



Emotional avoidance and rumination as mediators of the relation between adult attachment and emotional disclosure [☆]



Angela M. Garrison ^{a,*}, Jeffrey H. Kahn ^b, Steven A. Miller ^c, Eric M. Sauer ^a

^a Western Michigan University, Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology, United States

^b Illinois State University, Department of Psychology, United States

^c Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, Department of Psychology, United States

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ABSTRACT

The authors evaluated emotional avoidance as a mediator of the relation between attachment avoidance (i.e., fear of dependency) and emotional disclosure and rumination as a mediator of the relation between attachment anxiety (i.e., fear of rejection) and emotional disclosure. Two operational definitions were used for each of three variables – emotional avoidance, rumination, and emotional disclosure – such that hypotheses were tested on generalized self-appraisals and responses to specific emotional events. College students ($N = 116$) first completed generalized self-report measures of attachment, expressive suppression (i.e., emotional avoidance), rumination, and emotional-disclosure tendencies. Then, during a 7-day diary study, they provided daily reports of emotional avoidance, rumination, and disclosure concerning the day's most unpleasant event. Attachment avoidance was negatively related to disclosure tendencies and daily-event disclosure; emotional avoidance was supported as a mediator in the generalized self-report analyses. Attachment anxiety was positively related to both measures of rumination, and daily-event rumination was positively related to daily-event disclosure, but mediation was not supported in either analysis. The findings suggest implications for theories of attachment and emotion regulation.

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1. Introduction

In Western cultures, when people are upset, they often look for someone with whom to talk. Such *emotional disclosure* (i.e., talking about one's distress) often increases in concordance with the amount of distress experienced, such that emotionally intense experiences are disclosed more than emotionally trivial experiences (Cano, Leong, Williams, May, & Lutz, 2012; Garrison, Kahn, Sauer, & Florczak, 2012). Although disclosure of one's distress is not always adaptive, in general, emotional disclosure tends to be beneficial (Frattaroli, 2006; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001). For example, emotional disclosure to others can reduce intrusive thoughts (Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000) and reduce the intensity of the emotion (Zech & Rimé, 2005).

Despite the advantages of disclosing distress, many individuals do not disclose distress even in the face of an emotionally intense

experience. That is, individuals differ in their tendency to disclose personally distressing information across situations. Low-disclosing individuals experience poorer well-being than individuals who tend to disclose distress, including lower levels of social support and self-esteem and higher levels of depression and loneliness (see Kahn, Hucke, Bradley, Glinski, & Malak, 2012). Because of these negative outcomes, there is value in examining the processes that are associated with problematic levels of emotional disclosure.

1.1. Attachment orientation and emotional disclosure

Attachment theory may provide valuable insight into understanding individual differences in emotional disclosure. Among adults, attachment is typically conceptualized along two dimensions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998): *attachment avoidance* (i.e., fear of dependency, need for self-reliance) and *attachment anxiety* (i.e., fear of rejection, need for approval). Individuals high in attachment anxiety or avoidance (i.e., those with insecure attachment) have distinct patterns of emotion regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), and these patterns of emotion regulation have theoretical implications for emotional disclosure.

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* Corresponding author. Address: Western Michigan University, Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology, 1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5226, United States.

E-mail address: angela.m.garrison@wmich.edu (A.M. Garrison).

1.1.1. Attachment avoidance

Attachment avoidance develops when an attachment figure is not available. Because it does no good to engage in attachment behaviors, individuals high in attachment avoidance deactivate their distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). For example, when distressed they may use expressive suppression (Gross & John, 2003) whereby they inhibit the behavioral expression of distress. Expressive suppression and emotional disclosure, while strongly, negatively correlated, are not merely opposites (Kahn et al., 2012). Behavioral expression typically occurs as part of the momentary experience of emotion (Averill, 1997), whereas talking about an emotion often occurs well after the emotion episode. Thus, expressive suppression may be viewed as the inhibition of nonverbal expressions of emotion in the moment, whereas emotional disclosure refers to the verbal sharing of emotion at some later point in time. Because individuals high in attachment avoidance are attempting to avoid distress, they would have the opportunity to engage in expressive suppression before they had the opportunity to engage in emotional disclosure. Thus, emotional avoidance/suppression is a potential mediating variable in the relation between attachment avoidance and emotional disclosure.

