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Attachment dispositions and human defensive behavior ☆

Tsachi Ein-Dor *

Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory has generated an enormous body of research and conceptual elaborations. Although attachment theory and research propose that attachment security provides a person with many adaptive advantages, during all phases of the life cycle, numerous studies indicate that almost half of the human species can be classified as insecurely attached or insecure with respect to attachment. To date, the mainstream view in attachment theory and research is that attachment insecurity incurs only disadvantages. I, however, argue that each attachment disposition – security, anxiety, avoidance – has unique adaptive advantages in promoting survival. In making this argument, I extend the scope of attachment theory and research by considering a broader range of adaptive functions of insecure attachment strategies, and present data to support my argument.

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1. Introduction

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982), one of the most influential contemporary theories in developmental, personality, and social psychology (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), proposes that human beings possess an innate psychobiological system (the *attachment behavioral system*) that motivates them to seek proximity to significant others (*attachment figures*) when they need protection from threats. When attachment figures regularly respond sensitively to a person's needs, he or she develops a sense of attachment security while acquiring constructive strategies for coping with threats and regulating negative emotions. When attachment figures are often unavailable, unreliable, or rejecting of bids for support, a person may become chronically insecure with respect to close relationships. The main insecure attachment patterns in adulthood are *avoidance*, marked by extreme independence, and *anxiety*, marked by extreme dependence and hyperarousal. These attachment orientations are relatively stable over time but can be changed through natural life experiences or effective psychotherapy (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review).

According to both theory and research, attachment security confers adaptive advantages, compared with insecurity, in a variety of social, emotional, and behavioral domains (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). For example, secure individuals tend to have more lasting and satisfying close relationships as well as fewer psychological problems. They are also viewed by others as more ideal relationship partners (e.g., Klohnen & Luo, 2003). These benefits of security caused researchers to wonder why a substantial portion of all large samples studied in various countries are insecure with respect to attachment. Belsky and colleagues were the first to argue that under certain conditions attachment insecurity has adaptive benefits, because it is associated with earlier menarche in females and earlier reproduction in environments where waiting for better conditions might result in failing to reproduce (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Belsky, Steinberg, Houts, & Halpern-Felsher, 2010).

Theory and research also suggest, however, that survival rather than early reproduction might be the major reason for the emergence of the attachment behavioral system during mammalian, especially primate, evolution (Ein-Dor, 2013; Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, & Shaver, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Threats (e.g., natural signs of danger or threats to a close relationship; Bowlby, 1982) activate the attachment system, which is adaptive because it increases the likelihood of protection, support, and survival (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). In keeping with this view, in the present paper, I present research showing that a person's responses to threat are based partly on her or his attachment disposition and that these dispositions may promote survival in a unique and adaptive way.

2. Attachment theory

Social and personality psychologists generally conceptualize adult attachment patterns as regions in a continuous two-dimensional space (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). One

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* Address: School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya 46150, Israel. Tel.: +972 9 9602843; fax: +972 9 9602845.
E-mail address: teindor@idc.ac.il

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dimension, attachment-related *avoidance*, reflects the extent to which a person distrusts relationship partners' goodwill, strives to maintain independence, and relies on deactivating strategies for dealing with threats and negative emotions. Avoidant people cope with threats by deemphasizing distress and vulnerability and by attempting to cope independently, without seeking others' help (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1997). The second dimension, attachment-related *anxiety*, reflects the extent to which a person worries that others will not be available or helpful in times of need. People high on attachment anxiety exaggerate their sense of vulnerability and insistently call on others for help and care, sometimes to the point of being intrusive (Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Attachment security is defined by low scores on both anxiety and avoidance. Secure people generally cope with threats by relying on internal resources developed with the help of security-enhancing attachment figures or by effectively seeking support from others or collaborating with them (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Secure individuals generally have high self-esteem, trust other people, and perceive the world as a relatively safe place.

In contrast to the dominant view in attachment theory and research (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007 for extensive reviews), I contend that each of the three major attachment patterns – secure, anxious, and avoidant – confers special adaptive advantages that tend to increase the fitness of individuals when dealing with threats and danger. This view is in line with Nettle's (2006) argument that personality variations can be understood in terms of tradeoffs among fitness costs and benefits: "Behavioral alternatives can be considered as tradeoffs, with a particular trait producing not unalloyed advantage but a mixture of costs and benefits such that the optimal value for fitness may depend on very specific local circumstances" (p. 625).

