Daily variations in attachment anxiety and avoidance: A density distributions approach

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ABSTRACT

Attachment theory proposes that experiences of acceptance and rejection will modify feelings of attachment security, but such processes have rarely been investigated. In this study, daily variations in attachment anxiety and avoidance were investigated across 7 days in a sample of college undergraduates currently in romantic relationships. We observed significant within-person variation in attachment avoidance and anxiety. Participants reported lower anxiety and avoidance on days on which they felt more accepted by their romantic partners. Further, perceptions of acceptance predicted the following day's attachment security through lower negative mood. Greater variability in attachment avoidance and anxiety was associated with greater physical aggression in relationships.

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1. Introduction

From womb to tomb, humans desire positive and lasting relationships. We crave connection with our parents, our friends, and our romantic partners. If they make us feel rejected, we can pursue strategies to protect ourselves from future pain. We can avoid closeness, keeping our distance. Or we can do the opposite—redoubling our efforts to feel accepted by excessively seeking reassurance and remaining vigilant to signs of further rejection. Our motivation to affiliate, along with strategies people use to manage their fear of rejection, forms the backbone of attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), attachment style is largely determined by interactions between the person and caregiver. Early in life, parents serve as caregivers, and the attachment style established in infancy is considered relatively stable. Given the importance of our need for relationships, it is no surprise that attachment has important implications for personality and mental health. For example, insecure attachment predicts greater neuroticism (Noftle & Shaver, 2006), depression (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005), anxiety (Hankin, Kassel, & Abela, 2005), substance abuse (Burge et al., 1997), and criminal behavior (McElhaney, Immele, Smith, & Allen, 2006). The development of attachment security is therefore of great interest.

However, attachment style can change over time (Bretherton, 1985), and it is normal to observe different patterns of attachment in different relationships (e.g., secure attachment to parents but insecure attachment to romantic partners) (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). Therefore, fluctuations in the quality of person-caregiver interactions should be associated with fluctuations in attachment security, especially early in a relationship. The current study examines these fluctuations utilizing a density distributions approach (Fleeson, 2001) to seven days of reports of attachment anxiety and avoidance in romantic relationships.

Attachment is a behavioral control system aimed at maintaining the goal of felt security (Bretherton, 1985). Feelings of security are enhanced by proximity to caregivers, who provide physical protection, emotional support, and other resources. Such caregivers, also referred to as attachment figures, are important across development. In infancy and childhood, the primary caregivers are parents; in adulthood, romantic partners often serve as attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). When security is threatened, such as by physical or social threats (e.g., a stranger approaches an infant, an adult undergoing a job interview, etc.), proximity to a caregiver is sought (e.g., the infant cries out for the parent, the adult seeks social support from a spouse). However, persons must relinquish proximity to caregivers in order to explore the environment and achieve various goals (Bowlby, 1988). Thus, children cannot bring their parents to school with them; adults cannot typically bring their spouses to work with them. This distance from caregivers is tolerable as long as there are no threats to security. In this way, caregivers serve as a secure base from which persons can venture into the wider world.

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This basic description of attachment theory makes clear that feelings of security and proximity seeking are expected to fluctuate across situations. Further, the development of stable individual differences in attachment patterns is based on the quality of interactions between person and attachment figure, which also varies from day to day. If a person seeks proximity from a caregiver, but is rejected, that person will need to seek other means of achieving the goal of felt security (Bretherton, 1985). As noted above, there are two general alternative strategies (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

The first is avoidance, which is characterized by dismissing the threat or danger and relying on the self as much as possible. Persons with avoidant attachment may be uncomfortable being close with other people and have difficulties forming close relationships. The second strategy is anxiety (also known as ambivalence in infancy), which is characterized by hypervigilance to threat and high levels of dependence on caregivers. Persons with anxious attachment may worry a lot about their relationships and be highly demanding of their partners. The extent to which persons exhibit attachment security, anxiety, or avoidance may therefore fluctuate according to whether attachment figures provide acceptance or rejection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).

