The Relationship of Adult Attachment and Perceptions of Romantic Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Attachment Theory has been well established as a context for understanding a caregiver's importance on infant development. Recently, there has been a trend in applying Attachment Theory to adult relationships, specifically romantic relationships, to investigate the endurance of attachment style from infancy to adulthood. Participants (N = 78) completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson, 1990) and read a scenario describing a conflict between a romantic couple. Scenarios varied the type of conflict resolution (effective vs. ineffective). Participants then rated their support of the resolution. We found main effects of attachment style and conflict resolution. The interaction between attachment style and conflict resolution was not significant.

INTRODUCTION

Psychologists have long been interested in the attachment bonds between individuals. According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1980) attachment behavior is any form of behavior that involves a person seeking proximity to another individual. The goal of the behavior is to maintain the bond formed with the attachment figure. Several theorists have argued that attachment has helped enable species to survive, namely by enabling infants to avoid danger by keeping close to the caregiver. Although originally developed to explain infant relationships to caregivers, attachment styles also have been linked to the development of romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1980; Pistole, 1989; Shi, 2003).

Bowlby (1980) identified three attachment styles developed in infancy. Secure attachment is developed when the primary caregiver consistently responds to a child's distress. This consistency fosters stability and trust in relationships. The second attachment style is avoidant, which is developed when an infant's distress is consistently ignored. This pattern causes children to avoid seeking attachment figures for support, and inhibits their ability to appropriately express emotion. The third attachment style is the anxious-ambivalent style, which develops when a child's distress is inconsistently responded to. These children are exceptionally difficult to soothe due to their increased anxiety and exaggerated expression of emotion. These attachment styles are believed to endure throughout the lifespan, and are actively displayed in adult romantic relationships (Bouthillier, D., Julien, D., Dube, M., Belanger, I., and Hamelin, M., 2002; Shi, 2003).

The current study explored the relationship between attachment styles and responses to conflict. Researchers suggest that stress and danger activates attachment behavior in infants whereas conflict in romantic relationships activates attachment behavior in adults (Pietromonaco, Greenwood & Feldman Barrett, 2004). Research contributing to the understanding of conflict in romantic relationships is directly applicable to improving the wellbeing of individuals in a relationship and relationship satisfaction and success (Cobb & Bradbury, 2003; Greefe, 2000). Conflict in relationships concerns those involved and mental health and legal professionals. It has been suggested that conflict in marriages accounts for 20% of the country's one million annual divorces relationships (Gaulier, B. et al., 2006).

Conflict Resolution

Individuals' conflict resolution strategies relate directly to their conflict styles. Conflict style can be defined as a patterned response to conflict (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). The well-established conflict measure, the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II (1983), categorizes responses into one of five approaches (Bippus & Rollin, 2003; Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; could add more sources here to validate ROC-II). The five styles are dominating, avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising and they can be classified as reflecting either concern for the self, or concern for another (Rahim, 1983). The conflict styles that are classified as mutually focused (i.e., concern for self and other are of equal importance) are compromising and integrating. These two styles employ the

most pro-social and effective strategies of conflict resolution. Less effective strategies are associated with dominating, obliging, and avoiding, which involve placing one's own needs above another's, readily ceding to the demands of others, and displaying aversion to confrontations (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Rahim (1983) argues that individuals tend to maintain one style when they are faced with conflict, regardless of situational variations (Rahim, 1983).

Adult Attachment and Conflict Resolution

Attachment styles predispose people to think, feel, and behave in predictable ways in response to relationship events (Collins, 1996). Growing evidence suggests that conflict style is related to attachment in important ways (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Individuals with secure attachment report higher relationship satisfaction and are more likely to use more effective conflict strategies (Bippus & Rollin, 2003; Leonard & Senchak, 1992; Pistole, 1989; Shi, 2003). Furthermore, secure attachment has been found to be positively associated with two mutually focused conflict styles (integrating and compromising) and negatively associated with conflict avoidance (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Alternatively, non-effective conflict styles tend to be employed more often by an individual who is anxious, ambivalent, or avoidant in their relationship, than by an individual who is secure and confident. This difference remains evident regardless of actual state of relationship quality; for instance, an insecurely attached individual in a good relationship may consistently interpret events negatively and thus employ a less effective conflict style (Collins, 1996).