2.1. Advantages and disadvantages of secure individuals' defensive reactions

Attachment research has shown that secure individuals tend to collaborate with others in times of need and to use the strength of numbers to overcome threats. For example, they are generally better than insecure people at leading and coordinating group activities, and they work more effectively with other group members when solving problems (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007; Hinojosa, Davis-McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014). These advantages stem from a sense of security rooted in past supportive experiences with attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), and is closely associated with core beliefs, such as the belief that the world is a safe place, especially when significant others are present. These optimistic, comforting mental representations promote self-soothing reappraisals of threats, which help secure individuals perform better than insecure ones in many challenging situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In times of need, secure individuals activate schemas and scripts that promote seeking proximity to others (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid, & Avihou-Kanza, 2009) because as Axelrod noted (Axelrod, 2006; Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981) using the prisoner's dilemma game, cooperating with others usually outdoes asocial-based strategies.

What attachment researchers call "felt security" (Sroufe & Waters, 1977), however, does not always reflect actual physical security. In times of danger, a sense of felt security can be maladaptive if it hinders rapid recognition of a threat or retards assembly of a rapid, effective response. For example, Mawson (2012) showed that the typical human response to danger is to seek the proximity of familiar people and places, even if this means remaining in or even approaching a dangerous situation. Therefore, proximity seeking is sometimes not the safest strategy and may, in fact, incur two disadvantages: (a) slower identification of early signs of danger and (b) slower activation of defensive behavior.

Sime (1983, 1985) examined these disadvantages in a retrospective study of reactions to a fire in a large coastal resort on the Isle of Man, Great Britain, in 1973. He found that people who were physically closer to significant others (e.g., family members) were less likely to react to ambiguous cues of danger, such as noises and shouts, which occurred during the early stages of the fire. They reacted only later, when unambiguous cues of danger, such as smoke, flames, and people running while holding fire extinguishers, occurred. Subsequent studies of survivors' behavior during disasters also suggest that people who were together with familiar others were slow to perceive that they were in danger (Aguirre, Wenger, & Vigo, 1998; Köster, Seitz, Treml, Hartmann, & Klein, 2011). This tendency might result from secure people's sense of safety and optimistic threat appraisals (Ein-Dor et al., 2010).

Research examining reactions to real or imagined dangers also provides indirect support for the hypothesis that securely attached people react in non-optimal way to signs of danger. For example, Bowlby (1973, p. 91) noted that during and after disasters, "no member of a family is content, or indeed able to do anything else, until all members of the family are gathered together." Governments and trained professionals have great difficulty getting people to evacuate before and during disasters, because "traditional family ties often keep individual members in the danger zone until it is too late" (Hill & Hansen, 1962, p. 217).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that although people who are secure with respect to attachment are better at leading and coordinating group activities, these advantages are partially offset by their slower identification of actual and imminent dangers and their sometimes non-optimal reactions to danger because of their wish to stay close to other people. This suggests that the tendency of secure people to focus on an ongoing project irrespective of mounting danger may sometimes hamper their survival. Vigilance to danger and a quick fight-or-flight response are sometimes necessary to avert disaster. Being high on either attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance might confer these abilities.

2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of people high on attachment anxiety

As compared with people who are secure with respect to attachment, those who score relatively high on anxious attachment often perform relatively poorly in times of need because of their tendency to be overwhelmed with stress. Specifically, they are inclined to exaggerate appraisals of threats (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2000), to have difficulties in suppressing negative thoughts and feelings (e.g., Mikulincer, Dolev, & Shaver, 2004), and to ruminate on distressing thoughts (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). Nevertheless, these tendencies may be of benefit to them: Anxious people are vigilant in monitoring the environment for threats and are emotionally expressive and desirous of support when a threat is detected (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1990). Therefore, they may react quickly and vocally to early, perhaps ambiguous, cues of danger (i.e., sentinel behavior; Ein-Dor et al., 2010) and be quicker, more sensitive and more accurate in detecting various threats. As Freud contended, "the paranoid person does not project onto the sky, so to speak, but onto something that is already there." (Freud & Rieff, 1963, p. 163).

The first evidence in favor of this notion linked attachment anxiety with heightened accessibility to core components of the sentinel schema – noticing danger quicker than others and warning them about the danger (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011a). For example, when participants were asked to write a story about a TAT-like (Thematic Apperception Test; Murray, 1943) card portraying a scary scenario in which a group of people faced a menac-

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