



# Insecure attachment, resource control, and unrestricted sociosexuality: From a life history perspective



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## ABSTRACT

We tested a proposition central to the life history model of attachment that the insecure attachment might be related to resource control strategies in adulthood. We conducted a structural equation modeling analysis based on a sample of 177 undergraduates. Participants were asked to complete self-reported questionnaires to measure their avoidant and anxious attachment, coercive and prosocial resource control, and unrestricted sociosexuality. Results indicated that avoidant attachment was positively related to coercive resource control, and anxious attachment was positively related to prosocial resource control. In addition, coercive resource control was positively related to unrestricted sociosexuality, whereas prosocial resource control was not significantly related to unrestricted sociosexuality. Implications for insecure attachment and resource control are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers in the area of attachment have long held that insecure attachment styles, which deviate from secure attachment, represent maladaptive social and emotional bonding. The relationships between insecure attachment and behavioral problems and mental disorders have been widely documented in the literature (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brumariu & Kerns, 2010). In addition, although the traditional view holds that prosocial behavior is related to social acceptance and coercive behavior is related to social rejection, both prosocial and coercive behaviors are evolutionarily adaptive strategies that are used to control resources (Charlesworth, 1988; de Waal, 1986; Hawley, 1999). Within the evolutionary frameworks, we reinterpret the existing literature by integrating theoretical models from the life history (LH) model of attachment and the resource control (RC) theory to support the argument that insecure attachment styles might be related to resource control strategies in order to enhance individuals' reproductive opportunity.

The present study aimed to examine the associations among attachment, resource control strategy, and sociosexuality in a sample of Chinese undergraduates. China has been seen as being a distinct entity in cross-cultural research because its traditional value system differs from most Western societies, with a greater emphasis placed on social relatedness (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), however, from the evolutionary perspective, potential cultural differences may not override the evolved psychological mechanism (e.g., Buss, 1989). This article which underscores the ultimate explanation may enhance our

understanding of the evolutionary significance of insecure attachment and its resource control correlates.

### 1.1. The RC theory

Resources for survival and reproduction are limited. Therefore, competition for resources is a major adaptation of humans throughout their lives. As a consequence, various social behaviors are selected for dealing with resource-related environment (Charlesworth, 1996; Green & Rechis, 2006). Evolutionary research has demonstrated that human social behaviors may carry an adaptive function to acquire and control resources. For example, people, who use deception, stealing and some violent behaviors, control others' resources (Archer, 2009; Buss & Duntley, 2008; Wilson & Daly, 1993). For another example, people who have knowledge, skills and expertise commonly gain prestige and have more resources (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Some evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Charlesworth, 1996; Hawley, 1999) reinterpreted individual social behavior in resource-directed terms with an evolutionary-function explanation. There are two broad resource control behaviors: coercive and prosocial strategies (Hawley, 1999; Pellegrini, 2008). Individuals can access the resources in the social group by using a coercive strategy or by using a prosocial strategy. These two different forms of behavior can serve the same function of maximizing resource acquisition (Charlesworth, 1996; Hawley, 2011a, 2011b).

In addition, it should be noted that different resource control strategies for men and women may have different reproductive fitness outcomes (Archer, 2009; Campbell, 1999; Daly & Wilson, 1988). On the one hand, coercive resource control is high among men because the associated payoffs in terms of reproductive success (e.g., social status, and

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sexual access) are high also; on the other hand, prosocial resource control is high among women because their prosocial (rather than coercive) strategy to acquire resources is an adaption which is driven by the importance of mothers' survival for their own reproductive success. A large body of evidence showed that men were more likely to use coercive resource control whereas women were more likely to use prosocial resource control (e.g., Campbell, 1999; Hawley, Shorey, & Alderman, 2009).

### 1.2. The LH model of attachment

Although there may be genetic factors that may account for the development of different attachment patterns (Bokhorst et al., 2003; van IJzendoorn et al., 2000), some evolutionary psychologists, when explaining how evolution shapes individual variation, argued that stable individual differences are not only attributable to genetic factors, but also to environmental factors, especially experiences in early life (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Draper & Harpending, 1982). The LH model of attachment was developed to explain how childhood experience links with attachment patterns and reproductive strategies within the framework of life history model (Belsky et al., 1991). Specifically, it proposed that early social experiences (which in turn shape attachment styles) during the first five to seven years of life adaptively channeled children down one of two developmental pathways of divergent reproductive strategies in evolutionary history. Specifically, children who experience favorable family conditions with supportive and warm parenting tend to develop a secure attachment style. These children are thought to adopt a more “reciprocally-rewarding” reproductive strategy in adulthood characterized by late maturation, commitment in long-term relationships, and higher investment in offspring. On the other hand, those children who experience an unfavorable family environment with harsh parenting and insensitive caring tend to establish insecure attachment styles with their parents. Insecure attachment subsequently leads to “opportunistic” reproductive strategies in adulthood characterized by early reproduction, short-term mating orientation, and lower parental investment in a larger number of offspring.

