

**SELF-CONCEPT CLARITY FOLLOWING MARITAL DISSOLUTION:
INVESTIGATING THE ROLES OF ATTACHMENT ANXIETY AND DAILY SOCIAL
BEHAVIORS**

By

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ABSTRACT

Self-concept clarity refers to the extent to which people feel certain about who they are as a person, and during periods of stress, including stressful interpersonal or social upheavals, this sense of clarity is often in flux and highly disturbed. The present honors thesis aims to investigate whether variability in daily social behaviors mediates the association between attachment insecurity and changes in self-concept clarity across a five-month recovery period following marital separation. One hundred and twenty adults who had recently separated from their marital partner were examined over five months, with data gathered at three different timepoints a month apart. In order to objectively measure social integration, participants wore the Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR; Mehl et al., 2001) throughout the weekend of each assessment time point. The EAR is a widely validated assessment tool that allows for the calculation of an objective social integration composite, by capturing social behaviors as they naturally occur in one's daily life. We hypothesized that higher levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance would predict lower social integration in the months following marital dissolution and social integration in turn would be associated with lower self-concept recovery as it acts as a mediator of the relationship between attachment orientation and LOSROS. Our results did not reveal a mediation relationship, but a correlation between social integration and LOSROS was shown across the 5-month study period.

Key Terms: Divorce, Attachment Orientation, Self-concept, Social integration

Introduction

Divorce is a major stressful life event that can negatively impact one's psychological and physiological health (Sbarra, 2015). One route through which marriage dissolution negatively influences an individual is by damaging their self-concept clarity (Larson & Sbarra, 2015; Mason et al., 2011). Following a breakup, research has shown that individuals reject or retain attributes of their self-concept based on how influential their ex-partner was to their sense of self (Slotter et al., 2014). Depending on how negatively or positively one views their dissolved relationship, an individual may have the desire to continue to incorporate attributes gained during the relationship or to remove them once the relationship is over. An unclear understanding of the aspects of self-concept that grew from the relationship may make it particularly hard to recover emotionally after a breakup. As an individual adopts new social roles and leaves past roles, their self-concept is internally redefined; however, this period of rediscovery is characterized by a lack of confidence in the defining features of their self-concept. Research suggests that the more an individual struggles to redefine their self-concept following a breakup, the more post-breakup distress they experience (Mason et al., 2011).

Attachment Orientation and Self-concept Clarity

Attachment influences people's thoughts and behaviors within relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Insecure attachment is considered on two primary dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Attachment avoidance derives from a negative working model of others, while attachment anxiety derives from a negative working model of the self (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Individuals high in attachment avoidance have a strong sense of autonomy and fear intimate emotional connections with their romantic partner. Those high in attachment anxiety seek out and require deep emotional intimacy

and reassurance from their partners above and beyond what those with secure attachments require (Cope & Mattingly, 2021).

In studies evaluating the relationships between attachment orientation and self-concept clarity, researchers report mixed results. Anxiously attached individuals report more negative self-views, lower self-esteem, and less complex models of the self (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Conversely, more avoidantly attached individuals have more complex models of the self (Emery et al., 2018), characterized by a large number and variety of self-aspects (Mikulincer, 1995). Although the complexity of self-models is distinct from self-concept clarity, high levels of self-model complexity can cause people to experience lower degrees of self-concept clarity (Pilarska, 2016). Accordingly, attachment anxiety is consistently associated with lower self-concept clarity (Sbarra & Borrelli, 2013; Cope & Mattingly, 2021), while researchers have found that attachment avoidance is either unassociated with self-concept clarity (Sbarra & Borrelli, 2013) or is linked to lower self-concept clarity (Emery et al., 2018). Furthermore, after experiencing a relationship dissolution, those high in attachment anxiety report increased difficulty in separating themselves from an ex-partner and in turn face greater self-concept confusion (Slotter & Gardner, 2011).

Attachment Orientation and Daily Social Behaviors

There is some evidence to suggest that an individual's attachment orientation may influence their daily social behaviors. Studies have found that higher degrees of attachment anxiety and avoidance have been negatively correlated with perceived social support (Mallinckrodt & Wei., 2005). The correlational nature of these results suggests that insecure attachment orientations may lead to difficulty maintaining social relationships. Individuals with higher degrees of attachment anxiety and avoidance have increased problems with affective

communication (Muetzelfeld et al., 2020), which may negatively impact their social relationships. As anxiously attached individuals have a need for relational intimacy, their excessive reassurance seeking can negatively affect their relationships when their partner seems to be distancing themselves from the relationship. For individuals high in attachment avoidance, their tendency to mistrust close relationships can also negatively affect their social relationships (Muetzelfeld et al., 2020).

