Attachment insecurity and openness to diversity: The roles of self-esteem and trust☆

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ABSTRACT

Openness to diversity is useful to adjustment in the diversified modern society, but diversity can be perceived as a threat to one's identity and cultural values. Thus, tendency to feel secure and not easily threatened—attachment security—may be associated with openness to diversity. A path model hypothesized the associations between attachment insecurity (i.e., attachment anxiety and avoidance) and universal-diverse orientation (UDO; i.e., open attitude toward diversity) both directly and indirectly through low self-esteem and interpersonal trust. A structural equation modeling analysis using two samples ($N = 338$ and 350, respectively) of U.S. undergraduates revealed that attachment anxiety was associated with the UDO cognitive component Relativistic Appreciation positively but its emotional component Comfort with Differences negatively, suggesting ambivalent attitudes to diversity. Indirect effects were significant between attachment insecurity and UDO through trust, although self-esteem was associated with UDO only through its association with trust. It was suggested that mistrust in others' good intention might be why insecurely attached feel uncomfortable with the culturally different people.

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1. Introduction

In the increasingly diversified and globalized modern society, successful adjustment entails interacting with diverse individuals and negotiating diverse worldviews effectively (Jackson & Ruderman, 1995). Such diversity competence may be fostered by open attitude toward diversity (Chang, 2001).

However, close-mindedness to differences may be an immediate response because it had been useful for human survival. From an evolutionary perspective (Confer et al., 2010), differences were equated with potential danger in prehistoric times; it was adaptive to defend oneself by categorizing different looking people as an enemy, feeling fearful or angry, and distancing from or harming the person. As such, human evolution facilitated close-mindedness to diversity (Cole & Teboul, 2004).

Then, individual difference factors associated with openness to diversity may counter such closed-mindedness to diversity. Because diversity can be perceived as a threat (Strauss, Connerley, & Ammerman, 2003), and felt threat can decrease tolerance toward different cultural groups (Stephan, Ybarra, & Rios Morrison, 2009), individuals who feel secure and not easily threatened may be more open to diversity. Thus, this study examined whether attachment security was associated with openness to diversity because of its association with self-esteem and trust.

1.1. Attachment theory

Attachment theory proposes that attachment system—a biologically prewired behavioral systems—activates upon perceiving threats, and serves to ensure our survival by guiding physical proximity to attachment figures for protection (Bowlby, 1988). The attachment system deactivates when the attachment figure provides protection and soothing. If attachment concern is active, other behavioral system functioning (e.g., exploratory system function for exploring environments and novelty; Elliot & Reis, 2003) becomes compromised (Bowlby, 1988).

Individual differences in the attachment quality develop from the early childhood, depending on the attachment figure response to the proximity seeking (Bowlby, 1988). This attachment security versus insecurity persist into adulthood as a stable trait (Fraley, 2002), internalized in the form of internal working model (IWM; Bowlby, 1988).

IMW is a schema that consists of mental representations of self, others, and relationships. The child may internalize positive self- (e.g., "I am worthwhile") and other-representation (e.g., "others are trustworthy") and develop attachment security, if the attachment figure is perceived as consistently responsive and available (Baldwin, 1992). Conversely, perceived unpredictable and inconsistent responses of the attachment figure may lead to negative self-representation (e.g., "I

may not be worthy of love"), developing attachment anxiety. Perceived consistent rejection or unavailability of the attachment figure may lead to negative other-representation (e.g., "others are not trustworthy"), developing attachment avoidance. These mental representations beget evaluative judgment of self (e.g., self-esteem) and others (e.g., trust) (Wearden, Peters, Berry, Barrowclough, & Liversidge, 2008) and guide the person with certain expectations and motivations in life tasks and relationships, thereby affecting adjustment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a) including how one manages perceived threats.

1.2. Attachment and diversity as threat

Cultural diversity may be perceived as threat to our survival (Confer et al., 2010), desire to maintain positive self-concept (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992), and the sense of sharedness within one's cultural group (Stephan et al., 2009). Such felt threat can create negative evaluation and behaviors toward culturally different people (Stephan et al., 2009).

Individuals with attachment insecurity versus security may address such felt threat differently, developing more negative versus positive attitude toward diversity. Despite the dearth of research on the attachment and openness to diversity associations, literature on attachment and prejudice/intergroup relations is relevant. For example, experimentally primed attachment security (e.g., subliminal presentation of security-related words or images) reduced (a) negative evaluations of outgroups (Boag & Carnelley, 2015; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001), (b) aggressive behaviors toward outgroup members (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b) and immigrants (Saleem et al., 2015), and (c) discriminatory intention and behaviors toward Muslims (Boag & Carnelley, 2012). These results suggested that enhanced attachment security reduced a sense of felt threat, thereby rendering unnecessary the natural defensive efforts to devalue or harm outgroup members (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b).

