Adult attachment styles, self-efficacy, and causal attributional style for achievement-related failures

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ABSTRACT

Three studies examined the link between adult attachment styles, self-efficacy, and causal attributions for achievement-related failures. Study 1 examined participants' attachment dimensions, global academic self-efficacy, and causal attributional style toward academic failure scripts. Study 2, a longitudinal field-study, measured attachment dimensions, course-specific self-efficacy, and causal attributions for course grades. Study 3 investigated the effects of attachment dimensions on students' causal attributions as a function of the elapsed time since receiving a disappointing grade. The studies demonstrate the relevance of attachment styles to achievement-related self-efficacy and causal attributions. Attachment anxiety was related to low academic self-efficacy and to maladaptive attributions for failure. Attachment avoidance was linked to negative perceptions of lecturer and course and to adaptive causal attributions under failure.

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1. Introduction

Bowlby's (1969, 1973) attachment theory has been cited extensively to explain individual differences both in infant development and in adult personality. Research in the last three decades has examined in depth how adult attachment styles are related to psychological functioning in terms of emotional experiences, self-regulation of emotions and stress, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. However, less attention has been given to how the attachment and exploration behavioral systems are interrelated. In the current study, I follow researchers who have dealt with the relations between these two behavioral systems (e.g., Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Elliot & Reis, 2003; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Mikulincer, 1997), extending their research to enrich this body of work, which has been somewhat neglected both theoretically and empirically. Specifically, I study the academic achievement domain as an important part of the exploration construct in adulthood and the relevance of that domain to the attachment system. In particular, I focus on students' academic self-efficacy expectations and causal attributions for their academic failures.

1.1. Attachment theory and its relevance to the achievement domain

Central to Bowlby's thought is the assumption that the attachment and exploration behavioral systems are mutually relevant. Responsive, available and consistent parental care fosters in the infant a feeling that he/she has a *secure base* from which to explore the environment. Explorative behavior is bolstered by the infant's belief that should he/she encounter difficulty, the parent will be present to help regulate his/her distress. Likewise, the explorative behavior of a baby with a non-responsive caregiver will be undermined by the baby's anxiety over the caregiver's availability.

In support of Bowlby's assumption, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) showed that secure babies, whose mothers were responsive and available, were able to efficiently explore in the *strange situation*. In contrast, avoidant infants – whose exploration was somewhat rigid and seemingly devoid of true fun or interest – explored more as a part of their efforts to suppress their attachment needs. Their mothers were characterized by low responsiveness and sometimes even rejection toward their baby. Finally, anxious/ambivalent infants, who were emotionally overwhelmed by their anxiety in the strange situation, demonstrated the least explorative behavior. Their mothers' care of them was inconsistent, altering between availability, unavailability and invasiveness.

Following Bowlby's (1969) assumption that attachment styles remain stable throughout life, Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed that although the attachment figure shifts from the primary caregiver to the romantic partner, the same attachment styles exist in adulthood. Since Hazan and Shaver's seminal work, a vast body of research has demonstrated the relevance of adult attachment styles to behavioral, emotional and cognitive functioning in various realms, including caregiving and altruism (i.e., Gillath, McCall, Shaver, & Blascovich, 2008; Gillath et al., 2005; Kogut & Kogut, 2013), creative problem solving (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Rom, 2011), and even evaluations of personal belongings (Kogut & Kogut, 2011).

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Influenced by the work of prominent attachment researchers (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998; Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999), attachment measurement shifted from the categorical division of individuals into three distinct patterns of attachment to the more parsimonious and accurate measurement of two continuous dimensions of attachment – avoidance and anxiety; assuming that secure attachment is reflected by low scores on both dimensions. The combination of high scores in both dimensions is akin to the *fearful avoidant* style described by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). Later on, I will lean my hypotheses first, on the classical three-type classification which is more intuitively understood, and leans on many classical studies done under the typological measurement paradigm, and then, "translate" them into the two-dimensional approach.

In the current research, I contribute to the study of the *attachment-exploration balance* in adulthood by focusing on the links between attachment styles and two major variables addressed extensively in the academic achievement literature: Self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977, 2012) and causal attributions for academic failure[1] (Weiner, 1979, 1985). Although the academic achievement domain is an important aspect of young adults' life, its relation to attachment theory has not been thoroughly studied. Besides the abovementioned theoretical contribution, a better understanding of this link can be fruitful from an applied point of view in therapeutic/counseling settings (in which academic themes arise extensively during periods of formal studying), and in academic settings, when facing students' difficulties (e.g. by advisors, counselors, and teachers).