Daily Social Behaviors and Self-concept Clarity

Currently, there are not many studies that explore the relationship between social behaviors and self-concept. However, research has demonstrated that when an important self-aspect is threatened, receiving (evidentiary) social support leads to increased self-concept clarity (Slotter & Gardner, 2014). Some work also suggests that perceptions of one's own social attributes are closely tied with social behaviors. In one study, researchers demonstrated that individuals with high self-esteem were more likely to behave in a pro-social manner, aiding someone who asks for help (Brown & Smart, 1991). Research also shows that a higher degree of self-concept clarity is positively associated with relationship quality (McIntyre et al., 2017), while lower self-concept clarity is associated with poorer relationship quality (Lewandowski et al., 2010).

Present Study

One explanation for the association between greater attachment anxiety and lower self-concept clarity may rest in studying daily social behaviors. To the extent that people with high attachment anxiety withdraw from social engagement following a breakup, they may foreclose or remove themselves from opportunities to move past their self-concept disturbance. In the same vein, for people at high risk for self-concept disturbance, social interactions may be salubrious

and beneficial, and the lack of social interactions may maintain distress. The present study aimed to evaluate a potential mediation relationship between attachment orientation, social integration, and self-concept recovery. With a sample of 120 recently separated adults, we analyzed the participants' attachment orientation, self-concept recovery, and daily prosocial behaviors over a 5-month period. Our prevailing hypothesis is that social integration will act as a mediator of the relationship between attachment orientation and LOSROS, such that higher levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance will predict lower social integration in the months following relationship dissolution, which in turn will be associated with lower self-concept recovery.

Methods

Participants

This study consisted of 120 adults (34 men, 86 women) who had recently separated or divorced, and their ages ranged from 24 to 65 years of age ($M=43.81$, $SD=10.37$). On average, participants were married for 18 years ($SD = 19.5$ years) and separated for 1.2 months ($SD = 5.9$ months) at the start of the study. The participant samples consisted of individuals who identified as non-Hispanic White (62.5%), Hispanic (21.7%), African American (5%), Native American (1.7%), and Asian (2.5%), while the remaining 6.7% identified as "Other."

Procedures

The data utilized in this secondary analysis was originally gathered as part of the Divorce, Sleep, and (Social) Environment (DSE) Study. Data from the DSE Study are used in multiple reported in the published literature, including papers focused on sleep (Coppola et al., 2023; O'Hara et al., 2022), loneliness and social isolation (Danvers et al., 2023), the immunological correlates of daily social behavior (Hasselmo et al., 2018), and the role of contact with an ex-partner after divorce (O'Hara et al., 2020). Although portions of the data used in this

project have been included in other analyses (e.g., the Loss of Self questionnaire is included in the overall separation-related psychological distress composite used in prior reports), none of the analyses or findings reported herein have been reported previously.

Participant recruitment was completed through online and newspaper advertisements, family and conciliation legal courts, and divorce support groups. Eligibility depended upon the participant being married for at least three years and living with their partner for at least two years prior to their separation. All data was gathered over a 5-month period, and each participant was evaluated on five different occasions within this time period. Objectively measured EAR-gathered data (Mehl et al., 2001), including the daily socialization behaviors utilized in our social integration composite, were gathered for 7 days at months 1, 3 and 5. The electronically-activated recorder (EAR) was worn by participants as they go about their daily lives, routinely recording brief portions of audio. The EAR data gathering periods were specific to weekends (Saturday and Sunday, occasionally Friday evenings), and the EAR gathered approximately 45 minutes of audio per day when worn. These audio snippets were later coded into appropriate variables, describing the nature of the audio, and we used this coded audio data to calculate our social integration composite.

Measures

Attachment Orientations. Participants' attachment orientations were assessed via the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale – Short Form (ECR-SF), a 12-item self-report measure of attachment avoidance and anxiety in close relationships, at the start of the study. The ECR-SF evaluates attachment in terms of a 7-point scale of strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) with two 6-item subscales assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance, respectively. Higher scores on this form illustrate higher levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance. The anxiety

subscale addresses concern for close relationships and feelings of unease about partner approval engagement (e.g. “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them.”). The avoidance scale focuses on discomfort with intimacy and closeness in romantic relationships (e.g. “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.”).

