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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., Fleeson, 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

would still be influenced significantly by dispositional attachment style. (Previous research has shown that attachment style sometimes affects the perception of and reaction to relationship-related stimuli, although these stimuli—such as words like "abandonment" or "rejection"—have usually been fairly abstract and isolated from specific relationship situations; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). We were not sure whether to expect interactions between attachment style and situational context or main effects of both kinds of variables, so no specific predictions were made along those lines.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Seventy-three university students, 39 women and 34 men aged 18–30 (mdn = 19), volunteered to participate in the study. Eighty-five percent were self-reported heterosexuals. Forty-eight percent were committed to a single partner, 10% were casually dating one or more people, and 42% were not dating anyone. Forty-three percent were Caucasian; 41% Asian American, 10% Hispanic, 4% African American, and 2% other.

2.2. Measures and procedure

Each person received a questionnaire that included a measure of attachment style, a measure of relationship decisions in various situations, a written manipulation of relationship context (describing either a good relationship or a troubled relationship), and demographic questions. Participants completed the battery alone, at their own pace.

Attachment style was assessed with the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), a 36-item self-report instrument that measures attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Participants were asked to think about their close relationships, without focusing on a specific partner, and rate the extent to which each item accurately described their feelings in such relationships using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Eighteen items measured attachment-related anxiety (e.g., I worry about being abandoned) and 18 items measured avoidance (e.g., I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down). The reliability and validity of the two subscales have been repeatedly demonstrated (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007); in the present study, αs for the two scales were .88 and .90, respectively. As intended, the anxiety and avoidance scores were not significantly correlated.

A relationship behaviors measure (RBM) was constructed for this study. Fifty psychology students who were familiar with attachment theory were asked to write relationship scenarios that were threatening in some way (e.g., suggesting partner infidelity or indiscretion or lack of commitment), as well as possible reactions (representing a variety of secure and insecure responses) to each scenario. For example, "You are at a party and your partner just revealed an intimate fact or story about you that you had hoped would remain private. What would you do?" Four plausible reactions were listed, always including at least one secure response and three different insecure responses. The scenarios selected for the study met two criteria: (1) being likely to activate the attachment system (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002) because of a threat of rejection or betrayal and (2) offering a variety of different behavioral options that might appeal to different degrees to people with different attachment styles.

Before reading the 25 scenarios, participants received the following instructions: "In this section you will find questions about various situations that sometimes arise in romantic relationships. We want to know how you would react to them if you encountered them in your own experience. We will use the term 'your partner' to refer to your relationship partner in these hypothetical situations. We do not necessarily mean your actual partner at the moment, in your real life, although it is fine to think about that person if you like. Even if you do not have a partner at the moment, please imagine how you would probably respond if you did have a partner and found yourself in one of the described situations. Beneath each scenario, you will find different possible ways you might respond. For each possibility, please indicate how likely you would be to respond in this way, using a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (very likely)."

Upon completing the RBM, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (1) thinking about being in a relationship with a sensitive, supportive partner or (2) thinking about being in a relationship with an insensitive, unsupportive partner. The two contexts were described as follows: *Supportive*—"In this section, we would like you to answer the questions again, but this time imagining a relationship in which your partner, for a fairly long time, has consistently been available to you, sensitive to your needs, and highly reliable, having your interests at heart and supporting you in every way he/she can. That is, imagine that this person is about as reliable as any other human being could be." *Unsupportive*—"In this section, we would like you to answer the same questions again, but this time imagining a relationship in which your partner, for a fairly long time, has been pretty unreliable, not always very sensitive to your needs, and not always as supportive as one would expect from a partner in a good love relationship. Lately you have been wondering how long this relationship will, or should, continue."

