



# The interplay of stress and attachment in individuals weathering loss of employment



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## ABSTRACT

This study addressed two questions concerning the interplay between adult romantic attachment and exposure to stressful circumstances: do stressful events predict fluctuation in romantic attachment during a period of unemployment, and does attachment measured at one point predict later changes in stressors? Stressors and attachment were measured over a six month period following involuntary job loss for a sample of 426 adults. Autoregressive models found evidence for both the stress-effects and stress-generation hypotheses, with more stressors associated with prospective decreases in attachment, and lower attachment associated with prospective increases in stressors. These findings support a more dynamic formulation of the interplay between attachment and exposure to stressors over the months following job loss.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment theory has become a cornerstone in our understanding of interpersonal functioning across the lifespan, spanning numerous research projects examining adult attachment security. As research on attachment security accumulates, earlier questions concerning whether adult attachment is a stable personality characteristic are giving way to more complex questions of when and why change might occur, and what the consequences would be. Fraley and Brumbaugh's (2004) recent review of 26 longitudinal studies found consistent evidence of moderate stability in both categorical and continuous measures of adult attachment across periods ranging from one week (Pistole, 1989;  $r = .52$ ) to 26 years (Klohnen & Bera, 1998;  $r = .55$ ). Davila and Cobb (2004) noted that these moderate test–retest correlations reflect some stability, but also allow for substantial variation over time. Davila and Cobb also reviewed research suggesting that exposure to stressful life events, even those not directly related to relationships, may lead to a greater sense of insecurity, at least temporarily.

This picture is complicated by findings concerning stress generation. Two recent studies (Bottonari, Roberts, Kelly, Kashdan, & Ciesla, 2007; Hankin, Kassel, & Abela, 2005) find evidence that insecurely attached adults are more likely to experience new

stressful events when compared to securely attached adults. Taken together, these findings suggest a more dynamic bidirectional framework, with sense of security and stressful events influencing each other. Studying such dynamic processes requires that we use longitudinal designs and track fluctuations in both attachment security and stressors over time. Davila and Cobb (2004) note that dynamic models also require attention to time scale, suggesting that dynamic effects may operate over relatively short time periods.

In order to test this more dynamic model, we capitalized on data from a recent longitudinal study of involuntary unemployment, focusing on two questions. First, does the cascade of stressors that occurs following job loss predict fluctuations in adult sense of security? Second, does a person's attachment security at a given point predict differences in subsequent exposure to stressors?

### 1.1. Do stressful events predict fluctuation in romantic attachment security during a period of unemployment?

Several attachment researchers have recommended that adult attachment patterns be conceptualized in dimensional rather than categorical terms (Allen, Huntoon, & Evans, 1999; Sperling, Foelsch, & Grace, 1996), as studies have found only weak evidence for an adult attachment typology (Fraley & Waller, 1998; Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000). Researchers have argued that precision is lost with typological measures, and alternative measurement systems such as continuous scales may demonstrate better test–retest

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reliability (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995; Feeney, Nollar, & Callan, 1994; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). A high level of attachment security is characterized by faith in the responsiveness of important others, appropriate self worth, and comfort with interdependence (Gillath, Hart, Nofhle, & Stockdale, 2009). Attachment insecurity, on the other hand, is characterized by anxiety and worry related to self worth, extreme need for interpersonal closeness, and by avoidance, with an emphasis on autonomy and reduced tolerance for interpersonal intimacy. We used Collins' (1996) measure of attachment security, which includes subscales for assessing the components of closeness to others, ability to depend on others, and anxiety about abandonment. Most studies have combined these subscales to create a summary score, and we followed that approach in the current study, but we also explored whether the dynamics of attachment security might vary across subscales.

There is evidence that exposure to stressful events can reduce sense of security, but the data are not completely consistent. A number of studies have identified within-person associations between daily events and changes in attachment styles or security (Allen, McElhaney, Kuperminc, & Jodl, 2004; Davila & Kashy, 2009; Gentzler, Kerns, & Keener, 2010; Muller & Rosenkrantz, 2009). Further, these within-person associations may be particularly influential when they are viewed as indicative of loss (Davila & Sargent, 2003). Cozzarelli, Karafa, Collins, and Tagler (2003) further found that women with a history of abuse and/or depression displayed lower levels of attachment stability, but also suggested that changes toward greater security may be more related to situational factors, while changes toward insecurity may better reflect stable vulnerability factors. Studies have suggested that relationship-related life events are predictive of change in attachment security (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Ruvolo, Fabin, & Ruvolo, 2001). Attachment stability may differ for those who are or are not in a current romantic relationship. Nofhle and Shaver (2006) found that individuals who were not in a relationship reported higher levels of avoidant attachment than those who were in a relationship, suggesting that findings might differ for these two groups because of the salience of attachment figures during stressful periods; the present study will test findings to see if they are influenced by relationship status.