Loss of Self/Rediscovery of Self. The Loss of Self—Rediscovery of Self (LOSROS) scale was developed Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) to assess participants’ self-concept recovery and was measured throughout the 5-month study period; in the current project we use data from months 1, 3 and 5. The self-report questionnaire includes items for loss of self (LOS; e.g., “I do not feel like myself anymore.” and “I feel incomplete.”), providing a measurement of feelings of loss of self-concept, and items for rediscovery of self (ROS; e.g., “I have rediscovered who I am.” and “I have reclaimed lost parts of myself that I could not express while with my partner.”), measuring feelings of reacquaintance with aspects of the self-concept (Lewandowski et al., 2007). The ROS items are reversed scored, and higher scores on the composite reflect greater degrees of self-concept disturbance.

Social Integration Composite. The Social Integration Composite is drawn from observed daily social behaviors recorded via the EAR and was used in a prior report from the DSE Study (Hasselmo et al., 2018). The composite is made up of 4 coded pro-social behaviors: (1) socializing/entertaining, (2) positive support, (3) substantive conversation, and (4) the reversal of time spent alone. Data coded as “time spent alone” was reversed to provide an overall measure of time spent with others. For each of the three measurement occasions, each participant had about 45 minutes of sound files recorded per day by the EAR. Each sound file was later coded in accordance with the aforementioned pro-social behaviors. Interactions labeled as socializing/entertaining involve the participant hanging out or socializing with others for fun and

particularly excluded participation in any mundane activities. Positive support interactions include the participant receiving emotional, practical, or informational support, omitting any work-related support. Lastly, substantive conversation entails conversations that have the purpose of exchanging thoughts, information, values, and/or ideas regarding a non-emotional topic. In order to calculate the social integration composite, the z-scored percentages were calculated for each of the four pro-social behaviors. The social integration composite is the mean of these four z-scored percentages, with higher scores reflecting greater time spent socializing with others (i.e. participating in at least one of the four prosocial behaviors in our composite).

Data Analysis

In order to address our hypotheses, we utilized regression analyses to evaluate whether social integration acted as a mediator for the relationship between attachment orientation and LOSROS as well as to identify any relationships between the three constructs. In treating attachment orientation (EACS) as our independent variable, the analyses were run for both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, examining the potential mediation relationship for each attachment dimension.

Results

Attachment Anxiety

Regression analyses were used to examine whether social integration in the 3rd month of the study mediated the association between attachment anxiety and Loss of Self—Rediscovery of Self (LOSROS) scores in the 5th month of the study. The findings from these analyses are presented in Table 1. In a baseline model without statistical control (Model 1), social integration was significantly associated with LOSROS, $b = -6.13$, $SE = 2.57$, $p = .02$ (Figure 1). When controlling for social integration in the 1st month of the study (Model 2), social integration in the

3rd month of the study continued to be significantly associated with LOSROS, $b = -6.45$, $SE = 2.63$, $p = .01$. None of the other relationships between variables were significant in either model.

However, when a more rigorous set of control variables were included in the analyses (Models 3 and 4), association between social integration on LOSROS was no longer significant. When controlling for social integration and LOSROS in the 1st month of the study (Model 3), and when controlling for all relevant autoregressive paths (Model 4), none of the relationships were significant.

To investigate the change between models 1 and 2, and models 3 and 4, a correlation matrix was computed using all relevant variables (Table 2). As shown, attachment anxiety is weakly negatively correlated with social integration and is weakly positively correlated with LOSROS. Additionally, social integration is negatively correlated with LOSROS. This partially supports the directionality of the primary hypothesis – as predicted, higher attachment anxiety was associated with lower social integration. Additionally, because we see evidence of strong within-occasion associations between the LOSROS composite and social integration composite, we explored whether this patterning would hold over the entire study period. Specifically, we computed mean scores for the LOSROS and social integration composite averaging across each of the three occasions. Across all occasions, the average LOSROS and average social integration scores were significantly negative correlated, $r = -.32$, $p = .00039$, and this correlation is displayed in Figure 2.

Attachment Avoidance

Regression analyses were used to examine whether social integration in the 3rd month of the study mediated the association between attachment avoidance and the Loss of Self—

Rediscovery of Self (LOSROS) scores in the 5th month of the study. The findings from these analyses are presented in Table 3.

