



Attachment, culture and initial romantic attraction: A speed-dating study



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ABSTRACT

Attachment insecurity is generally associated with low romantic attraction from prospective partners. However, no research has examined the pan-cultural applicability of attachment and initial romantic attraction, referring to the extent to which attachment processes are implicated in romantic attraction across cultures. We examined if attachment insecurity influenced initial romantic attraction in the actor and partner, and whether effects were moderated by culture. Participants ($n = 93$ heterosexual participants, 42 of Western ancestry and 51 of Chinese ancestry) completed a measure of attachment and subsequently completed a speed-dating session. Women were less attracted to men high in attachment avoidance irrespective of culture, though attachment anxiety and avoidance were unrelated to male initial romantic attraction. Chinese women were more attracted to men higher in attachment anxiety, whereas attachment anxiety was unrelated to attraction in Western women. The pan-cultural applicability of attachment and romantic attraction is discussed, with particular focus on the extent to which attachment influences romantic attraction across cultures.

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1. Introduction

Being in a satisfying long-term romantic relationship is one of the strongest predictors of overall health and well-being (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005; Waite & Gallagher, 2002). It is therefore important to investigate factors that influence the quality of romantic relationships at all stages of relationship development. Much evidence indicates that adult attachment insecurity is associated with poor long-term outcomes in romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). More recently, researchers have begun to examine the influence of attachment insecurity on initial romantic attraction. Several studies demonstrate that attachment insecurity is associated with low initial romantic attraction (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Luo & Zhang, 2009); however, no research has examined the cross-cultural generalizability of these associations. Here we use the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Cook & Kenny, 2005) to examine the effects of attachment insecurity on one's own attraction to potential partners (actor effects), and the effects of an individual's attachment insecurity on partner ratings of romantic attraction (partner effects) in an Australian context. We further examined whether cultural background (Western vs. Chinese) moderated any association.

1.1. Attachment and romantic relationships

Attachment refers to the emotional bond formed between an infant and caregiver during the early years of life (Bowlby, 1969). The attachment system is a biologically evolved behavioral system which motivates infants to seek proximity to caregivers to protect them from harm. The attachment system is active and influential across the lifespan, and has implications for adult romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). It has been argued that this attachment system evolved to promote long-term romantic bonds between adults, as stable romantic relationships promote shared parental care-giving that favors the survival of human offspring (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015). Romantic attachment in adulthood is generally conceptualized along two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). High attachment anxiety is associated with hyperactivation of the attachment system, and is characterized by a negative view of the self, fear of rejection and abandonment, and efforts to increase proximity and closeness to romantic partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). High attachment avoidance is associated with deactivation of the attachment system, and is characterized by a negative view of others as untrustworthy, discomfort with intimacy and closeness, excessive independence, and efforts to avoid or reduce romantic intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Attachment security (low anxiety and avoidance) is associated with more stable and satisfying romantic relationships. In a meta-analysis of 118 independent samples, low attachment anxiety and avoidance were both reliably associated with high relationship satisfaction in established couple relationships (Li & Chan, 2012). Importantly,

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attachment dimensions were related to interpersonal processes in theoretically meaningful ways. High attachment anxiety was associated with negative expectations about romantic partner reactions, negative communication, and heightened conflict (Li & Chan, 2012). High attachment avoidance was associated with negative expectations about the effect of intimate relationships on oneself, and with lower emotional expression and support within intimate relationships (Li & Chan, 2012). In brief, attachment insecurity undermines the quality of established long-term relationships. More recently, researchers have begun to examine the influence of attachment insecurity on initial romantic attraction.

1.2. Attachment and initial romantic attraction

Interactions with potential romantic partners bring the possibility of negative evaluation of self by others; hence the attachment system is likely to be activated (McClure & Lydon, 2014). Several studies have found that people rate securely attached hypothetical potential partners presented via vignette more positively than they do anxious and avoidant partners (e.g., Chappell & Davis, 1998; Klohnen & Luo, 2003). However, hypothetical partner descriptions are unlikely to fully activate the attachment system, as the possibility of rejection or negative experience of others is not truly present, and people's stated preferred characteristics of potential partners often do not predict initial attraction to actual people (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008).

The limitations of hypothetical partner studies have prompted researchers to use speed-dating to examine predictors of initial romantic attraction in a real-world setting. In speed-dating sessions, people interact with a range of potential partners for a brief period of time, usually three to 8 min. Following each interaction, individuals rate their attraction towards the other (Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). Such speed-dating methodologies allow researchers to examine the impact of one's own attachment orientation on their attraction ratings towards potential partners (an actor effect), as well as the effects of potential partners' attachment orientation on an individual's ratings of attraction (a partner effect).