Attachment insecurity as an enduring trait—not experimentally boosted state—has been examined in relation to prejudice and intergroup contacts in a few studies. Some reported attachment anxiety, but not avoidance, was associated with outgroup devaluation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001) and negative emotions toward Arabs among U.S. college students (Saleem et al., 2015). Another study found that both anxiously and avoidantly attached people showed higher prejudice to outgroup members (Hofstra, van Oudenhoven, & Buunk, 2005). Also, attachment security, but not attachment anxiety and avoidance, was associated with direct contacts with immigrants, although attachment avoidance was associated with outgroup devaluation (Boccato, Capozza, Trifiletti, & Di Bernardo, 2015). Thus, it is not conclusive whether and which attachment insecurity dimensions are associated with prejudice or negative behaviors toward the culturally different, let alone with openness to diversity.

1.3. Attachment and universal-diverse orientation

In this study, openness to diversity was operationalized as universal-diverse orientation (UDO)—openness to and appreciation of human similarities and cultural and individual differences of others (Miville et al., 1999). UDO consists of a behavioral Diversity of Contacts—one's past and intended future behaviors regarding diversity, a cognitive Relativistic Appreciation—appreciation of value of diversity, and an emotional Comfort with Differences—a sense of connectedness and comfort with diverse individuals—components (Miville et al., 1999). UDO was associated negatively with prejudices such as homophobia and personality such as dogmatism (e.g., Miville et al., 1999), but no previous studies have examined systematic differential predictions of the UDO components, nor investigated their association with attachment.

As a tendency to feel threatened easily, however, attachment insecurity may be associated with UDO through negative IMWs. Encountering cultural diversity, the anxiously attached may feel threatened due to the negative self-evaluation (e.g., self-esteem; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a) and become motivated to protect felt-security by defensive measures (e.g., devaluing the culturally different) (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001, 2007b), which would be associated with low UDO; a person with attachment avoidance may feel threatened due to the negative other-evaluation (e.g., trust; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a) and become motivated to protect felt-security by distancing from them, which would be associated with low UDO.

Moreover, due to unaddressed attachment concerns, attachment system is chronically activated (attachment anxiety) or excessively suppressed (attachment avoidance) (Bowlby, 1988). Therefore, exploratory system functioning such as exploring diversity may be compromised (Elliot & Reis, 2003), resulting in low openness to diversity. Thus, attachment anxiety and avoidance may also be associated with low UDO directly.

2. Hypothesis and alternative models

With these rationales, I proposed a path model that attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with UDO directly and indirectly through low self-esteem and low trust respectively (Fig. 1). This model (Model 1) was tested and compared with three theoretically plausible alternative models. Model 2 added to Model 1 paths from attachment anxiety to trust and attachment avoidance to self-esteem. With mixed findings on the valence of other-representation in attachment anxiety (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000) and self-representation in attachment avoidance (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), it is not clear whether self-esteem and trust are common mediating paths for both attachment anxiety and avoidance versus distinctive paths (as hypothesized) in relation to UDO, which was explored by Model 2. Model 3 added to Model 1 a path from self-esteem to trust. IWM includes representations of self, others, and their relations (Baldwin, 1992). It is possible that self-in-relation-to others representation may be more relevant than the independent self-representation in predicting UDO (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000), because one may feel personal threat from diversity, rather than viewing diversity as a threat in general, which was explored by Model 3. Model 4 combined Models 2 and 3. The best fitting model then was chosen and cross-validated in a different sample.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduates enrolled at a regional Midwestern university in the U.S. Sixty out of 398 responses in the main sample and 63 out of 413 in the validation sample with <50% survey completion were deleted. The main sample ($N = 338$) included 136 (40.2%) men and 198 (58.6%) women with a mean age 21.18 (SD = 5.13, range 18–54). The validation sample ($N = 350$) included 139 (39.7%) men and 209 (59.7%) women with a mean age 21.34 (SD = 5.78, range 18–46). Both the samples were mostly European Americans (88.8%, 89.7% respectively).

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Attachment

The 12-item Experiences in Close Relationship-Short Form (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) measured attachment anxiety (6 items, e.g., "I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner") and attachment avoidance (6 items, e.g., "I am nervous when partners get too close to me") on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Internal consistency coefficients were 0.78 and 0.78 for attachment anxiety and 0.86 and 0.84 for attachment avoidance in each sample.