Empirical research supports the bivariate associations in this theory-based mediation model. First, there is evidence that avoidantly attached individuals use suppression as an emotion regulation strategy (Caldwell & Shaver, 2012; Fraley & Shaver, 1997). For example, when Roisman, Tsai, and Chiang (2004) asked participants to discuss potentially negative childhood experiences, only the avoidantly attached individuals showed increases in physiological activity that signified effortful behavioral inhibition. Second, expressive suppression is strongly, negatively associated with emotional-disclosure tendencies (Kahn et al., 2012). Finally, a negative association between attachment avoidance and emotional-disclosure tendencies has been supported empirically (Garrison et al., 2012; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). Unfortunately, none of these studies has examined the possible mediating relation between attachment avoidance and emotional disclosure, as mediated by expressive suppression. Doing so was one purpose of this research.

1.1.2. Attachment anxiety

Unlike attachment avoidance, the emotion-regulation strategy involved with attachment anxiety is hyperactivation, that is, the exaggeration of attachment strategies such as monitoring of relationship partners and proximity seeking (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This develops because an attachment figure is nearby but is not consistently responsive to the attachment behaviors; thus, the behaviors are amplified. However, because anxiously attached individuals fear rejection, they may also engage in suppression which, if ineffective, will result in rumination (Liverant, Kamholz, Sloan, & Brown, 2011). Indeed, rumination is a common form of hyperactivation found among anxiously attached individuals (along with other forms of emotion-focused coping; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Rumination involves repetitively thinking about distressing emotional experiences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). For example, Saffrey and Ehrenberg (2007) found that individuals high in attachment anxiety experienced increased levels of both general rumination and relationship-specific rumination following a recent relationship breakup. Consistent with the theory of social sharing, this rumination, in turn, prompts individuals to share their distress with others (Rimé, 2009). Thus, attachment theory and the theory of social sharing combine to suggest that, when faced with a distressing event, individuals high in attachment anxiety would engage in heightened rumination which would, in turn, increase their likelihood of engaging in emotional disclosure.

Despite the plausibility of this theoretical statement, much of the empirical research on attachment anxiety and emotional disclosure has found a small, negative association (e.g., Pistole, 1993; Wei et al., 2005), not a positive one as theory would predict. We believe that this divergence between theory and research is a function of the conceptualization of emotional disclosure as a stable individual-difference tendency versus as an act in response to a specific event. For example, Wei et al. measured emotional-disclosure tendencies using generalized self-reports and found attachment anxiety to be negatively related to emotional disclosure. Generalized self-reports likely tap into a lifetime of memories of being unable to disclose distress because of inconsistent attachment figures as well as cognitive expectations that disclosure is not always possible. By contrast, Tan, Overall, and Taylor (2012) measured the disclosure of specific events that had occurred over the past week, and they found a *positive* association between attachment avoidance and disclosure. Similarly, in a 7-day diary study, Garrison et al. (2012) found a positive association between attachment avoidance and the disclosure of intense emotional events that occurred earlier in the day. Thus, understanding the association between attachment anxiety and emotional disclosure – including the potential mediating role of rumination – requires two methodological perspectives. The analysis of generalized self-reports (which partly assess expectations about disclosure) and the analysis of reports of recent emotional events (which assess actual behavior) may show differing associations between attachment anxiety and emotional disclosure as well as divergent mediating effects. Thus, whereas we posit rumination to serve as a mediator variable in the relation between attachment anxiety and emotional disclosure, we believe that the methodology (generalized self-reports versus reports of recent events) will, in essence, function as a moderator variable.

1.2. The current study

The purpose of the current study was to test (a) emotional avoidance (e.g., expressive suppression) as a mediator between attachment avoidance and emotional disclosure and (b) rumination as a mediator between attachment anxiety and emotional disclosure. Given the conceptual differences between emotional-disclosure tendencies and emotional disclosure as a response to a specific event, we collected both generalized self-reports (which characterize how respondents appraise their typical experiences) and daily reports over a 7-day period (which characterize what respondents report actually doing on a daily basis). Our hypotheses utilizing generalized self-reports were that expressive suppression would mediate the negative relation between attachment avoidance and disclosure tendencies and that rumination would mediate the negative relation between attachment anxiety and disclosure tendencies. Our hypotheses utilizing daily reports were that, after accounting for the intensity of the event, emotional avoidance would mediate the negative relation between attachment avoidance and emotional disclosure, and rumination would mediate the *positive* relation between attachment anxiety and emotional disclosure. We note that these hypotheses may essentially be construed as a test of moderated mediation, whereby we expected the mediation results to differ between the two methodological perspectives (i.e., methodology is the moderator variable).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 116 undergraduate students (73 women, 43 men) from the midwestern United States. Most (78%) of the

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