Both forms of attachment insecurity are associated with behavioral patterns that undermine potential for intimacy. Those high in attachment anxiety display heightened manifest anxiety, more verbal disfluencies, and greater interpersonal awkwardness during interactions with partners (McClure & Lydon, 2014). Those high in attachment avoidance, on the other hand, use less self-disclosure (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991), display less non-verbal intimacy, closeness, and expressiveness (Bombar & Littig, 1996; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Tucker & Anders, 1999; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005), and even sit further away from partners during brief interactions (Guerrero, 1996). The characteristic features of attachment anxiety and avoidance are therefore likely to undermine potential for intimacy during initial meetings and impact upon romantic attraction.

Consistent with this proposition, those high in attachment anxiety are generally rated by potential partners as less attractive in speed dating sessions (partner effects; McClure, Lydon, Baccus, & Baldwin, 2010; McClure & Lydon, 2014), though one study found an effect for female but not male attachment anxiety (Luo & Zhang, 2009). In contrast to studies on hypothetical partners, none of these speed dating studies found attachment avoidance to be associated with attractiveness in the partner (Luo & Zhang, 2009; McClure et al., 2010; McClure & Lydon, 2014).

With regards to actor effects of attachment insecurity, attachment anxiety is associated with a negative internal working model of self, and positive model of others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) which might lead those high in attachment anxiety to rate partners as highly attractive as they see themselves as unworthy of love, and have a strong desire for intimacy and closeness. Consistent with this proposition, high attachment anxiety is associated with low selectivity when indicating desire to establish contact with speed-dating partners (McClure et al.,

2010), though Luo and Zhang (2009) did not find an actor effect of attachment anxiety on attraction.

High attachment avoidance is associated with a negative internal working model of others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), perceptions of low social reward from interacting with others (Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, & Baratta, 2013), expectations of relationship failure, and commitment aversion (Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009). Thus, it is likely that those high in attachment avoidance may be generally less romantically attracted to potential partners during speed-dating. Consistent with this proposition, avoidant individuals report less romantic interest when interacting with potential partners (Overall & Sibley, 2008), though Luo and Zhang (2009) did not find such an association during speed-dating.

1.3. Culture and attachment

As described earlier, attachment theory is steeped in an evolutionary perspective and is assumed to be universal across cultures. However to date, no research has examined the pan-cultural applicability of attachment and attraction during speed-dating, which is potentially important in light of recent evidence that patterns of attachment vary across cultures. A very large scale study of $n = 17,804$ participants drawn from 62 cultural regions across 5 continents, found mixed evidence that patterns of attachment anxiety and avoidance are pan-culturally consistent (Schmitt et al., 2004). On the one hand, the dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance were internally consistent across almost all cultures. On the other hand, the independence of these dimensions was inconsistent across cultures, and much higher rates of concurrent occurrence of high attachment anxiety (negative view of self) and low attachment avoidance (positive view of others) were evident across East Asian cultures than in other cultures. As the structure of attachment varies across cultures, the association of attachment to relationship attraction might also be moderated by culture.

In the current research we focused on Chinese-Western cultural differences for three reasons. First, Chinese and Western cultures differ widely on many major dimensions of cultural values, such as relational embeddedness and the importance of hierarchy (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007), and hence might have potentially important differences in relationship attraction. Second, people of Chinese ancestry account for one quarter of the world's population (Hoosain, 2008) and they represent the majority of Asians living in Western countries such as the USA and Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Shibusawa, 2008). Third, Chinese have high rates of intercultural marriage with Westerners (Zhang & Kline, 2009), highlighting that these cultural groups do form romantic relationships with each other.

Why might culture moderate associations between attachment and initial romantic attraction? First, recent evidence suggests that Chinese differ in important ways in their relationship standards (beliefs about what makes a good couple relationship) and relationship behaviors from Westerners. Specifically, Chinese rate personal romantic attraction to the partner as less important, and fitting in with extended family as more important, in intimate couple relationships than Westerners (Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver, & Liu, 2015). Chinese are less likely to express positive feelings directly to their intimate partner than Westerners (Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver, & Liu, 2016), and display more self-restraint and less self-disclosure, which is socially normative in Chinese culture (Moore, 1998). Accordingly, a recent study revealed that young Chinese adults viewed some features of avoidant attachment as ideal in romantic relationships (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Thus, attachment avoidance may have little association with initial attraction for Chinese, whereas for Westerners, features of attachment avoidance may be problematic (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and may be more likely to lead to lower initial attraction.

Several features of anxious attachment, such as concern about being alone and reassurance seeking when interacting with partners, may be viewed negatively by Westerners (McClure & Lydon, 2014), but in

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