In a baseline model, when not controlling for any variables (Model 1), only social integration was significantly associated with LOSROS, $b = -6.54$, $SE = 2.63$, $p = .01$ (Figure 3). When controlling for social integration in the 1st month of the study (Model 2), social integration in the 3rd month of the study continued to be significantly associated with LOSROS, $b = -6.54$, $SE = 2.63$, $p = .01$. None of the other relationships between variables were significant in either model. However, when a more rigorous set of control variables were included in the analyses (Models 3 and 4), the impact of social integration on LOSROS was no longer significant. When controlling for social integration and LOSROS in the 1st month of the study (Model 3), and when controlling for all relevant autoregressive paths (Model 4), none of the relationships were significant.

To investigate the change between models 1 and 2, and models 3 and 4, a correlation matrix was computed using all relevant variables (Table 4). Attachment avoidance is not consistently correlated with social integration and is weakly positively correlated with LOSROS. As mentioned above, we computed mean scores for the LOSROS and social integration composite averaging across each of the three occasions, and across all occasions, the average LOSROS and average social integration scores were significantly negative correlated, $r = -.32$, $p = .00039$ (Figure 2).

Discussion

Because romantic breaks and relationship dissolution are associated with self-concept disturbances (Larson & Sbarra, 2015; Mason et al., 2015), it is important to examine the factors that contribute to the decline and recovery of self-concept clarity following divorce. The primary

purpose of this study was to explore a potential mediation relationship between attachment orientation and self-concept recovery via daily social behaviors. Based on prior literature that illustrated links between attachment orientation and self-concept recovery (Cope & Mattingly, 2021; Emery et al., 2018; Sbarra & Borrelli, 2013), attachment orientation and daily social behaviors (Muetzelfeld et al., 2020), and daily social behaviors and self-concept recovery (Brown & Smart, 1991; Slotter & Gardner, 2014), we hypothesized that social integration would mediate the relationship between attachment orientation and self-concept recovery; specifically, we predicted that people high in attachment anxiety or avoidance would evidence lower levels of daily social integration, which, in turn, would be associated with less improvement (or maintained disturbance) in their self-concept. This hypothesis was premised on the idea that people high in attachment anxiety may be too caught in the emotional distress of their breakup and thus miss important opportunities for salubrious social connection, which would be beneficial in helping them “reorganize” their sense of self. On the other hand, people high in attachment avoidance may evade opportunities to form new social connections following their breakup, resulting in them missing the chance for these connections to aid in their self-concept reorganization and recovery.

We found no evidence for a mediational relationship. However, our results did reveal a significant correlation between average social integration and average LOSROS across the 5-month study duration, which suggests that as average social integration increases, participant self-concept disturbance decreases. This finding is consistent with previous research that observed a temporal association between self-concept recovery and psychological well-being (Mason et al., 2011), as our results illustrate a similar temporal association between self-concept recovery and an increase in pro-social behaviors, likely improving an individual’s psychological

well-being. Moreover, our results are in line with past research that observed an indirect effect between social integration and psychological distress (Hasselmo et al., 2018). The correlation we found provides one potential explanation for how social integration indirectly effects psychological distress, with greater self-concept clarity acting as a driver of psychological recovery. However, the directionality of this correlation is unclear; self-concept clarity could improve in response to increased social integration, or social integration could increase in response to improved self-concept clarity. The improvement of one's self-concept clarity could cause an individual to seek out more socialization opportunities, increasing their social integration. On the other hand, increased social integration could lead to an individual forming a broader network of social relationships, allowing for more concrete social roles to develop, and in turn, this could improve an individual's self-concept. There is also the possibility that these two processes occur simultaneously, essentially reinforcing each other. For example, as an individual increases their social integration, their self-concept may begin to improve, causing an individual to engage in even more pro-social behaviors. Despite being unable to illustrate the mediation relationship we initially hoped to identify, our results did begin to fill a gap in self-concept research, identifying an association between social integration and self-concept recovery.

We observed a weak negative correlation between attachment anxiety and social integration, and there was a weak positive correlation between attachment anxiety and LOSROS. These correlations align with our expectations, as higher degrees of attachment anxiety are associated with lower degrees of social integration. Additionally, attachment avoidance was not correlated with social integration, contrasting our prediction of higher degrees of attachment avoidance to be associated with lower degrees of social integration. Attachment avoidance and LOSROS did have a weak positive correlation, contributing to the opposition in past results that

have shown no association (Sbarra & Borrelli, 2013) or a positive correlation (Emery et al., 2018). Moreover, for each attachment dimension, social integration and LOSROS had a weak negative correlation, implying that higher degrees of social integration were correlated with less self-concept disturbance.

