

Perceptions of Relationship Conflict as Predicted by Adult Attachment and Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

Research on the attachment theory has contributed to a better understanding of the parental or caregiver relationship with their children. However, research on adult attachment and perceptions of relational conflict is minimal. This study looked at the relationship between adult attachment, self-esteem and romantic relationship conflict. Participants (N = 120) completed a questionnaire with measures for self-esteem, adult attachment, and perceptions of relationship conflict. Participants viewed a video clip of relational conflict of a couple in a committed relationship. After video completion, the participants completed a questionnaire measuring their perceptions of the conflict. A significant correlation between Adult Attachment and perception of relationship conflict was not found; a correlation between Adult Attachment and self-esteem was not found.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment theorists argue that human beings have a natural tendency to make and maintain lasting bonds (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Familiar and irreplaceable persons such as parental figures are the major source of these lasting bonds. Attachment behavior is most obvious when an individual is frightened or sick. During these times an individual will seek out the person they are attached to for security and comfort. According to Bowlby these bonds lead to emotional health and well-being throughout a one's lifespan (Bowlby, 1988).

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth devoted their lives to developing The Attachment Theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Ainsworth focused on individual differences when she developed her studies on the strange situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Her studies focused on the relationship between a mother and a child, specifically looking at the reaction of the child when the mother was absent from the child, as well as the child's reaction towards strangers when the mother was absent. Through her research with this "strange situation," Ainsworth detected a distinction between secure and insecure infants (Ainsworth, et. al., 1978). Securely attached babies were distressed by the absence of their mother. The stranger provided some comfort but the babies treated the stranger differently than their mother. Upon the return of the mother, securely attached babies actively sought out comfort from their mother. Two types of insecure attachment were also classified, anxious-avoidant and anxious-resistant insecure attachment. Anxious avoidant babies were indifferent towards their mother. When their mother left the room, they were comforted by the stranger because their distress from the absence of their mother was caused by being alone rather than the mother not being present. Anxious resistant babies were very distressed when the mother left the room and actively avoided the stranger. When their mother returned they sought her out but resisted contact. Attachment Theory has strongly and positively impacted the field of psychology; according to Jones (1996) the theory "has generated a rich and rapidly growing body of findings on the importance of early care giving experience in the development of psychopathology and in the promotion of adaptation (p. 5)."

Studying attachment allows a better understanding of the parental or caregiver relationship with their children. Research indicates that early attachments affect individuals' future relationships including romantic relationships. Secure attachment leads to the development of a child's trust in oneself and others. Lacking in either or both of these types of trust can have lasting effects on relationships that develop into adult life (Parkes, 1991).

Understanding how initial attachment affects future adult attachment will help to understand the importance of early childhood attachment. The proposed study will explore the effects of attachment styles and self-esteem on the perception of severity of romantic relationships conflict.

Adulthood and Attachment

Although numerous studies have been conducted on adult attachment, there is not yet a clear definition of what it means to be attached in adulthood. For example, there is not an agreement of what relationships are considered

adult attachments or how they are different or similar to childhood attachments (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999; Hazan, Gur-Yaish, & Campa, 2004; Main, 1999). Adult relationships are much more complex than infant-parent relationships and it is not known how to explain the numerous dimensions and functions of these adult relationships. Adults also have many more relationships than infants and it is not yet understood which relationships can be classified as attachment relationships. Much of the research on adult attachment is directed by the assumption that the same concept of the close emotional bond between parents and their children is responsible for the bond that develops between adults in emotionally intimate relationships. For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that adults who were secure in their romantic relationships were more likely to recall their childhood relationships with their parents affectionate, caring, and accepting. Many researchers also believe that the function of adult attachment is similar to the attachment in infancy in the sense that adult attachment assures the formation of reliable relationships that can be counted on for psychological and physical support, affect regulation, and reproductive success (Bretherton 1985; Crowell et al., 1999).

