



Empathy for the group versus indifference toward the victim: Effects of anxious and avoidant attachment on moral judgment



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance predict utilitarian moral judgments.
- Anxiously attached individuals make utilitarian judgments for more 'pro-group' reasons and act out of a need to belong and a focus on the welfare of the group as a whole.
- Avoidantly attached individuals make utilitarian judgments because they lack empathy for the victim, which originates in a discomfort in caring for others.
- Anxiously attached individuals modify their moral judgments to match the desires of the group.

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ABSTRACT

Research on deontological versus utilitarian moral reasoning has been largely silent on how interpersonal experiences shape moral judgment. We hypothesized that both anxious and avoidant attachment would predict the propensity to make utilitarian versus deontological judgments, but via different pathways. In Studies 1 and 2, the link between anxious attachment and utilitarianism was mediated by the need to belong and empathy toward the group. In contrast, the link between avoidant attachment and utilitarianism was mediated by discomfort with caring for others and decreased empathy toward the individual victim. In Study 3, the moral judgments of anxiously attached individuals changed to more closely match the group's desired outcome: utilitarian or deontological. In contrast, the judgments of avoidantly attached individuals moved in opposition to the desire of the group. The distinct paths to utilitarianism displayed by anxious and avoidant individuals suggest that utilitarianism may result from a diverse set of psychological processes.

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Should moral decisions be guided by adherence to certain universal rules or by the aim to maximize benefit for the greatest number of people? This tension between deontological (Kant, 1959/1785) and utilitarian (Mill, 1998/1861) moral philosophies is exemplified by dilemmas in which participants must indicate whether they find it morally acceptable to kill one person in order to save the lives of multiple others (e.g., Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1985).

Much of the recent research on deontological/utilitarian reasoning has focused on the differential roles of emotional versus cognitive processes. Neurophysiological studies have linked deontological judgment with higher activity in brain regions implicated in emotionality (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Koenigs et al., 2007). Other studies have linked utilitarian judgments with increased activation in brain regions implicated in reasoning (Greene, Morelli,

Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008; Greene et al., 2001), working memory capacity, (Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008), and rational (Bartels, 2008; Paxton, Ungar, & Greene, 2011) and/or deliberate (Suter & Hertwig, 2011) styles of thinking.

More recent research has begun to refine the prevailing dual-process model. For example, Conway and Gawronski (2013) demonstrated that people may arrive at utilitarian judgments via 1) endorsement of the utilitarian position or 2) rejection of the deontological position. A parallel may be drawn for deontological judgments. The present studies build on this idea by identifying a well-studied, individual difference variable that predicts a priori who will follow one of two routes to utilitarian judgment.

In addition, whereas much of the early work in this literature was largely silent regarding the interpersonal or relational dimensions of moral judgment, researchers have increasingly argued for the need to place moral perceivers within their broader social context. For example, studies have demonstrated that individuals' moral beliefs are heavily influenced by their surrounding culture (Graham et al., 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987).

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More recently, Koleva, Selterman, Iyer, Ditto, and Graham (2014) identified an important *interpersonal* variable that may also play an important role in moral judgment: attachment style. They reported that anxiously attached individuals show greater preoccupation with issues of harm, fairness, and purity, while avoidantly attached individuals show a lack of concern for harm and fairness violations. In addition, the authors found that higher attachment avoidance predicted a greater tendency to make utilitarian judgments, an effect that was mediated by lower trait empathy. Of particular interest to the current research, Koleva et al. (2014) also reported (in a table) that attachment anxiety predicted greater utilitarian judgment. They did not, however, discuss this association any further.

The present research brings this link between anxious attachment and utilitarianism to the forefront. We argue that by examining and comparing how *both* forms of insecure attachment influence moral judgment, one can elucidate 1) how interpersonal experiences influence moral judgment and 2) begin to isolate distinct varieties of lay utilitarianism.

We suspected that attachment anxiety would predict utilitarian judgment through a different route than that of attachment avoidance. In particular, we hypothesized that whereas avoidant participants would select the utilitarian option out of lack of concern for the sacrificed individual, anxious participants would select the utilitarian option in order to maximize social approval. We turn next to the rationale for this hypothesis.