Limitations and Future Directions

Considering this study's use of secondary data, there were multiple attributes of the data that were not ideal for examining the hypotheses. Most notably, the initial data collection occurred over the 5 months following the initial divorce of the participant, restricting our analyses to the same time period. In retrospect, it is likely this duration of data collection acted as a limitation to our analyses, as there is the possibility that changes in variables may become more apparent across a longer period of data collection. In building upon this, a future study with a longer data collection period, perhaps gathering data for up to two years following an initial divorce, could allow for more reliable analysis of self-concept recovery after divorce. Other limitations of the data are rooted in our particular sample. For the purposes of our analyses, we excluded data from participants who did not fill out the ECRS. Additionally, we also excluded participants who did not provide any EAR data for our social integration composite. In terms of the sample's demographics, the sample is predominately non-Hispanic White individuals (62.5%) and includes majority women with a ratio of about 2.5:1 (women: men). Our results likely reflect the skews of our sample, magnifying the experience of women and non-Hispanic White individuals.

The measurements we used this study also came with their own limitations. As the ECRS and LOSROS scales are both self-report measures of attachment orientation and self-concept, respectively, there is no way to ensure participant objectivity or check for the validity of their

responses. There is also a major limitation of our objective measurement approach to social integration. Participants' daily social behaviors were only recorded by the EAR on weekends, meaning any variation in socialization during the week were not illustrated in our data. Within our data set, a participant who socialized a lot but only during the week would appear to have very low degrees of social integration in our analyses. The clearest solution to this problem would be to gather EAR data every day of the week, but this would be an additional burden and may not appeal to many potential study participants.

Although our results demonstrated an association between LOSROS and social integration with some of our analysis models, there is still the question of what kind of relationship potentially underlies this association. Does LOSROS improve because of increased social integration? Or does social integration increase because LOSROS improved? Or are they simultaneous bidirectional processes? A study evaluating the direction of this relationship would be beneficial in identifying whether self-concept clarity or daily social behaviors are significantly influential in determining post-relationship dissolution outcomes.

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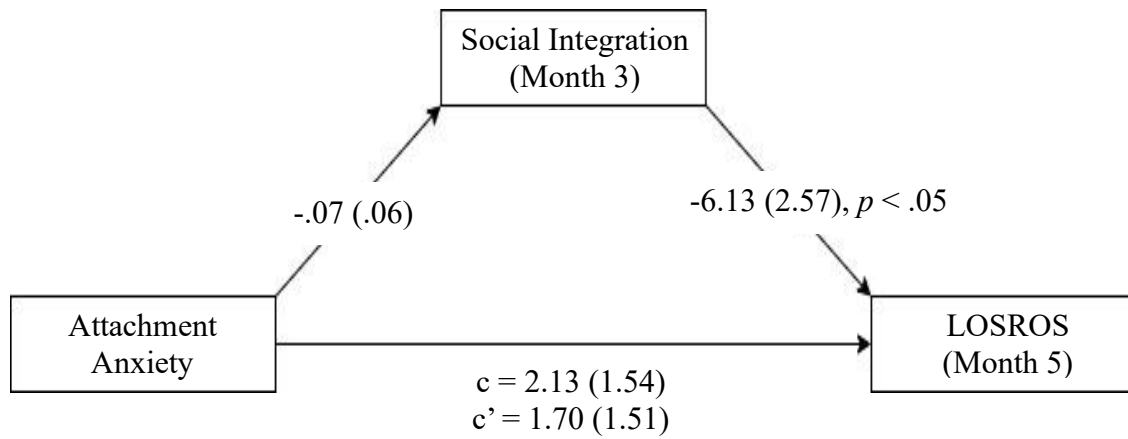


Figure 1. Mediation model illustrating effect of attachment anxiety on Loss of Self—Rediscovery of Self (LOSROS) through social integration. Direct and total effects also shown. Unstandardized coefficients with standard error presented in parentheses presented for each path.

