

Avoidant adult attachment negatively relates to classroom popularity: Social network analysis support for the Parent–Partner–Peer Attachment Transfer model



Gregory D. Webster^{a,*}, Amanda N. Gesselman^b, Benjamin S. Crosier^c

^a University of Florida, USA

^b Indiana University Bloomington, USA

^c Dartmouth College, USA

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ABSTRACT

We propose and test one aspect of the Parent–Partner–Peer Attachment Transfer (3PAT) model. Specifically, we examined whether adults who were more romantically avoidant were less likely to be nominated as friends by their peers. Social network analysis is ideal for this investigation because it integrates individuals (nodes) and their relationships (ties) into a common framework of social associations. We predicted that avoidant romantic attachment would negatively relate to classroom popularity in peer-based social networks. In Study 1, undergraduate psychology students indicated their friendship strength with classmates and completed personality and attachment measures. After controlling for Big Five personality, which relates to social network structure, avoidant attachment was negatively related to eigenvector in degree centrality – a popularity measure. In Study 2 and using integrative data analysis (Curran & Hussong, 2009), we directly replicated this effect with identical measures. Overall, our findings supported one aspect of the 3PAT Model – partner-based avoidant romantic attachment negatively related to peer-based classroom friendships.

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1. Introduction

Do individual differences in adult romantic relationship attachment express themselves in peer friendships? More specifically, are people who report having more avoidant attachments with lovers less likely to be nominated as close friends by others in a group setting? To address these questions, we used social network analysis to index peer-nominated popularity in undergraduate classrooms, and then correlated these scores with self-reports of personality traits and attachment security. We begin by reviewing the prior literature on attachment and social networks. Drawing on this background, we also propose a new theoretical model of attachment transfer, highlight relevant research on attachment development, and identify a key gap in the extant literature – the link between adult romantic relationship attachment and friendship formation in whole social networks.

1.1. Attachment and social networks

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980) is rooted in parent–child relationships. Young children and their caregiver(s) can show different forms and dimensions of bonding, including (but not limited to) anxious, avoidant, and secure attachment patterns. Anxious attachment describes relationships where children of the parents or caregivers become deeply distressed when separated from them, often resulting in inconsistent responsiveness. Anxiously attached adults are often hyper-vigilant to signs of distress or separation from their close friends, romantic partners, or both. Avoidant attachment can develop from parental neglect or unresponsive caregiving. Avoidantly attached adults often believe that close others cannot be relied on, and consequently, tend toward self-reliance and disinterest in close relationships. In contrast, secure attachment describes close bonds between children and parents, and it develops when attachment figures offer consistent support and responsiveness, especially in times of need. In adults, secure attachment often reflects the absence of anxious and avoidant attachment.

People's attachment styles likely shape their social networks (Henderson, 1977). More specifically, attachment styles appear to influence social network formation, characteristics, and maintenance

* Corresponding author at: P.O. Box 112250, Department of Psychology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250, USA.

E-mail address: gdw@ufl.edu (G.D. Webster).

(Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004). Among young adults, securely attached people (i.e., those with low anxious and avoidant attachment scores) have more people in their attachment networks, and their networks tend to be denser (i.e., more interconnected; Rowe & Carnelley, 2005). Indeed, people scoring higher on avoidant attachment (vs. anxious or secure attachment) are both less likely to form and maintain ties, and more likely to dissolve ties in their social networks (Gillath, Johnson, Selcuk, & Teel, 2011; Gillath & Karantzas, 2015). This result corroborates theory and other empirical research suggesting that highly avoidant people eschew closeness and intimacy in relationships and distance themselves from others because they perceive others' social support to be lacking, insincere, untrustworthy, or unable to meet their needs (Collins & Feeney, 2004a; Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Rowe & Carnelley, 2005). Avoidants' distancing likely relates to their desire to be – or to see themselves as – self-reliant, often placing personal or professional goals ahead of social or relationship goals (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994; Karantzas, Feeney, & Wilkinson, 2010).

Despite these advances, nearly all research linking attachment with social networks to date has used personal networks to help understand attachment (e.g., Gillath & Karantzas, 2015). Ego or personal networks examine the people that a target person chooses to nominate as friends or close others, and the relational ties among those people (e.g., who knows whom among a focal person's friends; McCarty, 2002). These egocentric or person-centered networks contrast with sociocentric ones, also called whole or complete networks, which are often defined by a social group, common cause, boundary, or event, such as friendship links among students in the same classroom, company coworkers collaborating on the same project, citizens living in the same township, or professors attending the same convention (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013).

