

Brief Report

Effects of attachment style and relationship context on selection among relational strategies

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Abstract

Numerous studies have examined attachment-style differences in social perception, emotion-regulation, and couple communication, but relatively little is known about how dispositional attachment style combines or interacts with relationship situations or contexts to influence the decisions people make about how to act in their relationships. In the present study, participants were presented twice with relationship scenarios and asked to indicate how they would respond to each one. They completed the task initially without a particular context in mind and then again with either a positive or a negative relationship context in mind. Results indicated that a deteriorating relationship context caused participants to choose less secure and more insecure behaviors, especially avoidant ones, but dispositional attachment style was still important as well. Both sets of factors produced main effects rather than interactions.

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1. Introduction

Behavior is often conceptualized as a joint function of personality and situation (Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006; Mischel, 1968), but the principles by which traits and situations jointly shape behavior are still unclear. In the study reported here, we explored how people with different attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)

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evaluate and select relational behaviors under differing relationship conditions. This is an important issue for relationship researchers, because people in relationships are often reacting to changing conditions, commitment cues in a partner's behavior, other people's comments on the relationship, and so on.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1982) concerns the formation of emotional bonds between people and the effects of a person's attachment history on emotion regulation and other aspects of personality. According to Bowlby (1982), proximity-seeking behavior, beginning early in infancy, is regulated by an innate *attachment behavioral system*, the function of which is to obtain protection and care from a "stronger and wiser" other (called an *attachment figure*). The system becomes adapted to characteristics of key attachment figures over the life course, and the resulting *attachment style* (e.g., secure or insecure) becomes relatively stable and can be measured by self-report questionnaires. Attachment style then affects other attitudes, emotions, and behavioral strategies in relationships (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review).

Attachment styles can be assessed in terms of two insecurity dimensions: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). People are roughly normally distributed within the conceptual space formed by these two orthogonal dimensions. Since Hazan and Shaver (1987) first suggested that these styles, first identified by Ainsworth et al. (1978) in studies of infants, can be applied to the study of adult pair-bonding, hundreds of studies have shown that a person's attachment style is a powerful predictor of various psychological and social-relational phenomena including self- and social schemas, the quality of relations with romantic or marital partners, sexual motivation, and reactions to relationship breakups or losses (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Most of these studies, however, have focused on the effects of personality (i.e., attachment style) while paying relatively little attention to the effects of context or situation, leaving a gap in our understanding of the ways in which decisions are made and actions are chosen in the context of close relationships. Influenced by the literature on combined effects, including interactions, of dispositional and situational variables (e.g., Fleenor, 2004; Funder, 2006; Mischel, 1968), we here examine what happens when people with different attachment styles encounter fairly common but threatening relationship situations. Clearly, a relationship in which one's partner is not reliable and supportive is likely to make one more cautious about trusting the partner and communicating openly with him or her. But it is unclear whether the effect of an optimal or nonoptimal partner—where "optimal" is defined in relation to attachment theory—would or would not eliminate the effects of previously established attachment styles, which are thought to have their roots in a person's long history of attachment relationships.

Our main research questions were as follows: (a) Would attachment style (measured in terms of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance) continue to predict behavioral choices even in changed relationship contexts? (b) Would the different relationship contexts affect behavioral choices? And (c) would attachment style and context interact to affect behavioral choices? We predicted that before participants were exposed to contexts other than the ones they naturally took for granted when describing their relationship choices, their choices would be influenced by attachment style. In particular, we expected avoidant individuals to choose more avoidant behavioral reactions, anxious individuals to react anxiously, and secure people (who score low on both insecurity dimensions) to select relatively secure, trusting behaviors. We also predicted that specifying a relatively secure or insecure relationship context would alter participants' behavioral choices, but that their choices

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