



Autistic traits and adult attachment styles

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between autistic traits and adult attachment styles in a non-clinical sample of 326 university students. Multiple regression analysis was used to predict both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety from levels of self-reported autistic traits. A significant unique relationship between autistic traits and attachment avoidance was found after controlling for all Big-Five personality traits, BIS/BAS, gender, and current relationship status. Hence, individuals who report more autistic-like behaviours, especially with respect to communication difficulties, are less likely to report sharing high levels of emotional closeness with romantic partners. On the other hand, no unique relationship between autistic traits and attachment anxiety was present.

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1. Introduction

Attachment represents the natural inclination to seek proximity and emotional bonding with significant figures (Bowlby, 1977). Attachment relationships that originate with primary figures can extend beyond childhood and manifest themselves throughout the life-course in what is known as adult attachment styles. These early experiences with primary attachment figures are encoded in mental representations of self and others which constitute the internal working models of the social world (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1980). Such attachment schemas are thought to guide the individual's perceptions, emotions, and expectations in later relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1993).

Disruption in the emotional context of the child-parent dyad can affect the quality of the bonding experience and lead to the development of insecure attachment. Insecure attachment is manifested as difficulties forming intimate and caring bonds with significant others which in turn can affect the establishment of future adult relationships (Pickover, 2002). With respect to adult attachment styles, Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) have proposed the existence of two broad dimensions of adult attachment based on a continuum of typical traits and behaviours, namely attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment anxiety is characterized by a negative view of the self, hypersensitivity

to rejection, difficulty trusting others in a relationship, as well as heightened concerns about the partner's responsiveness. Conversely, individuals who are prone to attachment avoidance hold a negative view of others, value autonomy and independence, and demonstrate a typical inclination towards social isolation and withdrawal (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 2000).

Individuals with severe forms of autism manifest remarkable impairments in social communication as well as restricted and stereotypical patterns of behaviours (DSM-V; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Early theories described autism as a disorder characterized by a marked inability to form emotional attachment and establish emotional bonding with significant figures (Rutter, 1978; Volkmar et al., 1987). However, such a definition is discordant with available research suggesting that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are indeed capable of forming secure attachment relationships. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis indicated that, in most of the cases reviewed, ASD children showed an equal tendency to develop secure attachment (Rutgers et al., 2004). Namely, no differences in the proportions of insecurely attached high-functioning autistic children and control children were detected. However, children that were diagnosed with more severe symptoms of autism who also had concurrent mental delay did tend to exhibit insecure attachment to a greater extent. Nonetheless, in a subsequent study, Rutgers et al. (2007) reported a tendency for children with a diagnosis of autism to exhibit less secure attachment than both a clinical group of children with mental and language deficits and a control group without autism or developmental delays. Similarly, van IJzendoorn et al. (2007) found that the group of autistic children in their study tended to score

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lower on a continuous Richter scale measure of attachment security and higher on attachment disorganization. However, in line with [Rutgers et al. \(2004\)](#), these trends were especially evident for children with mental retardation.

Relatedly, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; [Main & Goldwyn, 1998](#)) was used by [Taylor, Target, and Charman \(2008\)](#) to examine attachment security in an adult sample of clinical patients with a diagnosis of ASD. One focus of this research was to show that individuals with a diagnosis of autism could develop secure attachment to the same extent as adults without autism. However, a higher prevalence of insecure attachment was found in ASD individuals in comparison to non-clinical samples. Although the AAI employs a very detailed analysis of childhood memories to identify specific attachment patterns in individuals, such identification is based on a categorical classification of secure and insecure attachment. Generally, categorical measures lack some of the beneficial psychometric properties inherent in more dimensional scales ([Fraleay & Shaver, 2000](#)). Some other issues regarding [Taylor et al.'s \(2008\)](#) findings that are relevant to the current research surround the fact that their sample of $N = 20$ participants was small and because it was composed of clinical individuals with diagnosis of ASD, the extent to which their findings may then be applicable to more general population samples containing individuals with milder forms of autism is not clear. Indeed, the relationship between attachment security and autistic tendencies in adult samples from the general population is only recently beginning to be investigated.

Broader autism phenotype (BAP) is a term used to define a mild form of autism presenting sub-threshold expression of typical autistic symptoms that do not meet clinical criteria ([Costantino & Todd, 2003](#); [Happé, Ronald, & Plomin, 2006](#)). Such a characterization of the ASD is based on the assumption that autism-related traits are normally distributed in the general population and quantifiable along a continuum of social and attentional skills. This view relies on a reconceptualization of autism from an all-or-nothing categorical approach to a dimensional classification that includes milder variants of the disorder. One of the most widely used quantitative measures used to assess the BAP is the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ; [Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, & Clubley, 2001](#)). Higher AQ scores have been related to low empathy ([Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004](#)), deficits in social cognition and impaired processing of emotional signals ([Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001](#)), as well as poor interpersonal functioning ([Jobe & Williams White, 2007](#)).

