



# Intolerance of uncertainty mediates the relationship between adult attachment and worry



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Attachment anxiety and avoidance have been found to be associated with worry. A substantial body of research suggests that intolerance of uncertainty (IOU) is a phenomenon which predicts level of worry, yet the relationship between attachment, IOU and worry remains to be investigated.

**Methods:** The present study recruited 281 participants from the community within Australia to complete an online survey incorporating the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale, the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised, and the Penn State Worry Questionnaire.

**Results:** The analyses revealed attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were positively correlated with IOU, and that attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance and IOU were positively correlated with worry. Furthermore, IOU was found to mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and worry, even when attachment avoidance was entered as a covariate. By contrast, for the relationship between attachment avoidance and worry, intolerance of uncertainty only mediated the association if attachment anxiety was ignored.

**Conclusions:** The results of the study suggest that IOU may play a key role in the relationship between adult attachment difficulties and the experience of worry. These findings may have significant implications for the conceptualisation and psychological treatment of attachment related difficulties.

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## 1. Introduction

Worry has been defined as a cognitive phenomenon reflecting negative recurrent thoughts, concerning the future, which elicit anxiety (e.g., Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983; Freestone, Rhéaume, Letarte, Dugas, & Ladouceur, 1994). Excessive worry has been shown to be associated with psychological distress (Olatunji, Broman-Fulks, Green, & Zlomke, 2010) and poor quality of life (Dugas, Schwartz, & Francis, 2004) and has been hypothesised to maintain anxiety through the occurrence of arousal-inducing appraisals of potential uncertainties as threats (de Jong-Meyer, Beck, & Riede, 2009). A variety of variables have been implicated in the aetiology and maintenance of worry. *Intolerance of uncertainty* (IOU) and *adult attachment style* are two constructs which have been demonstrated to be associated with worry (e.g., Buhr & Dugas, 2006; Simonelli, Ray, & Pincus, 2004). However, to date, there has been no investigation of the relationship between adult attachment, IOU and worry.

### 1.1. Intolerance of uncertainty and worry

Intolerance of uncertainty is conceptualised as a cognitive bias that affects how one perceives, interprets, and responds to uncertainties at a behavioural, cognitive and emotional level (Dugas et al., 2004). It has been further discussed as reflecting an individual's negative beliefs about uncertainty and their ability to cope with the distress associated with uncertainty and the tendency to experience ambiguity as stressful (Buhr & Dugas, 2006). Individuals with high levels of IOU perceive uncertainty about their future as unacceptable, anxiety provoking and impairing (Chen & Hong, 2010). Intolerance of uncertainty has been mostly researched and discussed in relation to worry, with a variety of research having been conducted in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Dugas, Gosselin, & Ladouceur, 2001). Much of this research has focussed on its links with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV diagnosis of Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD; APA, 1994, 2000), a diagnosis characterised by pathological worry. Although IOU has historically been conceptualised to be a dimension of worry, it is now typically considered a distinct construct and has been investigated in relation to numerous psychological variables and psychological disorders (e.g., Einstein, 2014).

A wide body of research has demonstrated that IOU is positively associated with worry and that individuals who engage in excessive worry tend to have higher reported levels of IOU (Dugas, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1997). Furthermore, individuals with high levels of IOU

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tend to employ vigilant coping strategies and display preferential processing of threatening stimuli (Grenier, Barrette, & Ladouceur, 2005). Dugas et al. (2004) proposed that IOU is associated with information processing biases that contribute to the maintenance and development of worry in individuals with anxiety disorders such as GAD.

Dugas et al. (1997) noted that social interactions are often ambiguous and outcomes uncertain, and that worry has been shown to be primarily social in nature. Consequently, individuals high in IOU would be expected to experience the uncertainty inherent in social situations as more intolerable and distressing than those low in IOU. Consequently, the nature of an individual's security within relationships and perception of threatening outcomes within these relationships may have significant implications for their ability to tolerate uncertainty and for their experience of worry. Emerging research suggests that IOU may emerge early in a child's psychological and emotional development and may be a product of early caregiver interaction (Sanchez, Kendall & Comer, 2016). Consequently, early caregiver relationships, as well as adult interpersonal functioning, could potentially play a significant role in the development of IOU.

## 1.2. Attachment

Attachment refers to the ability of an individual to stay or maintain close contact with an attachment figure (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). According to Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998), adult attachment styles can be conceptualised as being represented across two continuous or-orthogonal dimensions: *attachment anxiety* and *attachment avoidance*. These two dimensions can be combined to form four regions that represent four continuously distributed styles of adult attachment: Secure, Preoccupied, Dismissing and Fearful (Bartholomew, 1990; Brennan et al., 1998). However, a number of authors have argued that it is more useful and valid to conceptualise these as two continuous variables rather than as discrete categories (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Both dimensions have been demonstrated to be positively associated with individual level of worry (e.g., Simonelli et al., 2004).

