



Brief Report

Asymmetry in self-other agreement on attachment style among romantic partners

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ABSTRACT

This research reports about asymmetrical relations in self-other ratings of attachment style. Specifically, results showed that romantic partners hold relatively accurate perceptions of each other's attachment styles with one exception: women's ability to judge their male partner's level of attachment-related anxiety was compromised compared with the other agreement indices measured. The effect was not moderated by acquaintanceship length or relationship satisfaction, but it was affected by men's interpersonally oriented self-control. The findings appear to reflect men's reluctance from appearing anxious to their female partners and from the nature of the anxiety dimension of attachment. Anxiety (as compared with avoidance) has a less consistent interpersonal behavioral manifestation and thus is more concealable among those motivated and capable of doing so.

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1. Introduction

In recent years much research effort has been directed at studying attachment in adulthood (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Along with the development of new adult-oriented self-report attachment scales, research has focused on the implications of attachment theory to romantic relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Individual differences in attachment patterns have been found to predict a wide range of relationship outcomes. Compared with securely-attached individuals, insecure individuals were found to be less attractive romantic partners, to form relationships that are based on relatively superficial mutual commitment and intimacy, to express less satisfaction in both dating and marital relationships, and to cope less effectively with difficulties and stressors in romantic relationships (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Williams & Riskind, 2004).

Contemporary social psychological approaches to adult attachment consider it a combination of two relatively independent dimensions – anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety dimension reflects individual's worries about partner's availability and about one's own value to the partner, and it is expressed in a strong desire for closeness and protection. Furthermore, anxiety is associated with inability to maintain a stable sense of self-esteem and with erratic (i.e., ambivalent and fluctuating) appraisals of relationship partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The avoidance dimension reflects preference for emotional distance and self-reliance and is manifested in discomfort with closeness and with

depending on relationship partners. In contrast with the hyperactivating tendencies among anxious individuals, the deactivating tendencies that characterize avoidant individuals are associated with an unreceptive, distant, and emotionally unexpressive self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

There are reasons to expect that romantic partners will be in a fairly good position to report accurately about each other's attachment style. Considering the central role that attachment plays in shaping romantic relationships, partners are likely to register (and even shape) each other's attachment style (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, because adults' attachment patterns demonstrate relative stability over extended periods of time, repeated exposure should also facilitate accurate perceptions. And yet, discrepancies could arise between judgments of the two dimensions because of differences in the level of behavioral consistency associated with each. Whereas attachment-related avoidance predisposes one to a generally consistent – although remote and hostile – interpersonal behavioral pattern, attachment-related anxiety often leads to fluctuated interpersonal behavior driven by a “here-and-now” focus (Campbell et al., 2005). That is, behavioral consistency (which is a major factor affecting self-other agreement; Funder, 1995) favors a more accurate perception of avoidance tendencies (high consistency) over anxiety tendencies (low consistency).

Notwithstanding, among relatively well acquainted romantic partners (the focus of the present investigation) general trait characteristics might prove less influential than deeper person-focused motivational and self-regulatory processes. With detail, overt expressions of anxiety and distress contradict gender-specific social expectations associated with masculinity (Ansfield, 2007). Whereas femininity is stereotypically associated with emotional expressivity, vulnerability, and interdependence; masculinity is

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associated with emotional stability, agency, and independence (Cross & Madson, 1997; Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998). Therefore, in order to maintain their traditional gender role, men are highly motivated to conceal attachment-related anxieties from their partners (Timmers et al., 1998). With regard to avoidance, although this dimension is more strongly associated with the masculine stereotype, cultural pressures on women to down-regulate avoidance tendencies are probably not as strong, because some of the dimension's correlates (e.g., self-reliance) are valued in Western societies (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997). This leads to the prediction that men's level of attachment-related anxiety will be judged least accurately.

Furthermore, maintaining favorable self-presentation involves exertion of self-regulatory efforts (e.g., Uziel & Baumeister, in press). Therefore, individuals characterized by high (vs. low) level of self-control should be in a better position to achieve their self-presentational goals. Self-regulatory ability was not expected to affect self-other agreement directly, but to represent a resource among those motivated in adjusting their public image. Thus, to the extent that men seek to publicly manage their attachment-related anxieties, differences in self-regulatory capacity may render this effort successful or not.