The interpersonal roots of moral judgment

Whereas much of the moral judgment literature has treated the moral decision maker as an isolated entity, there is evidence from both classic and recent sources that individuals' moral judgments are meaningfully shaped by their history of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Kogut & Kogut, 2013; Koleva et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983). Why might this be the case? Theorists have long noted that moral values are not only beliefs about how we ought to act toward others but also *expectations about how others will act toward us* (Kohlberg, 1969; Turiel, 1983). Given that a fundamental source of interpersonal behavioral expectations is each individual's history of secure or insecure interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1969), there may be a strong connection between attachment style and moral reasoning.

According to attachment theory, early attachment-related experiences with caregivers teach children important lessons about how to relate to close others (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Zayas, Mischel, Shoda, & Aber, 2011). Those lessons are, in turn, applied to adult relationships later in life (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Caregivers who are consistently available and attentive teach the child that close others can be relied upon in times of need. This results in a secure attachment style in adulthood, characterized by a tendency to trust and rely on others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Caregivers who provide care inconsistently or insensitively teach the child that close others are not reliably available for care. These uncertain models of self and other translate into an anxious attachment style in adulthood, characterized by excessive dependence on close others. Finally, caregivers who are absent or punishing of the child's demands for reassurance teach the child that relying on others is futile at best, and dangerous at worst. These negative models of self and other translate to an avoidant attachment style in adulthood, characterized by a discomfort with closeness with others.

Considerable evidence suggests that adult attachment represents a fundamental lens that helps to shape people's construal of the actions of others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As such, attachment style appears to play an important role in shaping people's moral perspectives. Attachment style has been found to predict a wide range of morally-relevant behavior, including lying to others (e.g., Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008), volunteering for non-profit organizations (e.g., Gillath et al., 2005), and selling one's material possessions (Kogut & Kogut, 2011). It

follows that attachment style may also help to explain people's differing perspectives on utilitarian moral dilemmas.

Different paths to utilitarianism

When presented with a utilitarian dilemma, the decision maker is asked to choose between killing versus not killing one person in order to save a group. We propose that there are two distinct paths through which one could reach the utilitarian decision of killing the person to save the group. One such path is through lack of concern for the individual being sacrificed. If the decision maker does not feel particularly moved by the plight of the would-be sacrificed individual, then he or she may be more willing to sacrifice that individual in exchange for the greater good. However, a second path to the utilitarian conclusion is through a heightened concern for the group. Decision makers could choose to sacrifice an individual not because they lack empathy for that individual, but because their concern for the wellbeing of the group outweighs their concern for the single individual. We discuss next how attachment style may relate to each of these pathways.

Avoidant attachment

Koleva et al. (2014) found that avoidant attachment was associated with higher utilitarian judgment and that this effect was mediated by lower trait levels of empathic concern. One purpose of the present paper was to unpack this association by asking *toward whom* do avoidantly attached individuals lack empathy?

Avoidantly attached people are deeply uncomfortable with having others rely on them: being asked to care for another person threatens avoidantly attached individuals' strong need for independence and autonomy (Shaver, Mikulincer, & Shemesh-Iron, 2010). As a result, avoidantly attached individuals are relatively unwilling to provide comfort and support to their romantic partners, particularly when their partners are in a state of distress (Feeney & Collins, 2001). We suggest that this tendency applies beyond romantic contexts; encountering *any* individual in distress is a threatening situation for avoidant individuals.

The 'victim' in a utilitarian dilemma represents a particularly vivid case of an individual in distress. Thus, we predict that, due to their discomfort with caregiving, people who are high in avoidance will display less empathy for the victim than will people who are low in avoidance. Similar effects have been documented for participants who were high in Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Koenigs, Kruepke, Zeier, & Newman, 2012). However, because groups are more abstract targets than individuals (Lickel et al., 2000) and groups generally elicit less empathy than do individuals (Cameron & Payne, 2011; Slovic, 2007), the difference between high and low avoidant participants will be less evident for group targets than for individual targets. Taken together, we predict that because high avoidants display less empathy than low avoidants for the victim, but similar levels of empathy for the group, high avoidants will show a greater preference than low avoidants for the option that favors the group over the victim.

Anxious attachment

Koleva et al. (2014) further found a positive association between attachment anxiety and utilitarianism. A second purpose of the present research was to unpack this association to understand why anxiously attached individuals would be drawn to utilitarian judgments. Unlike avoidantly attached individuals, anxiously attached individuals are not threatened by the prospect of giving care to others (Shaver et al., 2010). Therefore, it seems unlikely that anxiously attached individuals prefer utilitarian judgments because they lack empathy for the person being sacrificed. Rather, we hypothesized that anxiously attached individuals choose the utilitarian option because (relative to both avoidant

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