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Preliminary analyses: Construction of the response tendency scales (RBM)

We looked at all of the behavioral reactions we considered to be secure, based on both attachment theory and the attachment research literature, and examined their performance when placed in a single scale measuring secure behavioral responses. Twenty-three items formed a theoretically coherent scale that had a coefficient α of .90. The same procedure was used to create 23-item scales reflecting anxious ($\alpha = .87$) and avoidant ($\alpha = .91$) behavioral responses, respectively.[1]

The correlations among the three behavior scales were as follows: anxiety and security, $r = -.09$, ns; anxiety and avoidance, $r = .45$, $p < .01$; avoidance and security, $r = -.58$, $p < .01$. The same behavioral choice scales were used in the second part of the experiment, where context was manipulated. The α reliability coefficients in that part of the experiment ranged from .81 to .94, and the correlations among the scales were: anxiety and security, $r = -.28$, $p < .05$; anxiety and avoidance, $r = .45$, $p < .01$; avoidance and security, $r = -.64$, $p < .01$. Thus, in general the avoidant behaviors were more clearly distinguished than the anxious ones from the secure behaviors; the two kinds of insecure behaviors were related,

[1] Various methods were used to create the scales, ranging from ad hoc item selection to exploratory factor analysis, and similar results were obtained in all cases.

across scenarios; and the distinction between secure and anxious choices became clearer following the manipulation.

3.2. Effects of the relationship context manipulation

We first wished to examine whether the manipulation had an effect on people's response tendencies. Scores on the RBM were analyzed in a 2 (relationship context: supportive vs. unsupportive) × 2 (questionnaire: first vs. second) × 3 (response tendency: anxious, avoidant, secure) mixed model analysis of variance (with the second and third factors being within-subject factors). (We also ran the analyses with gender as a factor, but there were no main effects or lower-order interactions with gender, and the 4-way interaction that occurred was attributable to women's reactions to the manipulation being somewhat stronger than men's. In the interest of brevity, the details are omitted here.)

There was a main effect for response tendency, such that people were more inclined, overall, to choose secure reactions than insecure ones. This suggests that normal college students' first reaction to a relationship threat or violation tends to be secure, probably because most normal young adults are fairly secure and have fairly secure relationships in mind when thinking about the situations in the RBM for the first time. There was also a main effect for 1st vs. 2nd administration of the questionnaire, such that participants gave somewhat higher ratings the second time, suggesting that the manipulation caused them to choose more secure or insecure behaviors, depending on condition. There were also two 2-way interactions (qualified by a 3-way interaction), one between RBM response tendency (secure, anxious, avoidant) and relationship context, $F(2,70) = 4.74$, $p < .05$, and one between response tendency and 1st vs. 2nd administration, $F(2,70) = 16.05$, $p < .001$. There was also a 3-way interaction of response tendency, 1st vs. 2nd administration, and relationship context, $F(2,70) = 28.64$, $p < .001$.

To examine the 3-way interaction, we divided the file by relationship context and computed within-subjects repeated measures ANOVA examining the effects of administration (1st vs. 2nd) and response tendency (secure, anxious, and avoidant). The 2-way interaction was significant only for participants in the unsupportive relationship condition, $F(2,40) = 34.57$, $p < .001$, not for those in the supportive relationship condition, $F(2,29) = 3.15$, *ns*. In the supportive relationship condition, scores on the secure behavioral response scale rose slightly from the first administration to the second (from 3.72 to 3.86), whereas scores on the anxious and avoidant response scales dropped slightly (anxious responses, from 2.55 to 2.53; avoidant responses, from 2.11 to 2.04). In the unsupportive relationship condition, scores on the secure response scale went down considerably (from 3.67 to 2.94) and scores on the insecure scales went up (anxious, from 2.44 to 2.76; avoidant, from 2.03 to 2.74). The differential impact of the two conditions probably occurred because during the 1st administration of the RBM, participants were thinking implicitly of a fairly supportive relationship (perhaps the one they were actually in, for people who were involved in a relationship), which means there was less room for change when the manipulation emphasized a supportive relationship context.

Overall, these initial analyses indicate that the unsupportive partner manipulation affected participants' choices of relational behaviors, which provides a preliminary positive answer to our second research question: Relationship context does affect choices among possible relational behaviors.

