



# Disorganized attachment mediates the link from early trauma to externalizing behavior in adult relationships



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mediating effects of attachment disorganization in adulthood, along with the organized attachment styles of anxiety and avoidance, to determine whether the connections between early childhood traumatic experiences and externalizing behaviors in adult romantic relationships can be explained by an attachment model that directly assesses a dimensional measure of adult disorganization. In our study, we used 510 adults who were U.S. citizens, all of whom completed online scales that provided retrospective information about childhood trauma, attachment working model information, and current experiences regarding relationship patterns. Our results indicated that adult disorganization mediated the effects between childhood and adult experiences. We also contrasted fearful avoidance with disorganization as mediators, demonstrating that they appear to be different constructs (as is sometimes contested in the literature) and can provide conflicting information about childhood to adult linkages. Our findings suggest that disorganization in adulthood mediates important relationships between early trauma and later adult externalizing outcomes, similar to outcomes seen for disorganization in childhood and adolescence. We therefore extend the existing literature, demonstrating that results from developmental psychology are relevant to social psychologists who study attachment theory in romantic relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

Disorganized attachment (disorganization) has been studied extensively in the developmental psychology infant and childhood literature, but it has only been briefly touched upon in social psychology by those who study attachment theory. In this paper, we examine the notion of disorganized attachment in adulthood, demonstrating that it provides important linkages between early trauma and outcomes for adults, particularly in romantic relationships.

Disorganized attachment was proposed as a fourth category of infant attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990), distinct from the “organized” categories of avoidance, anxiety (resistance) and security seen in infants in Ainsworth and colleagues’ Strange Situation paradigm (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Infants in the disorganized category displayed fearful, conflicted, apprehensive, disoriented, abortive, and other odd behaviors that could not be recognized as organized categories for coping with distress upon separation and reunion from the mother. Infants placed in the disorganized category also receive a secondary placement in an organized category, because the apparent

disorganized behavior often is seen as occurring briefly or momentarily in conjunction with other organized reactions.<sup>1</sup>

Disorganization has also been observed in childhood and adolescence. For example, some disorganized children behave punitively toward their parents, seeking to challenge or humiliate them, while others adopt a caregiving stance, taking the role of the parent and attempting to soothe or comfort them (Bureau, Easterbrooks, & Lyons-Ruth, 2009; Main & Cassidy, 1988). Both of these forms of behavior are seen as controlling. Other forms of disorganized behavior include manifesting fear toward or having difficulties in addressing or interacting with the parent, exhibiting behavior that invades parental intimacy, engaging in self-injuring behaviors or markers for dissociation, and preferring strangers to attachment figures (Bureau et al., 2009). Meta-analyses have indicated small to moderate behavioral consequences for disorganized children, particularly for externalizing behaviors (e.g., delinquency, aggression, oppositional behavior, hostility; Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). Disorganization has also been measured in adolescents and has been found to be associated with delinquency and/or aggressive

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 19% of infants in the Strange Situation are labeled disorganized. Approximately 46% of the secondary placements are anxious, 34% are avoidant, and 15% are secure (van IJzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999).

behaviors (Lecompte & Moss, 2014; Obsuth, Hennighausen, Brumariu, & Lyons-Ruth, 2014).

The primary causes associated with early disorganization appear to be attributed to fear-arousing behaviors by the parental attachment figures (Main & Solomon, 1990), or communicative behaviors that would be confusing for the infant or child (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008), such as seeking comfort from the infant/child, eliciting approach from the infant/child but then withdrawing from him or her. A particularly important, more distal, factor in the development of disorganization is childhood maltreatment or abuse, which research has demonstrated to be a strong correlate of disorganization (Cicchetti & Barnett, 1991). No matter the cause, disorganization results because of frightening, confusing, or traumatic behavior by attachment figures that promotes avoidance on the part of the infant,<sup>2</sup> which is in direct conflict with the evolutionary attachment system that encourages the infant to approach its attachment figure when frightened and distressed.

Recently, Paetzold, Rholes, and Kohn (2015) have argued that disorganization plays an important part in the adult attachment system. In addition to the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance typically studied, Paetzold et al. have argued that fear of the attachment figure him- or herself and a resulting confusion about relationships are the central features of disorganization in adulthood.<sup>3</sup> This fear is believed to be different from fear associated with the organized attachment styles. Although persons who are more anxious fear that their romantic partners will abandon them or be unresponsive in times of need, their fear pulls them toward their romantic partners in an effort to get their needs met. And although persons who are more avoidant fear rejection by their partners, this fear causes them to distance themselves from their partners to minimize their rejection experiences. Disorganization, on the other hand, leads to an approach–avoidance conflict in the fear of the partner, which parallels the fearful confusion, disorientation, and other odd or conflicting behaviors as seen in disorganized infants and children.