The mutual relevance of these two fields stems from several theoretical assumptions:

(a) The academic achievement domain may be analogical to the concept of exploration in infancy. Prominent researchers (e.g., Elliot & Reis, 2003; Hazan & Shaver, 1990) have recommended linking adult attachment with the achievement domain to improve the construct validity of the attachment-exploration balance in adulthood.
(b) A crucial determinant in achievement-related activity is the individual's beliefs concerning his/her own worth, skills and efficacy (Atkinson, 1957; Bandura, 1977; Rotter, 1954). According to Bowlby (1969, 1973), such beliefs are included in *internal working models* about the self, that develop through the relationship with attachment figures, where the baby learns about his/her ability to achieve desired results.
(c) Achievement activity involves motives and goals (Atkinson, 1957; Elliot & Church, 1997) that may facilitate or compete with the goals of the attachment system. If so, behavior in each domain (attachment or achievement) would be better understood by considering the other domain.
(d) The encounter with achievement settings is often stressful and evokes negative emotions. Exploiting findings about attachment-related typical styles of coping with stress and affect regulation (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 1995, 1998; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) may improve our understanding of individual differences that emerge in stressful achievement situations.

The achievement domain can be viewed as a process that begins before the actual achievement-related performance and that continues thereafter. The so called *pre-performance phase* not only primes the

achievements per se, it also influences them. In this phase, the individual is engaged in motivational and cognitive activity regarding the situation ahead. The achievement-related literature addresses variables in this phase, such as achievement motivations (Atkinson, 1957) and achievement goals (Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Elliot & McGregor, 2001), which have already been linked to attachment style (Elliot & Reis, 2003), and self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977, 2012). The *performance phase* refers to the individual's actual performance, for example, when taking an exam. Typically, part of the performance phase entails feedback on one's performance, such as a grade for an exam. Finally, the so-called *post-performance phase* refers to processes that occur in response to the feedback/grade, such as causal attribution for the grade, and mood changes. The achievement process tends to be circular, i.e., post-performance variables (e.g., a bad mood after receiving a grade) influence the pre-performance variables in forthcoming achievement experiences (e.g., self-efficacy expectations toward them). The current investigation links student attachment style with one pre-performance variable – academic self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977), and one post-performance variable – causal attribution for academic failure (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1979).

1.2. Self-efficacy expectations

Bandura (1977, 1997) defines self-efficacy expectations as referring to beliefs held by individuals regarding their ability to perform certain activities required to attain specific ends. Such beliefs are created in response to the cognitive integration of cues about one's abilities. The most influential cue is *personal performance achievements*, i.e., one's previous successes and failures in relevant areas, such that past successes enhance self-efficacy while past failures reduce it. Indeed, self-efficacy beliefs are critical in the academic domain, predicting performance level better than ability measures (Hackett & Betz, 1995), and are also linked to academic persistence (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Lennon, 2010; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991).

1.2.1. Rationale and hypotheses

Academic self-efficacy seems inherently related to attachment styles. Theoretically, a baby's "successes" and "failures" when seeking the proximity of his/her caregiver by signaling distress may parallel what Bandura calls personal performance achievements, and therefore, these experiences are important in shaping one's self-efficacy. In addition, the prominence of the attachment process in the individual's life means that this process will likely project on expectations pertaining to non-interpersonal fields, including the achievement domain. Ainsworth (1985) claims that the type of maternal responsiveness that leads to secure attachment also indirectly influences exploratory behavior, and fosters among the baby a sense of competence that may, in turn, encourage an active and exploratory attitude in general.

I hypothesize that secure people are likely to have strong self-efficacy beliefs, considering that their interpersonal histories are generally positive, thus reinforcing their feelings that their efforts are efficacious. On the other hand, anxious-ambivalent people are likely to have weak self-efficacy expectations, since their interpersonal histories are dominated by feelings of failure and helplessness. Finally, I expect avoidant people to show strong self-efficacy beliefs which would not differ from those of secure people. Although their early interpersonal histories are characterized by their rejection by others, which should have led to very low self-efficacy expectations, nevertheless their defensive stance, their repudiation of weakness (Mikulincer, 1998), and their compulsive self-reliance are expected to shape their dominant, conscious experience in a way that would obscure their sense of low efficacy. Investigating these hypotheses in terms of the two attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety leads to the assumption that attachment anxiety will be inversely associated with academic self-efficacy, while the attachment avoidance score is not expected to correlate significantly with self-efficacy expectations.

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[1] Studies 1 and 2 originally measured also causal attributions for academic success, but since attachment styles did not predict attributions for success, these measurements were not included in the article. The lack of significant results for success conditions is in line both with Bowlby's (1969) claim that the attachment system is more prominent under conditions of distress, and also with the growing understanding that negative events tend to capture our attention and to elicit attempts at explanation much more than do positive events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001).