How would stressors associated with involuntary unemployment influence attachment security? Stressors experienced by job seekers often involve negative social interactions, including rejection or humiliation by potential employers and social service personnel, conflict with landlords and creditors, and arguments with other family members (Howe, Levy, & Caplan, 2004). In particular, the financial hardship that often accompanies job loss may reduce the capacity for individuals and their attachment figures to respond effectively to stressors, increasing the frequency of negative and stressful interactions among family members and altering the organization of these attachments (Allen et al., 2004; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). More specifically, Wilson (2001) found that greater economic strain following job loss was associated with higher sociotropy, a personality dimension strongly related to anxious attachment in other research (Sibley & Overall, 2007), and both were related to reports of negative interaction with romantic partners. While a measure of economic and job-loss related stressors may not explicitly seem to focus on interpersonal stressors, Wilson's research suggests that the two are correlated.

Job loss and its aftermath provide a means of studying this question prospectively, as job loss ushers in a period of economic uncertainty that can lead to a cascade of specific stressors. These may vary in intensity, from new daily hassles to severe sequelae such as losing one's home or being exposed to humiliation and rejection when searching for employment. In this study we were able to track dynamic patterns of stress exposure by following

people for several months after job loss, and periodically assessing the stressors they were experiencing. We also measured stressors in three different ways, assessing severity of the job loss itself as well as fluctuations in moderate and severe stressful events related to job-loss and economic strain at five occasions, allowing us to test whether different aspects of stressors were related to attachment security. This prospective design also allowed us to study how stressors in one period might be related to fluctuations in reports of attachment security, which we measured three times over the course of six months. It also allowed us to test this thesis across more than one time period, to determine whether it replicated across waves of assessment.

### 1.2. Does attachment security measured at one time point predict later changes in stressors?

Although less frequently studied, there is evidence that attachment security may contribute to stress exposure. In a study of depressed women, Bottonari et al. (2007) found that avoidant and anxious attachment interacted with each other in predicting socio-tropic but not autonomous life events, but only for women with milder depression. Those women with high anxious attachment but low avoidant attachment reported more sociotropic events, as did those women with high avoidant but low anxious attachment. Bottonari et al. interpreted these findings as evidence supporting a stress-generation model, although the non-longitudinal nature of the study limits confidence. Longitudinal data will be useful in evaluating likely direction of effect.

Is there reason to believe that attachment security would lead to generation of stressors such as those experienced by the recently unemployed? Attachment security has been associated with behavior in interpersonal interactions, conflict resolution (Pistole, 1989), self-disclosure (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991), and expression of anger (Mikulincer, 1998). While insecure attachment is clearly associated with difficulties in romantic relationships, there is also evidence that insecurely attached individuals have more difficulty in other social domains, including work relationships (Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). Bottonari et al. (2007) did not find that attachment security was associated with rates of autonomous or non-social stressors, replicating findings in an earlier prospective study of college students (Hankin et al., 2005). Given evidence that stressors experienced by job seekers often involve social interactions, we hypothesized that attachment security would contribute to the generation of stressors in the months following job loss. Because we measured stressors five times over this period, we were able to approach this question prospectively by testing whether attachment security measured at our first and third waves was related to subsequent changes in stressors at the second and fourth waves.

### 1.3. Goals of the current study

Building on previous research examining attachment security over time, the current study tested a dynamic model of the interplay between attachment security and exposure to stressors utilizing prospective longitudinal data from a sample of recently unemployed adults. We began by testing whether attachment security demonstrated systematic changes over the eight months following job loss. We then included measures of three types of stressors collected during the first interview to test the hypothesis that variation in the stress of job loss and its immediate sequelae would be associated with more insecurity at that time, and with different rates of change in security over the next six months. Next, we specified autoregressive models to test the hypothesis that fluctuations in attachment security across shorter three month periods would be predicted by variation in moderate and severe stressors

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