3.3. Effects of attachment style on behavioral choices during the first administration of the RBM

To examine the effects of attachment style on behavioral choices in the first administration of the RBM, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses for each behavioral response scale (secure, anxious, and avoidant). The predictors in each analysis were ECR attachment anxiety and avoidance and the interaction between the two. ECR attachment anxiety was a significant predictor of anxious responses to the scenarios in the 1st administration of the RMB, $\beta = .38$, $p = .001$. That is, the more anxious a person on the ECR, the more anxious were his or her behavioral choices in reaction to the scenarios. Neither avoidance nor the interaction of attachment anxiety and avoidance were significant. ECR avoidance was a significant predictor of avoidant responses to the scenarios in the 1st administration of the RBM, $\beta = .40$, $p = .001$, such that the more avoidant people (according to the ECR) chose more avoidant behaviors in response to the scenarios. There was also a marginally significant main effect of attachment anxiety, $\beta = .22$, $p = .05$, but not a significant anxiety by avoidance interaction. Finally, both anxiety and avoidance were significant (negative) predictors of choosing secure behavioral responses to the 1st administration of the RBM; for anxiety, $\beta = -.25$, $p < .05$; for avoidance, $\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$. Once again, there was no significant interaction.[2]

Overall, the results reported in this section indicate that choices among possible relational behaviors are affected by attachment style when no particular relationship context is specified. Presumably, participants were relying on their own sense of what a relationship is like when choosing behavioral reactions to a partner's behaviors at time 1.

3.4. Possible interactive effects of attachment style and the context manipulation

To examine possible interactions among attachment anxiety, avoidance, and relationship context, we conducted three additional hierarchical regression analyses predicting behavioral choices following the manipulation (i.e., during the 2nd administration of the RBM). In these analyses, we included the same predictors as before (attachment anxiety, avoidance, and their interaction), but we also included the relationship context manipulation, the 2-way interactions between the manipulation and each of the attachment dimensions, and the 3-way interaction between anxiety, avoidance, and the manipulation.

For the anxious behavioral choices, there was a main effect of relationship context, $\beta = .23$, $p < .05$, such that participants in the unsupportive partner condition chose more anxious behavioral responses than participants in the supportive partner condition. As with the regression analysis for the 1st administration, there was also a main effect of ECR attachment anxiety, $\beta = .44$, $p < .001$, such that more dispositionally anxious participants

[2] When we conducted the same regression analyses while statistically controlling for relationship status, the results were similar. However, in the regression analysis predicting the choice of anxious behaviors there was a main effect of relationship status, such that people not in a committed relationship tended to choose more anxious responses, $\beta = .36$, $p = .001$. A similar effect was obtained in the regression analysis predicting choice of anxious behaviors after the manipulation, $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$. Thus, people with an anxious attachment style who were not in a relationship at the time of the experiment were more likely to imagine choosing anxious behaviors. It would be interesting to know whether this points to a cause or an effect of difficulties in previous relationships. (Most of the participants, around 60%, who were not in a relationship at the time of the experiment had previously been in one or more relationships.)

chose more anxious responses to relationship scenarios. No other main effects or interactions were significant.[3]

The regression analysis predicting the choice of avoidant behaviors also revealed a main effect of relationship context, $\beta = .44$, $p < .001$, such that people in the unsupportive partner condition chose more avoidant behaviors than those in the supportive partner condition. As with the regression analysis for the 1st administration, there was also a main effect of ECR avoidance, $\beta = -.32$, $p < .01$, such that the dispositionally more avoidant people were more likely to choose avoidant behaviors in the scenarios. There was also, as before, a main effect of attachment anxiety, $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$, such that more anxious people were more likely than less anxious ones to choose avoidant behaviors.[4]

The regression analysis predicting the choice of secure behaviors revealed a main effect of relationship context, $\beta = -.53$, $p < .001$, such that people who read a description of a supportive partner rated secure behavioral responses as more likely than people who read a description of an unsupportive partner. Main effects were also found for attachment anxiety, $\beta = -.32$, $p = .001$, and avoidance, $\beta = -.32$, $p = .001$, indicating that the more anxious or avoidant a person was, the less likely he or she was to choose secure behaviors. In other words, being more secure dispositionally and perceiving one's partner to be a source of security contributed to choosing secure reactions to threatening relationship scenarios. No other main effects or interactions were significant.[5]