Table 1. Model Coefficients for Mediation Analyses

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>
Outcome: Social Integration (Month 3)								
Attachment Anxiety	-.07 (.06)	.21	-.02 (.05)	.62	-.02 (.05)	.69	-.03 (.05)	.60
Social Integration (Month 1)			.59 (.08)	< .001	.58 (.09)	< .001	.60 (.08)	< .001
Outcome: LOSROS (Month 5)								
Attachment Anxiety	1.70 (1.51)	.26	1.62 (1.58)	.31	.30 (1.54)	.85	-.41 (1.30)	.75
Social Integration (Month 3)	-6.13 (2.57)	.02	-6.45 (2.63)	.01	-3.34 (2.47)	.18	-.22 (2.14)	.92
LOSROS (Month 1)					.48 (.09)	< .001	.29 (.09)	.001
LOSROS (Month 3)							.48 (.10)	< .001

Table 2. Correlations between attachment anxiety, social integration and LOSROS

	Attachment Anxiety	Social Integration (Month 3)	LOSROS (Month 5)
Attachment Anxiety	1.0	-.13	.13
Social Integration (Month 1)	-.15	.60	-.20
Social Integration (Month 3)	-.13	1.0	-.24
LOSROS (Month 1)	.24	-.30	.52
LOSROS (Month 3)	.19	-.33	.60
LOSROS (Month 5)	.13	-.24	1.0