Less than a handful of studies reported about self-other agreement in attachment (e.g., Banai, Weller, & Mikulincer, 1998; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These studies focused mainly on agreement among peers and concluded that relatively high levels of agreement can be reached, much like agreement on the Big Five traits ($r_s \sim .40$; Connelly & Ones, 2010). However, beyond this general conclusion, little or nothing is known about agreement among romantic partners, about the differences between anxiety and avoidance dimensions, and about the issues at the focus of the present study, which is the role of gender in moderating agreement. In exploring these questions the present study also measured and controlled for two potentially important relationship factors: length of acquaintanceship and relationship satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

To take part in the study participants had to be in a romantic relationship with a partner for a minimal period of 6 months. Ninety-five heterosexual participants and their partners responded (61% of the targets were female; target's $M_{\text{age}} = 24.80$, $SD = 3.50$; partner's $M_{\text{age}} = 25.39$, $SD = 3.67$; 33% of the couples were married; $M_{\text{acquaintanceship length (months)}} = 38.52$; range = 6–163). Each target-partner dyad received a packet of self-report (target person) and other-report (partner) questionnaires (i.e., a nonreciprocal design; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) sealed in individual envelopes.¹ The participants were asked not to discuss the content of the questionnaires until after they completed them. In exchange for their participation, dyads were offered the opportunity to win a substantial sum of money in a raffle.

2.2. Tools

The following measures were applied in the present study.

2.2.1. Attachment style

Attachment was measured with the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). This scale

includes 18 items tapping the avoidance dimension (e.g., “I try to avoid getting too close to others”) and 18 items tapping the anxiety dimension (e.g., “I worry a lot about my relationships”). Participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings in close relationships on 7-point scales ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (7). Each target person completed the original version of the scale and each partner completed a modified version whereby the reference person was the romantic partner (e.g., “my romantic partner tries to avoid getting too close to others”). Reliabilities were high for the self-report version ($\alpha_s = .89$ and $.91$ for the avoidance and anxiety scales, respectively) and for the partner-report ($\alpha_s = .88$ and $.92$ for the avoidance and anxiety scales, respectively). There was no correlation between avoidance and anxiety in either self-report ($r = .02$, ns) or partner-report ($r = .08$, ns).

2.2.2. Self-regulation

Participants completed two measures of self-regulation: First, *interpersonally oriented self-control* (IOSC) was measured with the short EPQ-R L-scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985; e.g., “do you always practice what you preach?”; $\alpha = .74$). Recent evidence has indicated that a core characteristic among high scorers is not deceptiveness but rather an ability to demonstrate high levels of self-control in interpersonal contexts (Uziel, 2010a, 2010b; Uziel & Baumeister, in press). The second measure was the short version of the *self-control scale* (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; e.g., “I am good at resisting temptation”; $\alpha = .83$), which measures general self-control ability. The two scales were positively correlated ($r = .37$, $p < .001$).

2.2.3. Relationship satisfaction

Satisfaction in the relationship was measured with two questions (“how satisfied are you with your romantic relationship” and “how warm and intimate is your romantic relationship”). Participants marked their answers on an 11-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much”. Target and partner's ratings were significantly correlated ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) and were pooled together to form a combined satisfaction measure.²

3. Results

Self-other agreement was calculated by correlating the target's self-report about attachment with the partner-report across dyads (cf. Connelly & Ones, 2010). Consistent with past studies, agreement was overall positive and significant for both the avoidance dimension ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and the anxiety dimension ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), indicating that romantic partners are generally accurate in gauging each other's close relationship oriented attachment style. Notably, the magnitude of these correlations is in the range of agreement achieved for the Big Five traits (cf. Connelly & Ones, 2010). Although agreement was stronger for the avoidance dimension than for the anxiety dimension, the difference was trivial and not significant ($z < 1$, ns).

Regression analyses (in which the target person's attachment dimension was regressed on the partner's rating, the focal variable, and their interaction term³) showed that neither acquaintanceship length nor relationship satisfaction had a significant effect in moderating agreement on either avoidance or anxiety ratings (all interaction-term-related $ps > .14$).⁴

² Because the correlation was not very strong I had also explored satisfaction ratings at the individual level. These analyses yielded the same result as the combined rating.

³ In all analyses continuous variables were first standardized.

⁴ Inclusion of acquaintanceship length and relationship satisfaction as covariates in subsequent analyses had negligible impact on the results.

¹ Participants completed the questionnaire packet as part of a broader project on self-other agreement on personality. The packet included additional measures not mentioned here that served other studies.

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