because higher quality of social relationships can help them to reduce their relationship anxiety while also strengthening their self-evaluations. People high in relationship anxiety desire others' attention and care due to their worry about loss (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Therefore, having positive and reliable social relationships with others, such as supportive mentors or colleagues, will

alleviate their worries about loss. In addition, their self-evaluations are strongly tied to others' liking (Srivastava & Beer, 2005), so positive feedback or personal care from mentors or colleagues can help to strengthen their self-evaluations. Thus, for those people, a positive social environment might help both to reduce relationship anxiety and to enhance CSE, thereby increasing the impact of CSE on proactive behavior at a given moment and ultimately fostering proactive behavior.

This study has limitations, including a small sample size, low internal consistency of one of our attachment measures, reliance on self-report measures and an exclusion of environmental factors. However, our study provides an initial starting point for understanding when proactive motivational states translate into action and shows the powerful role of attachment security in this regard.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlations								
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Female											
2. Age	20.59	2.10	-.07								
3. Relationship anxiety	4.18	1.01	-.11	-.10							
4. Closeness avoidance	3.84	0.78	-.00	.03	.11						
5. Proactive personality	4.70	0.91	-.03	-.01	-.15	-.07					
6. Monthly core self-evaluations	2.91	0.52	-.07	-.13	-.42**	-.25	.24		.33**	.23**	.44**
7. Monthly curiosity	3.29	0.62	-.25	.06	-.12	-.26*	.32*	.39**		.44**	.58**
8. Monthly future orientation	3.35	0.79	.01	-.04	.10	-.14	.27*	.23	.45**		.46**
9. Monthly proactive behaviour	3.17	0.53	-.07	.03	-.21	-.28*	.55**	.48**	.66**	.50**	

Note. Correlations below the diagonal are correlations at the person level (N= 58).

Correlations above the diagonal are correlations at the month level (N= 174).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Results of HLM analysis

Parameter	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Effect at Level 1			
Intercept	3.22	0.09	36.34**
Monthly curiosity	0.28	0.12	2.23*
Monthly CSE	0.69	0.16	4.33**
Monthly future orientation	0.18	0.08	2.29*
Effect at Level 2			
Female	-0.07	0.11	-0.67
Age	0.01	0.03	0.21
Relationship anxiety	-0.06	0.05	-1.36
Closeness avoidance	-0.16	0.07	-2.30*
Proactive personality	0.30	0.05	5.65**
Cross-level interaction effects			
Monthly curiosity × Female	-0.09	0.18	-0.51
Monthly curiosity × Age	-0.01	0.04	-0.27
Monthly curiosity × Relationship anxiety	0.01	0.07	0.08
Monthly curiosity × Closeness avoidance	-0.07	0.12	-0.63
Monthly curiosity × Proactive personality	-0.13	0.11	-1.20
Monthly CSE × Female	-0.45	0.18	-2.45*
Monthly CSE × Age	0.01	0.04	0.17
Monthly CSE × Relationship anxiety	-0.24	0.08	-2.89*
Monthly CSE × Closeness avoidance	0.04	0.13	0.29
Monthly CSE × Proactive personality	0.08	0.12	0.73
Monthly future orientation × Female	-0.16	0.10	-1.70
Monthly future orientation × Age	-0.03	0.02	-1.45
Monthly future orientation × Relationship anxiety	0.08	0.03	2.25*
Monthly future orientation × Closeness avoidance	-0.07	0.08	-0.88
Monthly future orientation × Proactive personality	-0.07	0.06	-1.08

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

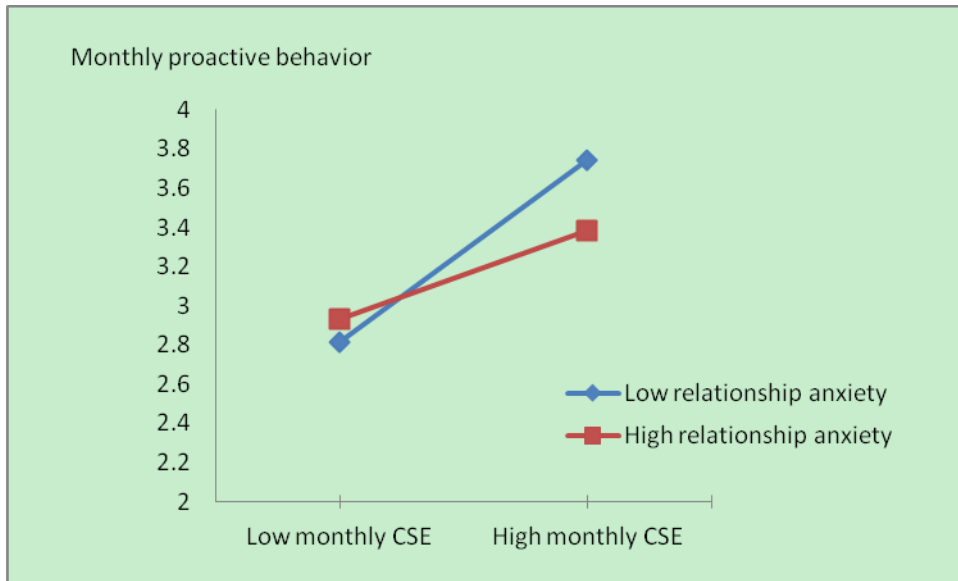


Figure 1. Interaction of relationship anxiety and monthly CSE in predicting monthly proactive behavior. CSE: Core self-evaluations.

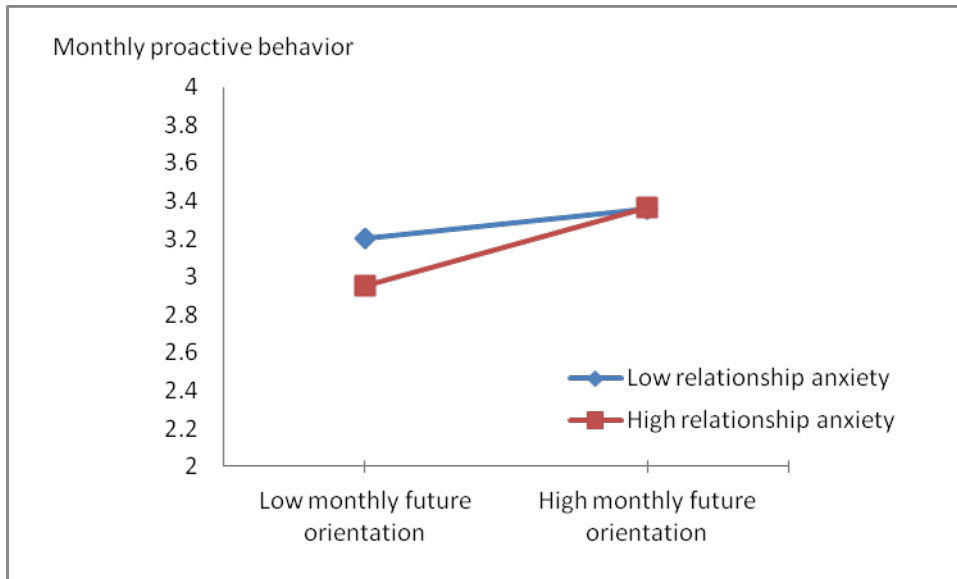


Figure 2. Interaction of relationship anxiety and monthly future orientation in predicting monthly proactive behavior.