



## Attachment and dysfunctional rumination: The mediating role of Emotional Intelligence abilities

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 8 February 2012

Received in revised form 12 May 2012

Accepted 21 May 2012

Available online 26 June 2012

#### Keywords:

Attachment style

Dysfunctional rumination

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional processing

### ABSTRACT

Integrating theories of attachment and maladaptive rumination, the present study tested the hypothesis that Emotional Intelligence (EI) abilities mediate relationships between insecure adult attachment orientations (Anxiety and Avoidance) and dysfunctional rumination (Brooding and Depression-related). The results showed that attachment anxiety and avoidance were positively associated with brooding and depression-related rumination, and EI abilities mediated these associations. Emotion perception and management abilities partially mediated the relationship of anxious attachment with brooding rumination, and fully mediated the relationship between avoidant attachment and brooding rumination. Using and understanding emotion abilities fully mediated links between anxious and avoidant attachment and depression related rumination. The results highlight the role of emotion-information processing in the adoption of maladaptive rumination in insecure attachment.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, research on adult attachment has significantly increased our understanding of the cognitive and emotional processes involved in psychological health and well-being (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 2001). A vibrant research literature on adult attachment examines the emotional processes activated when dealing with stressful events, and related depressive reactions. The present study extends this line of research by examining whether links between insecure attachment and dysfunctional rumination are mediated by emotional and cognitive processing associated with Emotional Intelligence (EI) abilities.

Dysfunctional rumination is defined as an excessive and maladaptive focus on negative feelings, their causes and consequences; it is a mode of responding to distress that involves repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and their possible causes and consequences (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Focusing on problems, on depressed mood, and on other components of negative self-experience has maladaptive and dysfunctional consequences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991).

According to Response Styles Theory (RST; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), ruminating on negative events increases the influence of negative cognitions on the person's depressive state, by amplifying

those negative aspects. A maladaptive cycle of negative thinking is thus maintained or even speeded up through this process (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Brooding and depression-related thoughts are two possible styles of maladaptive rumination (Trenor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Brooding rumination is defined as moody pondering, thinking "anxiously or gloomily" about events (Woolf, 1981, p. 140). Depression-related rumination is seen as a tendency towards developing or maintaining a depressive symptomatology.

According to attachment theory and research, dysfunctional rumination is related to adult attachment orientations. Whereas secure attachment is associated with flexible and suitable adjustment to emotional experience, by acknowledging distress and tolerating stressful events without being submerged by them (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998), attachment anxiety and avoidance are related to psychological distress and ruminative tendencies (e.g., emotional wondering; emotional distance from distress). Individuals high on attachment anxiety typically use hyper-activating strategies to regulate anticipated or felt distress, with the cognitive consequence of being hyper-vigilant towards negative emotion. Several studies have associated anxious attachment with emotion-focused coping (e.g., wishful thinking, self-blame, rumination; Ognibene & Collins, 1998). Individuals high on avoidant attachment, on the other hand, typically use deactivating strategies that limit accessibility to distress. For instance, Berant, Mikulincer, and Florian (2001) found that avoidant mothers at high levels of distress engage in dysfunctional emotion-focused coping. Recently, a handful of studies have established that inse-

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cure attachment is associated with dysfunctional rumination. In particular, Pearson, Watkins, Mullan, and Moberly (2010) found that current levels of depression fully accounted for the relationship between both anxious and avoidant attachment with brooding. Burnette, Taylor, Worthington, and Forsyth (2007) showed that insecure attachment orientations were positively correlated with angry rumination. Saffrey and Ehrenberg (2007) found that anxious persons had higher brooding levels that affected their relationship cognitions.

To gain further insight on the associations between insecure attachment and dysfunctional rumination, the present study focused on emotional and cognitive processes that may mediate such associations. We expected that the emotion-information processes reflected in Emotional Intelligence (EI) abilities – i.e., monitoring one's own and others' feelings, discriminating among them, and using this information to guide one's thinking and action (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) – would mediate associations between attachment and dysfunctional rumination.

People with high EI scores adapt well to stressful situations, whereas those with low EI adapt poorly, for instance by responding with depression, hopelessness and other dysfunctional strategies (Taylor, 2001). Studies have shown that high self-reported EI can influence responses to emotional arousal, and consequently play a role in promoting mental health (Gohm & Clore, 2002), and engaging in active emotional strategies (Fernández-Berrocal & Ramos, 2002). Higher levels of self-reported EI are also related to adaptive physiological and psychological strategies, such as low levels of intrusive thoughts (Ramos, Fernández-Berrocal, & Extremera, 2007; Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995), higher levels of distraction (Salovey, Stroud, Woolery, & Epel, 2002) and lower depression (Fernández-Berrocal, Salovey, Vera, Extremera, and Ramos, 2005).