Previous studies have found variation in attachment anxiety and avoidance across multiple time spans. The long-term stability of working models of attachment has received support in some studies (e.g., Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000), but not others (e.g., Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). Fraley et al. (2011) examined attachment variability across two timeframes (daily diaries for a month and weekly diaries for a year). Across both timeframes, a model postulating a prototype or latent construct of attachment outperformed a model relying only on autoregressive effects, suggesting that attachment security is a combination of trait and state. Davila and Sargent (2003) found that daily fluctuations in attachment security across 56 days were associated with the number of interpersonal loss events during the day as well as positive and negative mood. Zhang (2009) examined reports of attachment and relationship functioning twice a week for four weeks, and found that both diary perceptions of interpersonal loss and actual interpersonal losses predicted diary attachment fluctuations. State attachment avoidance was less influenced by daily perceptions than was state anxiety. Further, an examination of lags indicated that perceptions of loss reported on one diary predicted greater attachment anxiety on the next diary; actual loss events on one diary predicted greater attachment avoidance on the next diary.

The current study expands on this previous work in several ways. First, this study examines negative mood as a potential mediator of associations between perceived acceptance and attachment security across seven consecutive days. Second, this study examines the consequences of within-person attachment variability using the density distribution approach (Fleeson, 2001). In addition to using one day's acceptance to predict that day's attachment security in multi-level models, we compute a measure of how much attachment security varies from day to day and include that as a predictor of relationship outcomes, specifically relationship conflict and satisfaction.

The density distributions approach helps resolve the person-situation debate in personality by conceptualizing personality in terms of a density distribution with a mean and variance (or standard deviation). There are stable individual differences in behavior, represented by the means of the density distributions. Persons with higher or lower means are said to be higher or lower, respectively, on a given personality trait (e.g., higher or lower in attachment anxiety). At the same time, behavior is adapted to situations such that it varies around the person mean (e.g., attachment anxiety may be higher than normal for a person in the context of partner rejection). Just as individuals differ in their mean behavior, they also differ in the amount of variability in their behavior. Both the means and the standard deviations of density distributions are of interest and may predict outcomes such as mental health. The density distributions approach has been employed successfully in personality research, with findings indicating that within-person variability in personality is similar to or greater than between-person variability in personality, and that there are meaningful associations between variability in personality and personal need fulfillment and mental health (e.g., Church et al., 2013; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009; Fleeson & Leicht, 2006).

However, to our knowledge, the density distribution approach has never been applied to attachment. Consistent with attachment theory (Bretherton, 1985; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010), we hypothesize that the within-person variance in anxiety and avoidance across seven days will be statistically significant. We also examine associations between a traditional questionnaire measure of trait-level attachment (Experiences in Close Relationships Scale; ECR) and the mean and standard deviations of individual density distributions. We hypothesize that mean levels will be positively correlated with their respective ECR scales. Next, we determine whether there are associations between mean and standard deviations of individual density distributions and general measures of relationship functioning, including relationship satisfaction as well as verbal and physical aggression. We hypothesize that higher mean levels of anxiety and avoidance will be associated with poorer relationship functioning, consistent with attachment theory and previous research. We also expect larger standard deviations to be associated with poorer relationship functioning, as especially large amounts of variability from situation to situation are often considered a sign of psychological instability (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006).

The second goal of the current study is to determine whether daily measures of attachment security are associated with daily measures of emotional experiences of the relationship (partners making participants feel accepted). We expect anxiety and avoidance scores to be lower on days on which partners are perceived as more accepting. We also examine whether acceptance on one day is associated with attachment security the next day, and whether those associations may be mediated by negative mood. Lagged effects have been examined in two prior studies (Davila & Sargent, 2003; Zhang, 2009), but mediators of lagged effects have not. Questions of mediation are critical for advancing theory and understanding of the mechanisms underlying links between relationship events and attachment security. We propose that low levels of acceptance will result in more negative mood, and this negative mood will trigger activation of the attachment system, thereby predicting greater insecurity the next day.

These hypotheses are examined in a sample of men and women currently in romantic relationships (but not with each other; partners were excluded from the study). We were therefore able to test whether observed associations differed as a result of gender. Prior studies have not included gender in models of day to day measures of attachment security. It is important to consider the role of gender in models of attachment (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Men are more likely to have an avoidant attachment style than women, while women are more likely to have an anxious attachment style than men (Del Giudice, 2009). Furthermore, women may more readily use peers and romantic partners as attachment figures in early adulthood (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012). There are also interesting gender differences in how people respond to romantic rejection; women tend to blame their partners more and experience greater anger and hostility, while men experience greater self-blame, guilt, and protest reactions (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). However, we consider these analyses to be exploratory and make no specific hypotheses.