An individual's position on the attachment anxiety dimension indicates the degree to which the person worries that a partner will be unavailable and unsupportive in times of need, which heightens efforts to maintain closeness (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). An individual's position on the avoidance dimension indicates the extent to which the individual distrusts their partners' goodwill and capacity to help, which heightens their efforts to maintain a safe degree of independence and self-reliance (Mikulincer, 1998). Attachment is believed to influence individuals' interpretation and regulation of emotional experiences and ideas of self-worth, as well as the manner in which they think and feel about, and interact with, attachment figures (Eng, Heimberg, Hart, Schneier, & Liebowitz, 2001; Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Individuals low on attachment anxiety and avoidance are conceptualised as having positive perceptions of self, others in the relationship, of the relationship itself, and lower self-reported levels of anxiety (Eng et al., 2001). Such individuals do not typically worry about being abandoned (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The development of an inner sense of security is seen as providing a sense of strength and resilience (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003).

Insecurely attached adults (i.e., those high on attachment anxiety and/or attachment avoidance) are prone to denying their own needs for attachment, may perceive others as untrustworthy, and worry about abandonment, potentially limiting their ability to form secure attachments (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Individuals who score high in either domain are more likely to worry about their relationships and their perceived ability to cope with uncertainty within these relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

### 1.2.1. Attachment anxiety

Anxiously attached individuals are believed to rely on worrying as a coping skill to avoid distress and will often perceive more conflict in their relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005), will miss cues from their interpersonal environment and are, thus, more predisposed to relationship difficulties (Cassidy, Lichtenstein-Phelps, Sibrava, Thomas, & Borkovec, 2009). Individuals high in attachment anxiety are, therefore, more likely to employ "hyperactivating" strategies (involving hyperactivation of the attachment system) including energetic, insistent attempts to obtain care, support and love from relationship partners (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Such strategies may be conceptualised as reflecting efforts to minimise uncertainty concerning potential threats within their relationships.

Sanchez et al. (2016) suggested that children may develop IOU though observing parental avoidance of unpredictable situations and/or by being prevented from engaging with uncertain situations and having to overcome associated distress. The formation of beliefs regarding lack of ability or competence to engage with uncertainty and manage the attendant distress may be seen to closely parallel beliefs regarding worthiness and competence as a result of an individual's attachment relationships. Consequently, individuals high in attachment anxiety may be predisposed to perceive uncertainty within their interpersonal relationships as more threatening than individuals with lower levels of attachment anxiety and to doubt their capacity to manage such uncertainty.

### 1.2.2. Attachment avoidance

Individuals high in attachment avoidance have been described as being uncomfortable with being close or dependent on partners. Such individuals have been described as having little hope of receiving the care and support of others and as tending to suppress their need for attachment figures in order to maintain self-esteem, autonomy, and control (Mikulincer, 1998; Nofle & Shaver, 2006). Thus, they are conceptualised as having a positive working model of themselves and a negative model of others as malevolent or untrustworthy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fraley et al., 2000). Individuals high in attachment avoidance are characterised as being highly self-reliant, avoiding intimacy in close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and employing "deactivating" strategies, such as suppression and avoidance, which deactivate the attachment system (Mikulincer et al., 2003).

Given that ambiguity within interpersonal relationships may be appraised as indicating threat (i.e., confirming others' negative intentions and/or resulting in potential negative interpersonal outcomes; Campbell et al., 2005; Collins, 1996), individuals with high attachment avoidance may be hypothesised to be predisposed towards IOU. It would, therefore, be expected that attachment avoidance would be positively associated with IOU.

## 1.3. The relationship between adult attachment style, IOU and worry

To date, there has been no research into the relationship between IOU, adult attachment and worry. The research described above may suggest that individuals with heightened attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance may be predisposed to experience uncertainty as threatening (i.e., have higher levels of IOU), which, in turn, renders them more vulnerable to experiencing worry.

Based on this hypothesis, two mediation models were developed in order to explore the relationship between the following: (i) attachment anxiety, IOU, and worry, and (ii) attachment avoidance, IOU and worry. The theoretical rationale for the two models is that negative early attachment experiences may encourage individuals to develop heightened attachment anxiety and/or attachment avoidance. Heightened attachment anxiety and/or attachment avoidance may contribute to maladaptive emotion regulation and perceived inability to deal with uncertainty and associated distress (i.e., IOU). Heightened IOU, in turn, may lead to heightened worry (i.e., negative recurrent thoughts

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