Research on the relationships between emotional processes involved in EI abilities and well-being outcomes has however provided somewhat controversial results too (Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, Ruiz-Aranda, & Cabello, 2006; Goldenberg, Matheson, & Mantler, 2006; Zeidner & Olnick-Shemesh, 2010). On the one hand, EI abilities seem associated with successful ways of dealing with emotional issues, such as by reducing rumination following an emotional experience (Lanciano, Curci, & Zatton, 2010). Likewise, individuals with mental disorders were found to be characterized by low levels of the EI abilities of understanding and regulating emotion (Hertel, Schütz, & Lammers, 2009). On the other hand, the relationship between high EI abilities and low depression has been found to be mediated by gender (Salguero, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, *in press*). Moreover, EI seems to be associated with psychological well being more strongly when it is measured as a trait rather than as an ability (Goldenberg et al., 2006; Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007).

Finally, whereas several studies have examined cognitive and emotional facets of adult attachment organization, little research has directly investigated the relationship between attachment orientations and EI abilities (Kafetsios, 2004; Kim, 2005). Available evidence indicates that secure individuals are relatively accurate in perceiving facial expressions of negative emotions, whereas avoidant individuals have low emotion-decoding accuracy scores (Magai, Distel, & Liker, 1995). Additionally, secure individuals are less threatened by potentially distressing information; they can label, experience, and express felt emotions; when under stress, they seek support as an emotion regulation strategy, and use adaptive and functional strategies (e.g., Larose, Bernier, Soucy, & Duchesne, 1999). Conversely, anxious-preoccupied individuals exhibit ready access to painful memories and a paradoxical cognitive closure in response to positive affect induction. Finally, avoidant individuals exhibit defensive exclusion of painful thoughts and memories.

## 1.1. Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical accounts and empirical findings reported above, we expected that:

- H1. Attachment anxiety and avoidance will be positively associated with dysfunctional rumination.
- H2. EI abilities will be negatively related to insecure attachment and dysfunctional rumination.
- H3. Higher EI abilities will mediate associations between insecure attachment and dysfunctional rumination. As EI is conceived as comprising four abilities, we hypothesized a mediating role of all four EI abilities.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 157 female undergraduate students from a large state University in Italy ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.60$ ;  $SD = 2.04$ ). Participation in the study was voluntary.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Adult attachment orientations

The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was used to assess attachment orientations. It comprises a brief-sentence prototypical-description of each of four adult attachment orientations, i.e., secure, fearful, preoccupied, dismissing; e.g., “I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me”. The four orientations are rated on a seven-point scale. Following Griffin and Bartholomew (1994), the four adult attachment prototypes were converted into two dimensions representing attachment anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety dimension was computed by subtracting the sum of secure and dismissing scores from the sum of fearful and preoccupied scores. The avoidance dimension resulted from subtracting the sum of secure and preoccupied scores from the sum of fearful and dismissing scores.

#### 2.2.2. Ruminative style

The Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS) was used to assess the tendency to engage in dysfunctional rumination focused on sad or depressive feelings. It is formed by twenty-two items (1 = never; 4 = always) averaged into three composite indices (Trenor et al., 2003): Brooding (e.g. “Think ‘Why do I always react this way?’”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ), Depression-related rumination (e.g. “Think about how sad you feel”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ), and Reflection (e.g. “Write down what you are thinking and analyze it”; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$ ). Given the aim of the study, only the first two were considered for subsequent analyses.

#### 2.2.3. EI abilities

EI abilities were assessed by the Italian version of the Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; D'Amico and Curci, 2011; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). MSCEIT has eight tasks (141 items), presented in multiple-choice format, which provide a total EI assessment score and four branch scores: (a) Perceiving (assessment of the emotional content of faces, images, and pictures); (b) Using (knowledge about how different emotions can be effective in problem solving processes); (c) Understanding (knowledge of how emotions combine and change); and (d) Managing (effectiveness of different actions in achieving a specified emotional outcome involving oneself and others). MSCEIT scores were attributed by the Consensus scoring method, i.e., based on

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