Paetzold et al. (2015) have argued that disorganized attachment should be part of the adult working model of attachment, and should represent fears that generalize across situations and are stable over time, just like the fears of anxiety and avoidance. Disorganization is believed to be a dispositional characteristic of the person and not a response to contemporary conditions within a current relationship. Using a nine-item scale to assess disorganization in adults, Paetzold et al. (2015) demonstrated that disorganization predicted feelings and beliefs of depression and anxiety, as well as anger and aggression toward people in general, not specific attachment figures. They further argued that disorganization should exist in conjunction with organized attachment styles, just as it does in infancy. Thus, they found that disorganized attachment worked in conjunction with organized strategies to predict these outcomes.

### 1.1. Overview of the present research

First, we hypothesize that disorganization plays a significant and positive mediating role in linking childhood maltreatment, a key cause of disorganized attachment, to two important externalizing behavior outcome variables that have been demonstrated to relate to disorganization in the developmental literature. For our purposes, these outcomes are anger toward romantic partners, and aggression and violence tendencies toward romantic partners. Because attachment anxiety and avoidance may also play important roles in linking

childhood maltreatment to those outcomes, we hypothesize that all three aspects of adult attachment may be simultaneously important. As a check that disorganization is a dispositional element of the person and not a mere reflection of contemporary frightening behavior on the part of the attachment figure, we examine partner abuse as a control variable in one set of analyses. In other words, we investigate whether disorganization will continue to mediate our relationships even when partner abuse is controlled.

Second, we hypothesize that fearful avoidance and disorganization are distinct constructs that will play different mediating roles in our analyses. In earlier research, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) and Simpson and Rholes (2002) argued that disorganization may be a particular form of avoidance known as fearful avoidance. This argument stems from a characterization of adult attachment based on a measure known as the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), in which avoidance was split into either dismissing or fearful avoidance. People seen as fearful avoidant fear closeness to their partners because of the possibility of rejection, but “wish they did not have to feel this way” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 42), which is often described as having a mixed attachment strategy, one that is high on both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

Disorganization is seen by Paetzold et al. (2015) as distinct from a mixture of organized attachment strategies because it involves fear of the attachment figure as a person, something that neither attachment anxiety nor avoidance include. Thus, a final hypothesis of this study is that fearful avoidance and disorganization will be distinct in their ability to mediate at least some of the linkages between childhood maltreatment and our externalizing behavior variables.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants included 510 adults who were U.S. citizens (58% women) and registered for and recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT; [www.MTurk.com](http://www.MTurk.com)). Each participant who completed the survey, which was about their romantic relationships, personality, emotions, behaviors, and life events, received \$1. Most participants were white (79%), with 9% identifying themselves as African American, 5% as Asian American, and 3% as Hispanic. On average, participants were 34.1 years old ( $SD = 11.3$ ), with ages ranging from 21 to 80 years old. Half of participants (51%) had a college degree, and 47% reported having a full-time job. Most participants (78%) reported being in a current dating or marital relationship.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Disorganization

Disorganized attachment was measured using the Adult Disorganized Attachment scale (ADA) (Paetzold et al., 2015). The ADA consists of 9 items, each rated on a 7-point scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include “I find romantic partners to be rather scary,” “It is normal to have traumatic experiences with the people you feel close to,” “Strangers are not as scary as romantic partners,” and “Compared to most people, I feel generally confused about romantic relationships.” Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .91.

#### 2.2.2. Attachment orientations

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) was used to assess attachment orientation. The 36-item

<sup>2</sup> Recent research has suggested that there is a sub-group of disorganized infants who are not characterized by fright of their caregiver, but may have been born with a compromised emotional regulation system (Padrón, Carlson, & Sroufe, 2014) that led to disorganization. This suggests that there may be different routes to disorganization in adulthood as well. Our research is concerned only with disorganization resulting from fear.

<sup>3</sup> This would parallel the “fright without solution” (Main & Solomon, 1990) experienced by disorganized infants in the Strange Situation.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, however, social psychologists who use dimensional measures for anxiety and avoidance do not investigate which, if any, participants can be viewed as “high” on both anxiety and avoidance. Nor is it clear whether this refers to an additive or multiplicative effect of being high on both.

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