Within this theoretical framework of the LH model of attachment, Belsky (1997) further distinguished two insecure attachment styles, that is avoidant/dismissing and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles. Avoidant attachment evolved to promote short-term mating and low-investment parenting; this argument is similar to his original theory (see also Del Giudice, 2009 for a comprehensive review). But, ambivalent attachment, which is related to inducing helpless dependency in children, tends to shape indirect reproductive strategy and “helper-at-the-nest” behavior, which is designed to increase the inclusive fitness of the ambivalently attached individual by helping to rear siblings and other relatives (Belsky, 1997).

Recently, Del Giudice (2009), drawing on the LH model of attachment, suggested that an important switching period in human ontogeny should take place during middle childhood when behavioral strategies in human life history tradeoffs are reorganized to encounter the new stressful social environment in adulthood. Given males and females may encounter different fitness-relevant challenges in adulthood (Bjorklund & Shackelford, 1999), hence, sex-differentiated patterns for the insecure attachment emerge in middle childhood. Specifically, insecure girls tend to develop anxious attachment, whereas insecure boys develop avoidant attachment, when faced with new social demands driven by the peer group (Del Giudice, 2009).

### 1.3. Integrating LH and RC theoretical approaches

Bowlby (1969) drew heavily from evolutionary views when he developed his attachment theory. He emphasized that an infant establishes a close emotional bonding to parents to increase the likelihood of survival. Attachment behaviors such as crying, smiling, and immature

reactions can represent different strategies to maintain access to resources from parents (Hawley, 2007; Soltis, 2005; Trivers, 1985). Therefore, the LH model of attachment can predict associations between attachment style and resource management. Indeed, Chisholm (1996) suggested that insecure attachment styles in childhood also serve the function of ensuring resource investment from caregivers. Specifically, children high on avoidant attachment are more likely to display certain behaviors such as seeking self-sufficiency, and avoiding being abandoned or abused. Children high on anxious attachment are more likely to have behaviors including increasing need signals and immature behavior. Recent empirical research based on a Chinese sample in middle childhood has partly supported Chisholm's theoretical prediction, demonstrating that avoidant attachment was positively associated with the use of coercive strategies to control resources whereas anxious attachment was associated with the use of prosocial strategies to control resources (Chen & Chang, 2012a).

If the attachment behavioral system serves to regulate resource control behaviors during infancy and childhood, then it should continue to serve this adaptive function. However, it contributes directly to reproduction-related outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, rather than promoting safety and survival as it does during infancy and childhood (Chen & Chang, 2012a). Attachment system in adulthood may have evolved from the attachment system in infancy and childhood (Hazan & Diamond, 2000). The attachment system in adulthood, which serves to maintain the romantic relationships, may be helpful to promote reproduction-relevant success (Barbaro & Shackelford, 2016; Simpson, Grisevicius, & Kim, 2011). Indeed, Del Giudice (2009) has suggested that romantic attachment in adulthood may have the function of resource extraction in the service of an ultimate evolutionarily-fitness goal—reproductive success. For example, “opportunistic” reproductive strategies adopted by avoidantly attached individuals such as short term mating/low parental investment could help males access more breeding-age female partners and females access good genetic male partners—the supply of each type of partner being limited (Del Giudice, 2009). Ample studies have provided evidence, suggesting that unrestricted sociosexuality might be a coercive strategy to exploit sexual resources in order to increase reproductive success (Lewis, Easton, Goetz, & Buss, 2012; McDonald, Donnellan, & Navarrete, 2012). Therefore, it suggests that avoidant attachment may play a role on unrestricted sociosexuality through mediation of coercive resource control.

**Hypothesis 1.** Avoidant attachment was expected to be positively correlated with coercive resource control, which in turn was positively related to unrestricted sociosexuality.

In addition, as hypothesized by Belsky (1997), some anxiously attached individuals reach reproductive age without becoming autonomous from their parents, instead becoming “helpers-at-the-nest” to parents or other kin (see also Hrdy, 2005 for reviews). In evolutionary terms, such prosocial behaviors as helping and cooperating are not unconditionally altruistic or selfless because the prosocial individuals gain either through their genetic relatedness to the beneficiary (e.g., Hamilton, 1964; Wilson, 1978) or by increasing the probability of receiving similar aid in the future (i.e., reciprocity; Trivers, 1971). In this context, anxious attachment may be considered a useful strategy for extracting resource investment from kin and peers (Del Giudice, 2009). Simultaneously, anxiously attached individuals may adopt an indirect reproduction strategy by inhibiting or delaying their mating opportunities.

**Hypothesis 2.** Anxious attachment was expected to be positively correlated with prosocial resource control, which was not related to unrestricted sociosexuality.

Last, it should be noted that although there were gender differences in both attachment styles and resource control strategies, the relationships between attachment, resource control strategy, and unrestricted

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