The current study seeks to extend the research on adult attachment and conflict style. In contrast to much of the previous research, which is primarily correlational, we conduced an experimental study examining respondents' reactions to conflict styles based on their own attachment style. We expected to see more support of effective and collaborative resolution styles (e.g., compromising and integrating) of a conflict in a romantic relationship in individuals with secure adult attachment styles. We also expected that insecurely attached adults would show less support for effective and collaborative styles of conflict resolution in romantic relationships.

METHOD

Participants were of 78 college-aged men (n = 18) and women (n = 60). Most were Caucasian (n = 72). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 42 (M = 19.52, SD = 2.14).

We solicited participants who had or were currently involved in a committed romantic relationship with a minimum duration of four months to ensure participants had adequate relationship experience, enabling them to better relate to our study. Participants were offered extra credit for their participation.

Participants completed Simpson's (1990) Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) self- report measure. We categorized participants by attachment styles based on their scores. Participants who scored at least 67% of the total possible points were categorized as "more securely attached" (n = 26), and participants who scored fewer than 33% of the possible points were categorized as "less securely attached" (n = 18). The remainder of participants were dropped from further analyses to account for error on the AAQ. The AAQ was developed to expand on Hazan and Shaver's (1987) previously existing self-report measure, Adult Attachment Styles (AAS). The AAS was developed based on descriptions of avoidant, secure, and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles. On the AAS, participants classify themselves in accordance with one of three attachment vignettes, each representing one mutually exclusive attachment category (Simpson, 1990). Alternatively, the AAQ seeks to establish a more precise measure of an individual's attachment style by breaking down the three categories of the AAS into 13 items. Each item corresponds to one of the three attachment vignettes and is responded to on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Five items were derived from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) "secure" vignette, four from the "avoidant" vignette, and four from the "anxious-ambivalent" vignette (Simpson, 1990).

We randomly assigned participants to read one of two scenarios based on a common relationship conflict. The conflicts were identical, only the method of resolution differed. One described an effective, collaborative method of conflict resolution, while the other described an ineffective, destructive method of conflict resolution. The effective method displayed concern for self and other as equally important in resolution. Thus we considered it a mutually focused approach. The effective scenario combined key aspects of the compromising and integrating conflict styles as defined by Rahim (Chakrabarty et al., 2002; Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). The ineffective method displayed an unbalanced concern for self and other in resolution. The ineffective scenario was not mutually focused and reflected the dominating and avoiding conflict styles as defined by Rahim (Chakrabarty et al., 2002; Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Participants responded to five questions describing their support for the given scenario. The questions were likert-type items anchored at 1 = low support and 6 = high support.

RESULTS

We analyzed the data with a 2 X 2 factorial ANOVA. Our independent variables were attachment style (secure or insecure) and conflict scenario (effective or ineffective). Our dependent variable was the support for the conflict style utilized in the scenario. We found a main effect of attachment, F (1, 40) = 6.25, $p < .02$. Participants who were insecurely attached gave higher support ratings than securely attached participants, regardless of scenario. We also found a main effect of scenario, F (1, 40) = 14.93, $p < .00$. Participants were more supportive of the effective scenario than the ineffective scenario. The interaction between attachment and scenario was not significant (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Support of conflict scenarios based on attachment styles and type of conflict resolution

Attachment Style	Effective Conflict Scenario	Ineffective Conflict Scenario
Less secure	M = 4.29	M = 3.57
	SD = .84	SD = .49
More secure	M = 3.86	M = 2.90
	SD = .83	SD = .62