To summarize the analyses in relation to our initial questions, (a) attachment style predicted behavioral choices under threatening relationship conditions both before and after the context manipulation; (b) relationship context also strongly affected behavioral choices, in that imagining an unsupportive partner shifted behavioral choices in an insecure direction; and (c) the effects of attachment style and manipulated context were independent rather than interactive. That is, there were contributions of both person and situation, but no person-situation interactions.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine, in a preliminary way, the joint effects of attachment style, a personality construct, and relationship context on behavioral decisions in various relational situations. The study was meant to simulate what happens when people with different attachment styles encounter fairly typical but threatening relationship

[3] When we conducted the same regression analysis while controlling for behavioral tendencies at time 1, we got similar results. The main effect of the relationship context manipulation was a bit stronger, $\beta = .27$, $p = .001$. The main effect of ECR attachment anxiety did not change in size but the p value was smaller, $\beta = .19$, $p < .05$, because of the changed degrees of freedom. This suggests a heightening of anxious responses on the parts of anxious participants following the manipulation, because the significant coefficient indicates *change* compared with time 1.

[4] When we conducted the same regression analysis while controlling for behavioral tendencies at time 1, the main effect of the relationship context manipulation was stronger, $\beta = .51$, $p < .001$, but the main effects of ECR attachment anxiety and avoidance were no longer significant, $\beta = .10$, *ns*, and $\beta = .04$, *ns*, respectively. This suggests that the behavioral tendencies associated with dispositional anxiety and avoidance were already evident at time 1, before the manipulation, and were only slightly greater following the manipulation.

[5] When we conducted the same regression analysis while controlling for behavioral tendencies at time 1, the main effect of the relationship context manipulation was the same, $\beta = -.53$, $p < .001$, and the main effects of ECR attachment anxiety and avoidance were present but smaller, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .01$, and $\beta = -.15$, $p = .09$, suggesting that insecurity contributed to changes in the insecure direction following the description of an unsupportive relationship context.

situations in the context of a relationship in which the partner either is or is not a security-enhancing attachment figure.

Overall, the results indicate that, at least in this simulation, both attachment style and relationship quality and context influence a person's behavioral choices across a number of threatening or troubling relationship situations. Moreover, in this case there was not a person–situation interaction, in the statistical sense. Instead, relationship context and dispositional attachment style independently influenced people's behavioral choices.

The fact that the secure relationship condition changed responses less from the first administration of the RBM to the second suggests that most people had a fairly secure relationship in mind when they completed the questionnaire the first time. This in turn suggests that either their actual current relationship or their prototype of such relationships was fairly secure. The negative relationship condition affected people's responses more, moving them to make more insecure behavioral choices. The manipulation seemed to have an especially large effect on avoidant behaviors, and those behaviors were more likely for people who scored high on both the ECR avoidance scale, as expected, and those who scored high on the ECR anxiety scale. This may mean either that both kinds of insecurity cause a person to withdraw from a troubling relationship partner in an avoidant way, or that the way we described the troubling relationship and the imagined relationship partner (who was "not always as supportive as one would expect") encouraged avoidant rather than anxious responses.

Future studies should examine in greater detail how different kinds of relationship difficulties influence people's relationship strategies. What threats or violations are more likely to change a person's behavior? What kinds of relationship conditions or contexts influence decisions? Can we specify a cost/gain/commitment equation that predicts how a particular person will respond? (Presumably it matters how long a person has been in a relationship, what "opportunity costs" and "investments" the person perceives, and so on. See Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001, for relevant evidence. It may also be useful to incorporate theories and research paradigms developed by decision-making researchers, such as Lipshitz, Klein, Orasanu, & Salas, 2001.)

Our results suggest that although relationship context has a large effect, it does not erase or render irrelevant individual differences that have developed over time in close relationships. The same thing has been found in experimental studies using more abstract attachment-related stimuli (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2002). Although our study was exploratory and characterized by common limitations (a college student sample, hypothetical scenarios, self-reports of behavioral choices), the findings should stimulate other attachment-style-by-relational-context studies that illuminate the joint roles of persons and situations in maintaining or hindering close personal relationships.

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