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Attachment dimensions and the big five personality traits: Associations and comparative ability to predict relationship quality

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Abstract

Several studies have explored associations between measures of adult attachment style and the Big Five personality traits or factors, but the studies have not included current dimensional measures of attachment style (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) or the most complete (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and frequently used (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) measures of the Big Five. Moreover, most studies after Shaver and Brennan's (1992) have not compared attachment style and Big Five measures as predictors of relationship quality. Here, we summarize past research and report two studies comparing Brennan et al.'s two-dimensional measure of attachment style with the BFI and NEO-PI-R measures of the Big Five. There are consistent and theoretically meaningful associations between the attachment-style and personality trait measures, but attachment-style dimensions still predict relationship quality better than measures of the Big Five. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Adult attachment theory (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) is an extension of Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1969), designed to explain individual differences in cognitions, feelings, and behaviors that occur in the context of adolescent and adult close relationships. According to the theory, individual differences in "attachment style" emerge from experiences in previous close relationships, beginning with the attachment relationships between children and their primary caregivers. Since 1987, when the theory was first proposed, scores of studies (reviewed by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) have shown that measures of attachment style are associated in theoretically predictable ways with mental processes related to close relationships, behaviors observed in such relationships, and outcomes of such relationships, both subjective (e.g., satisfaction) and objective (e.g., breakup or divorce). In recent years, many studies have included both individual-difference measures and experimental manipulations, and have illuminated some of the mental processes, many of them implicit, that underlie variations in attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

In their early research, Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1990) used a simple three-category self-report measure of attachment style based on hypothesized parallels between Ainsworth's (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) three-category typology of infants' patterns of attachment to their parents. The three patterns were called secure, anxious (or anxious/ambivalent), and avoidant. This measure, which produced both self-ratings of the three category descriptions and selection of the most self-descriptive category, was used by Shaver and Brennan (1992) in an early longitudinal study of predictors of relationship quality and outcomes. In that study, the three category ratings were systematically associated with the then-current measure of the "Big Five" personality traits,¹ the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985); but the attachment ratings proved to be better predictors of relationship outcomes over time. The study was important in the history of adult attachment research, because it was interpreted as a license to pursue attachment theory as a conceptual framework that was not easily or completely assimilated to the Big Five framework.

As is well known, the Big Five personality traits—Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness—have emerged as an overarching, empirically based framework capturing major between-person differences in personality (John & Srivastava, 1999). It is therefore considered parsimonious and sensible to make sure, when any new individual-difference variables are introduced, that they are not simply clones of the Big Five variables bearing new names (the so-called "jangle fallacy"; Block, 2000). Shaver and Brennan's (1992) study accomplished this task for the early measure of adult attachment style.

¹ Although Costa and McCrae (1992) used the term "Five Factor Model" to refer to the traits instead of the "Big Five" (which is more associated with the lexical approach to identifying the traits; e.g., Saucier & Goldberg, 1996), we generally use the term Big Five in the present article because the Five Factor Model refers specifically to a formal theory of personality (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1999), rather than the five constructs per se.

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