



The boundaries between attachment and personality: Localized versus generalized effects in daily social interaction [☆]

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ABSTRACT

A diary study examined the effects of romantic attachment (avoidance, anxiety) and autonomous and sociotropic personality on levels of sociability within social interactions across relational contexts ($N = 89$ undergraduates). As expected, the effects of domain-specific romantic attachment avoidance and anxiety on sociability were localized to social interactions with romantic partners, whereas the effects of autonomy and sociotropy were generalized across relational contexts (i.e., across social interactions with romantic partners, family members, friends, and acquaintances/others). Furthermore, the effects of both autonomy and sociotropy on sociability were partially mediated by domain-specific attachment in domain-congruent (romantic) but not domain-incongruent (non-romantic) relational contexts: romantic avoidance partially mediated the effects of autonomy on sociability toward romantic partners, whereas romantic anxiety partially mediated the effects of sociotropy. These results suggest that autonomy and sociotropy summarize global regularities in relational responding that correspond to those described by attachment avoidance and anxiety—although (unlike attachment) they do so across relational contexts. Domain-specific attachment representations, in contrast, govern responding within context-congruent domains and act as a mechanism through which personality guides social interaction within these domains.

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1. Introduction

Two dimensions underlie regularities in the way individuals respond within close relationship contexts—referred to in the attachment literature as anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). As Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) have convincingly argued, these dual dimensions represent manifestations of the tendencies to use hyperactivating strategies indexed by attachment anxiety (such as increasing efforts to maintain proximity and elicit attention from attachment figures) and deactivating strategies indexed by attachment avoidance (such as withdrawing and downplaying the desire for proximity) to regulate attachment insecurity. Variation in the tendency to use these strategies in a given situation stems from underlying cognitive representations of attachment figure availability and the viability of proximity seeking. Thus, self-report measures of attachment anxiety and avoidance designed to tap these cognitive representations reflect individual differences in the use of specific if... then... patterns of behavior (as discussed by Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Mischel & Shoda, 1999) that regulate attachment insecurity in attachment-relevant contexts. People do not necessarily respond in the same ways across all relational contexts, however. The attachment system is adaptive, and the behaviors that most effectively regulate

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attachment insecurity should come into play in contexts similar to those in which they were effective on previous occasions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Consistent with Bowlby's (1969/1982) original theorizing, recent theoretical models posit that the adaptivity of the attachment system is facilitated by a hierarchically organized cognitive representational network (Crittenden, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Accordingly, representations summarizing the behavioral contingencies most effective in regulating the attachment system in relationships with specific persons, such as a current romantic partner (referred to here as relationship-specific representations) are nested under more global and abstract attachment representations summarizing the effectiveness of regulatory strategies in different relationship domains, such as romantic relationships in general (referred to as domain-specific representations) (Collins & Read, 1994; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003). Domain-specific attachment representations are in turn nested under more global representations that reflect the contingencies most likely to apply across all domains (including romantic, familial, and friendship domains). These global or 'default' representations are most likely to govern interpersonal behavior in new and unfamiliar contexts when more specific and presumably precise representations (in terms of the accuracy of if... then... behavioral tendencies) are unavailable to guide relational responding. As Collins and Read (1994, p. 58) have suggested, representations at this most global level of the attachment network should appear dispositional or trait-like in nature, and "apply to a wide range of relationships and situations, although it may not describe any one of them very well."

The boundary between where global or generalized attachment representations end and where stable regularities in interpersonal behavior indicative of personality traits or dispositions begin is somewhat blurred. As various commentators have noted, research focusing on such distinctions remains limited (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2005; Waters, Crowell, Elliott, Corcoran, & Treboux, 2002), as does research that directly assesses the most global (personality-esque) level of the attachment network (cf. Pierce & Lydon, 2001). We have recently presented a model that integrates into a unified framework research on attachment anxiety and avoidance with research regarding the personality dimensions of autonomy and sociotropy identified in the literature on the personality diatheses of depression (Sibley, 2007; Sibley & Overall, 2007). This framework operationalizes autonomy and sociotropy as broad-bandwidth (personality-level) measures that assess global summaries in two distinct patterns of if... then... regularities in interpersonal behavior that relate to the (more specific) dimensions of attachment avoidance and anxiety identified in the attachment literature. The current study tests predictions derived from this model regarding the localized and generalized effects of attachment and personality across a range of naturally occurring social interactions assessed using a social interaction diary.

1.1. *Autonomy and sociotropy: Broad-bandwidth measures of relational responding*

Consistent with the more general distinction between agency and communion first proposed by Bakan (1966), Beck (1983) identified two personality dimensions, autonomy and sociotropy, that he argued predisposed a vulnerability to depression in certain circumstances. Beck (1983, p. 272) defined the personality dimension of autonomy as an index of the individual's level of "investment in preserving his [or her] independence, mobility, and personal rights; freedom of choice, action, and expression; protection of his [or her] domain; and defining his [or her] boundaries." Sociotropy, in contrast, reflects the individual's level of "investment in positive interchange with other people. This cluster includes passive-receptive wishes (acceptance, intimacy, understanding, support, guidance); 'narcissistic wishes' (admiration, prestige, status); and feedback-validation of beliefs and behavior." A similar distinction was also proposed by Blatt, D'Afflitti, and Quinlan (1976), who used the terms self-criticism and dependency (respectively) to refer to two conceptually similar dimensions. Consistent with the dynamic interactionist model of depression (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992), research indicates that individuals high in sociotropy (or dependency) may be particularly prone to depression when interpersonal relationships and social support are threatened, whereas autonomy (or self-criticism) confers vulnerability to depression when personal goals and individual achievements are threatened.

As Sibley (2007) observed, autonomy and sociotropy are remarkably similar to recent definitions of attachment anxiety and avoidance. In their comprehensive summary of the attachment behavioral system, Shaver and Mikulincer (2002, pp. 135–136), for example, defined attachment anxiety as the predisposition for an "intense need to be close, accepted, supported, and reassured" by attachment figures, whereas attachment avoidance reflects a tendency to be "uncomfortable with closeness, self-disclosure, feelings and expressions of vulnerability, and dependency" in attachment relationships. While these descriptions parallel Beck's (1983) definitions of autonomy and sociotropy, the latter two constructs are more broadly defined and tap global regularities in relational responding that describe behavior across a range of different contexts, whereas attachment anxiety and avoidance refer to patterns of relational responding within particular relationships or domains.

Crossovers in the literature on adult attachment and the personality diatheses of depression also indicate similarities between attachment and depressive personality. For instance, research indicates that high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance may heighten vulnerability to depression, particularly with regard to stressful events that involve the individual's relationships with attachment figures (Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, & Wilson, 2003). Simpson et al. (2003), for example, reported that women high in attachment anxiety tended to perceive their partners as less supportive during a stressful life changing situation (the transition to parenthood)—despite that fact that their partners reported providing as much support as the partners of less anxious women. The lower levels of support perceived by women high in attachment anxiety in turn predicted increased levels of post-natal depression, suggesting that in this context attachment anxiety increases vulnerability to depression because it alters perceptions of partner behaviour and responsiveness. Furthermore, like individuals high in attachment anxiety (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Collins, 1996), highly sociotropic individuals typically

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