DISCUSSION

The main effect of attachment our study detected supports the theory that an individual's attachment style predisposes him or her to think, feel, and behave in predictable ways in response to relationship events (Collins, 1996). The main effect of scenario suggests that individuals can distinguish between various conflict styles, perhaps regardless of his or her own conflict style. Results showed that insecurely attached individuals were more supportive of the scenario read, regardless of the conflict resolution style indicated. This lack of interaction between attachment styles and support could indicate a tendency among insecurely attached individuals to seek security with an attachment figure. This could suggest unconditional preference for cohesiveness in a relationship, rather than opposition among insecurely attached individuals. Future research should focus on further investigating the potential absence of this interaction. Greater participant size and diversity of participants may aid in detecting interactions and implications of attachment styles. Findings may indicate new approaches in couples' therapy for consideration of attachment style as well as a general increased awareness of the role that attachment style plays in the relationships and conflicts of the human lifespan.

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APPENDIX

Effective Conflict Scenario

Katie (age 20) and Mike (age 21), both students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, have been dating for one year. Friends of Katie and Mike describe their relationship as healthy and often joke with them about a marriage in their future.

Recently, a conflict has arisen in Katie and Mike's relationship. Katie has begun spending more time with her opposite sex friend, Travis. He is her lab partner in Chemistry 103. Katie states their relationship is completely platonic, with no romantic intentions whatsoever. Travis has invited Katie to a party at his house on Friday night. Many of Katie's friends will be attending and she is looking forward to it. When she mentions the party to Mike and extends the invitation to him, he tells her he can't go because he is scheduled to work until 10 p.m. that night. Katie still plans to go and this upsets Mike.

Katie asks Mike why he is upset. He responds that he is uncomfortable with Katie spending time with another guy that he doesn't really know. He says that he is afraid that Travis has or will develop romantic intentions. Katie says that she understands how he feels and would like to have a chance for Mike and Travis to get to know each other and for Mike to trust Travis. Katie expresses her interest in going to the party to hang out with Travis. Knowing how important the party is to her and not wanting to upset her, Mike asks Katie if she could wait for him to be done with work so that they can go together. Katie is frustrated and thinks his argument is silly, but decides to wait for Mike.

Ineffective Conflict Scenario

Katie (age 20) and Mike (age 21), both students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, have been dating for one year. Friends of Katie and Mike describe their relationship as healthy and often joke with them about a marriage in their future.

Recently, a conflict has arisen in Katie and Mike's relationship. Katie has begun spending more time with her opposite sex friend, Travis. He is her lab partner in Chemistry 103. Katie states their relationship is completely platonic, with no romantic intentions whatsoever. Travis has invited Katie to a party at his house on Friday night. Many of Katie's friends will be attending and she is looking forward to it. When she mentions the party to Mike and extends the invitation to him, he tells her he can't go because he is scheduled to work until 10 p.m. that night. Katie still plans to go and this upsets Mike.

She is sure that Mike is jealous of her friendship with Travis and thinks it's ridiculous. Katie wants to go to the party and hang out with Travis and she is not about to give that up just because Mike is being unreasonable. Knowing

that Mike usually calls when he is done with work on a Friday night, she plans to go to the party and when he calls, then she will tell him where she is. Katie is frustrated by Mike's reaction. She is bound and determined to have fun on a Friday night after a hard week of classes, regardless of how Mike feels.

Support Measure

Responses were indicated on a 7-point Likert-Type Scale

a. I find it relatively easy to get close to others.
b. I'm not very comfortable having to depend on other people.
c. I'm comfortable having others depend on me.
d. I rarely worry about being abandoned by others.
e. I don't like people getting too close to me.
f. I'm somewhat uncomfortable being too close to others.
g. I find it difficult to trust others completely.
h. I'm nervous whenever anyone gets too close me.
i. Others often want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.
j. Others are often reluctant to get as close as I would like.
k. I often worry that my partner(s) don't really love me.
l. I rarely worry about my partner(s) leaving me.
m. I often want to merge completely with others, and this desire sometimes scares them away.