The present study aims to extend previous research by adopting a dimensional approach to the constructs of both autism and attachment in order to examine the relationship between adult attachment style and autistic trait levels in non-clinical individuals. With respect to attachment, the use of the Experience in Close Relationships (ECR) scale allows for a measurement of adult attachment styles in terms of bipolar continuums of anxiety and avoidance rather than discrete attachment categories. It is hypothesized that autism-related traits (as measured by the AQ) will be positively and significantly related to attachment insecurity (as measured by the ECR).

Of particular relevance to the present study is some recent work by [Pollman, Finkenauer, and Begeer \(2010\)](#) who found a simple positive correlation between AQ and ECR scores for a sample of newlywed couples. In that study, however, a subset of only 22 of the 36 available ECR items were selected and then aggregated into a single attachment measure from which no distinction between attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance could be made. Moreover, just recently, [Lampert and Turner \(2014\)](#) obtained a positive regression relation between scores on an alternative autistic trait measure and scores on both the anxious and avoidant ECR subscales. The relation between autistic trait levels and attachment

avoidance was subsequently shown to be fully mediated by global empathy. Aside from empathy and gender, however, no other variables were included in their analyses.

An important issue, though, regarding the use of individual-difference measures for both autistic traits and attachment security surrounds the extent to which they might overlap with personality characteristics. Indeed, adult attachment styles as measured by the ECR have been shown to be related to the Big-Five personality traits ([Nofhle & Shaver, 2006](#)). Similarly, AQ scores have also been shown to be related to personality characteristics ([Austin, 2005](#); [Wakabayashi, Baron-Cohen, & Wheelwright, 2006](#)). In addition, motivational processes driven by either the behavioural inhibition system (BIS) or the behavioural approach system (BAS) represent two other fundamental aspects of personality involved in determining individual differences in behaviour. Accordingly, research points to the presence of a relation between adult attachment style and BIS/BAS scales measuring general approach/avoidance tendencies and behavioural activation ([Gillath, Giesbrecht, & Shaver, 2009](#); [Meyer, Olivier, & Roth, 2005](#)). Similarly, behavioural inhibition and approach have also been associated with autism ([Mundy, 1995](#); [Mundy, Henderson, Inge, & Coman, 2007](#)).

Therefore, evidence exists that both the two adult attachment dimensions and the AQ are related to both the Big Five personality traits and BIS/BAS. Hence, to exclude the possibility of any shared variance between the anxious/avoidant attachment dimensions and the AQ that might be due to variance that is shared with other individual-difference characteristics, both the set of Big-Five personality traits and BIS/BAS will be controlled for in this study.

Our findings should inform researchers interested in attachment by indicating the degree to which attachment anxiety and avoidance are related to individual differences in a set of autism-related traits which could be regarded as being rather innate or, at least, highly dispositional in nature ([Lampert & Turner, 2014](#)). Moreover, they will also inform researchers interested in the BAP by indicating the extent to which individuals high on autism-related traits also tend to manifest the behavioural tendencies and thinking associated with anxious and avoidant attachment styles (especially given the specific influences that each of these two attachment styles have on romantic relationship functioning and, hence, well-being; [Pollman et al., 2010](#)).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were 326 (243 females and 83 males) students of introductory psychology. Their ages ranged between 17 and 33 years old ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 3.5$). Participants completed an online questionnaire set for course credit that contained the AQ, the ECR, the Personality Mini-Markers, and the BIS/BAS. They also provided information regarding whether or not they were currently involved in a romantic relationship (147 were single and 179 were currently in a relationship).

Note that of an original sample of 362 respondents with complete data, 36 were dropped after being identified as careless responders. Careless, inattentive, or random responding represents a serious threat to the integrity of research conclusions ([Maniaci & Rogge, 2014](#); [Meade & Craig, 2012](#)). Especially when utilizing survey data collected online, the physical distance, the uncontrolled environment, and the anonymity of the process can all serve to enhance the potential for respondent's carelessness.

In the present study, a set of initial analyses were conducted to identify patterns of careless responses. First, a multivariate outlier analysis was carried out by computing a separate Mahalanobis distance measure per construct and then summing them to obtain a

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