Recent research on egocentric networks has shown that attachment anxiety – but not avoidance – related negatively to ego network density (interconnectedness within one's personal network), and that attachment avoidance – but not anxiety – related negatively to multiplexity (Gillath & Karantzas, 2015). Multiplexity reflects the number of roles or functions filled by a given network member. Thus, more anxious people have more diffuse (less dense) personal networks, whereas more avoidant people prefer to have people playing different roles in their networks (e.g., one could be a friend or coworker, but not both). The present research is the first (to our knowledge) to examine anxious and avoidant attachment dimensions in association with whole or complete social networks (vs. personal networks). To help guide our predictions, we developed a new model and review the attachment transfer literature that supports it.

1.2. The Parent–Partner–Peer Attachment Transfer model

We propose the Parent–Partner–Peer Attachment Transfer (3PAT) model as a way to integrate three frequent sources of attachment using a common theoretical framework (Fig. 1). The 3PAT Model assumes that attachment dimensions – anxious and avoidant, with the lack of either reflecting security – can transfer from the parent–child domain into both the peer and partner relationship domains over time, from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. It also assumes some degree of reciprocated attachment transfer between peers and partners, with each mutually influencing the other during adolescence and through adulthood. In an extended model, each of the three attachment sources may influence a given outcome (e.g., relationship satisfaction; Hadden, Smith, & Webster, 2014), with the proximate attachment sources – peers and partners – at times mediating the direct, distal association between parental attachment and the outcome. We first highlight prior research that supports pathways implied by the 3PAT model, and then test one pathway that has received little attention: romantic attachment and close friendships.

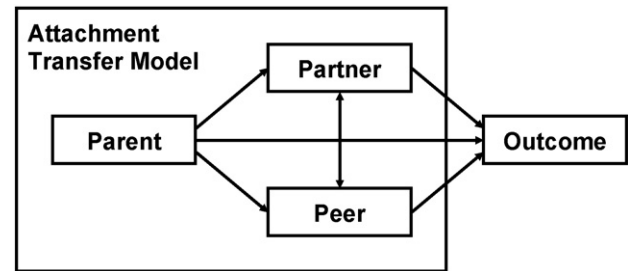


Fig. 1. The Parent–Partner–Peer Attachment Transfer model. Parent–child attachment influences later attachment to both peers and partners, which in turn mutually influence each other. All three attachment sources may influence a given relationship outcome (e.g., self- or partner-rated relationship satisfaction, peer-informed classroom popularity). Although not tested in the present studies, more-recent peer and/or partner attachment may mediate the more-distant association between parent–child attachment and an outcome variable. The present studies assume partner–peer attachment transfer and tests the extent to which self-reports of partner attachment relate to peer-informed reports of classroom popularity.

1.2.1. Parent–partner attachment

Over the last 30 years, much empirical and theoretical research has supported the idea that parent–child attachment patterns can and often do influence later attachment patterns with romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; for reviews see Collins & Feeney, 2004b; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Although parent–partner attachment transfer is not perfect, it is not uncommon for the same attachment styles or dimensions – anxious, avoidant, and secure – to carry over from the parent domain into the romantic partner one. For example, children who are avoidantly attached to one or both parents are more likely to be avoidantly attached (vs. anxious or secure) to their romantic partners, especially initial ones. Thus, support for the parent–partner attachment transfer link in the 3PAT model is well established in the attachment literature.

1.2.2. Parent–peer attachment

Although rarely examined in adults, multiple studies provide insight into possible links between attachment and friendships in children and adolescents. For example, secure parent–child attachment in infancy related positively to later preadolescent peer competence (Shulman, Elicker, & Sroufe, 1994). In a longitudinal study of children aged 4–5 years, friendship pairs in which both children had secure relationships with their mother (vs. pairs in which only one child was securely attached) received higher ratings from two observers on both positive ($r = .48$) and coordinated ($r = .41$) social interaction (Kerns, 1994; Park & Waters, 1989). Among fifth-graders, both perceived paternal ($r = .33$) and maternal ($r = .35$) support positively related to friendship quality (Rubin, Dwyer, Kim, & Burgess, 2004). Mothers and teachers reported that peers were more likely to exclude avoidant children, whom they rated as high on asocial behavior (Seibert & Kerns, 2015). Parent–adolescent attachment styles related to adolescents' interactions with friends (Shomaker & Furman, 2009), and among children aged 12–15 years, both anxious and avoidant attachment related negatively to perceptions of intimacy with a best friend (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008). Specific to the present research, popularity – via peer nomination counts – related positively to both attachment security ($r = .31$) and positivity with mothers ($r = .27$) in seventh and eighth graders (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005). Despite these advances in understanding links between parent–child attachment and friendships or popularity among children and adolescents, researchers know little about the possible links between adult romantic attachment and adult friendship formation.

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