Self-esteem is commonly known as one's appraisal of self worth or simply someone's feelings about him/herself. Recently researchers have begun studying the relationship between adult attachment and self-esteem. Foster, Kernis and Goldman (2007) found that higher attachment anxiety was associated with lower self-esteem for both men and women. The researchers used the Relationship Scales Questionnaire consisting of 30 items to assess attachment type (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) and Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of adult attachment and self-esteem on perception of severity of relationship conflict. Adult attachment and self-esteem have not been measured in relation to perception of the severity of relationship conflict. Given that attachment concerns are greatest under conditions of uncertainty and stress, research is needed that explores variations in responses to relationship conflict. According to DeVito (2008), "interpersonal conflict is a disagreement between connected individuals who each want something that is incompatible with what the other wants (para.1)." Romantic relationship conflict is a form of interpersonal conflict – often reflecting high levels of intense emotion. The disagreements among the couple can vary from where to eat lunch to wanting to have children. Conflict is often signaled by negative emotion such as anger and confusion (Fisher, 1997). Disagreements among partners can cause stress and anxiety that could potentially threaten the existence of the romantic relationship.

It was hypothesized that individuals with secure attachment will perceive relationship conflict as having fewer severe consequences when compared to individuals with insecure attachment who will perceive the conflict as having more severe consequences. In addition, it was expected that individuals with high self-esteem would view relationship conflict as having less severe consequences. As previously indicated, individuals with a secure attachment are expected to have higher self-esteem.

METHOD

Participants

120 undergraduate students from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse via a convenience sampling of courses in which the instructors are willing to provide extra credit for participating. Both males and females participated, with ages ranging from 18 to 28 years.

Procedure and Materials

Participants provided informed consent before the study began. Participants completed a questionnaire containing measures of self-esteem, adult attachment and demographic information including questions regarding current relationship statuses. Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale was used to assess self-esteem. Adult Attachment was measured using the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) created by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994). This measure consists of 30 statements in which participants rate self-descriptions on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The RSQ statements are drawn from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment measure, Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) Relationship Questionnaire, and Collins and Read's (1990) Adult Attachment Scale.

After completing the questionnaire, participants watched a video exhibiting verbal relational conflict between a romantic couple. The couple was married 2.5 years seeking out counseling. Topics argued upon were communication issues amongst the couple, starting a family and sharing space in their house. After watching the video, each participant completed a questionnaire designed to measure perception of relationship conflict. Questions prompted participants to rate their perceptions of each individual in the couple and the overall quality and stability of the relationship. In addition, participants indicated the extent to which they believe the conflict will have long-term severe consequences for the couple. Finally, participants were debriefed as to the nature of the study and had the opportunity to ask any questions about the study via email.

RESULTS

Participants were given a mean score for attachment, self-esteem and their perception of relationship stability. Responses from the RSQ were combined to create the mean score for attachment (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Responses were combined from Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale to create a mean score for self-esteem. Additionally, 5 questions from the perception of relationship conflict questionnaire were used to give the participants a mean relational perception stability score. Questions used were: how would you rate the level of stability of this relationship, how would you rate the level of conflict between the couple depicted in the video, if the couple were to stay together rate the likelihood that the conflict would continue, how long do you think this couple will remain married and what is the likelihood of the relationship being successful. Data was analyzed using bivariate correlation, regression and between-group analysis. The perception of relationship stability total was correlated with participants' attachment score [$r(119) = 0.051, p > 0.05$]. The stability total was also correlated with participants' self-esteem total [$r(119) = -0.074, p > 0.05$]. A significant correlation was not found for either hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

Results from this study did not support the initial hypothesis that individuals with secure attachment would perceive relationship conflict as having fewer severe consequences when compared to individuals with insecure attachment who will perceive the conflict as having more severe consequences. Results also did not support a correlation between individuals with high self-esteem and their perception consequences of relationship conflict.

There was little variability in the mean attachment scores amongst the participants, which may indicate that the sample of participants could likely have skewed the results. Participants consisted of college students seeking extra credit for class. Being that they are college students it is likely that they come from homes where their parents care about them and send them to college suggesting that the attachment style is likely to sway more towards secure. The younger age of college students also suggests that many participants did not have as much experience in romantic relationship and relationship conflict.

There was little variability among responses of the relationship conflict. This suggests the research clip may have contributed to the limitations in the results. Perhaps the clip should have had one subject of discussion versus multiple, which could have swayed the participants to rank the conflict as being higher. Participant responses could also have been skewed because the couple was in therapy.

Further research may involve utilization of a different video of relationship conflict, perhaps one in which the setting is not in therapy to eliminate any potential biases. A wider sample of participants should be used.

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