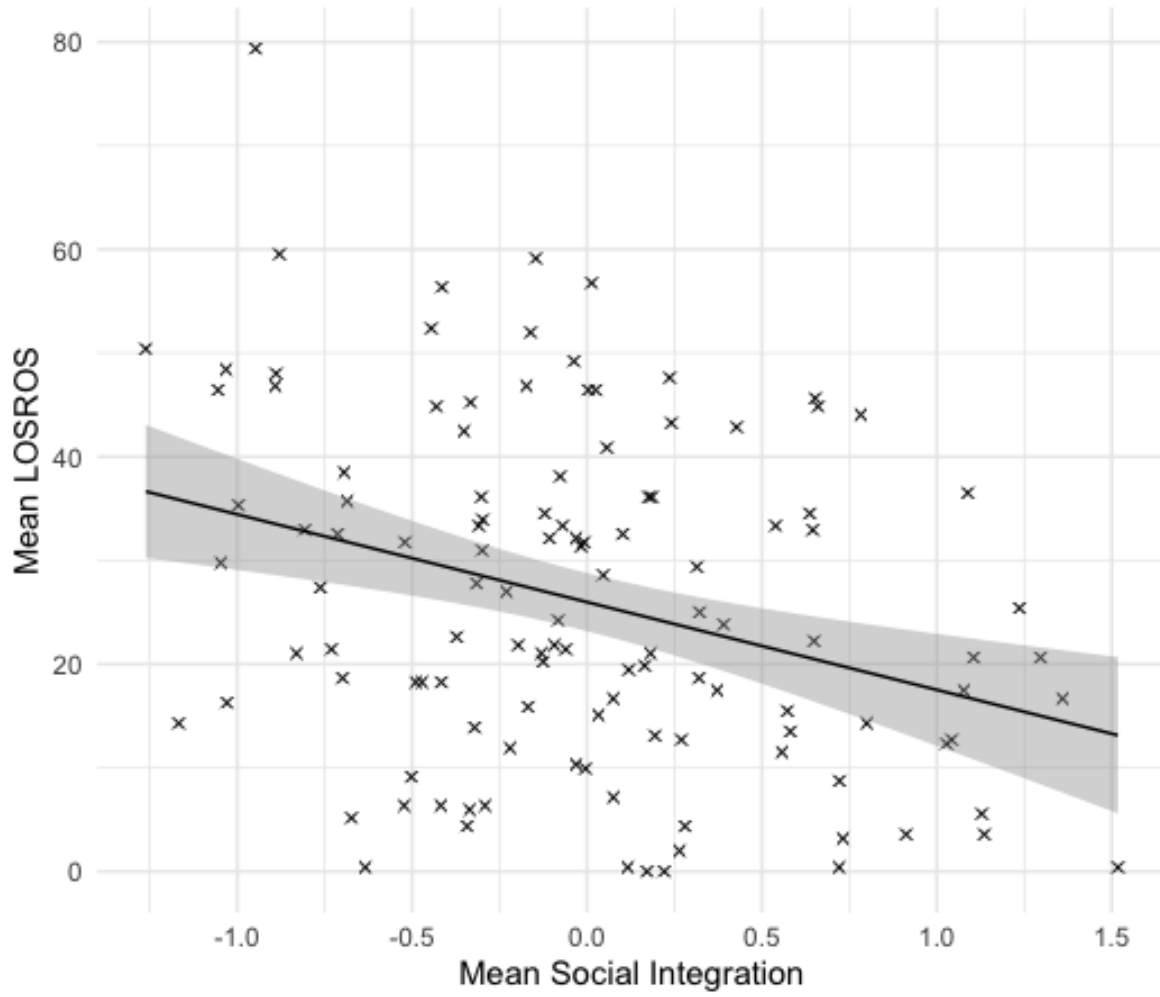


Figure 2. Relationship between average social integration and average LOSROS over the 5-month duration of the study.

Table 3. Model Coefficients for Mediation Analyses

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>p value</i>
Outcome: Social Integration (Month 3)								
Attachment Avoidance	-.00 (.07)	.95	-.06 (.06)	.32	-.06 (.06)	.32	-.06 (.06)	.32
Social Integration (Month 1)			.62 (.08)	< .001	.62 (.08)	< .001	.62 (.08)	< .001
Outcome: LOSROS (Month 5)								
Attachment Avoidance	2.46 (1.95)	.21	2.46 (1.95)	.21	1.95 (1.72)	.26	1.13 (1.56)	.47
Social Integration (Month 3)	-6.54 (2.63)	.01	-6.54 (2.63)	.01	-2.56 (2.34)	.28	-.25 (2.13)	.91
LOSROS (Month 1)					.49 (.09)	< .001	.29 (.09)	.001
LOSROS (Month 3)							.47 (.10)	< .001

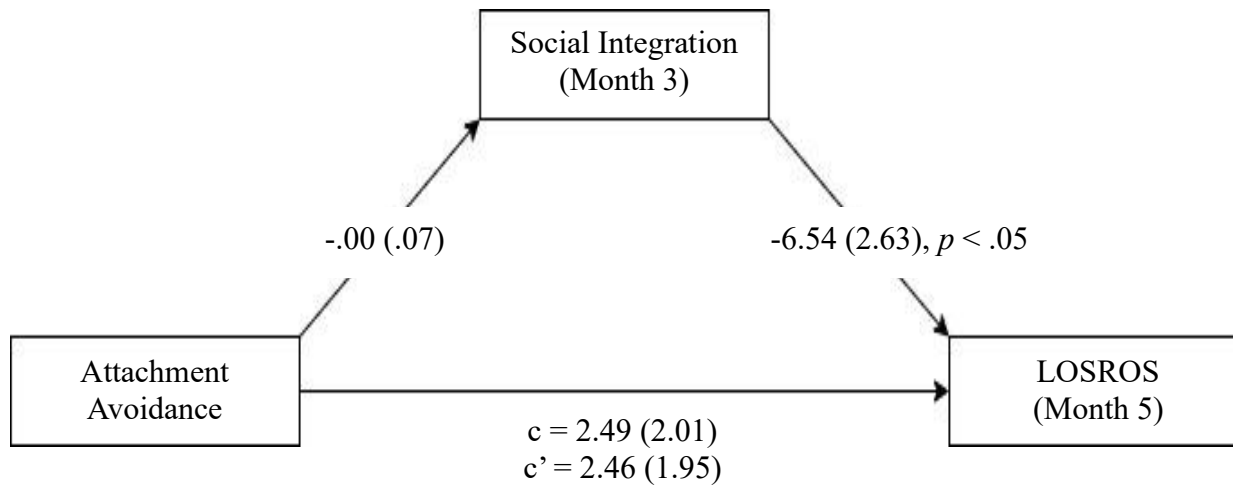


Figure 3. Mediation model illustrating effect of attachment avoidance on Loss of Self—Rediscovery of Self (LOSROS) through social integration. Direct and total effects also shown. Unstandardized coefficients with standard error presented in parentheses presented for each path.

Table 4. Correlations between attachment avoidance, social integration and LOSROS

	Attachment Avoidance	Social Integration (Month 3)	LOSROS (Month 5)
Attachment Avoidance	1.0	-.01	.12
Social Integration (Month 1)	.12	.60	-.20
Social Integration (Month 3)	-.01	1.0	-.24
LOSROS (Month 1)	.05	-.30	.52
LOSROS (Month 3)	.12	-.33	.60
LOSROS (Month 5)	.12	-.24	1.0