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## All you need is love? Strengths mediate the negative associations between attachment orientations and life satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

Several studies link attachment insecurities with lower levels of life satisfaction. Positive psychology studies link character strengths, especially those associated with social interactions (i.e., love and gratitude) or optimism (hope and zest), with higher levels of life satisfaction. We hypothesized that the negative associations between insecure attachment and life satisfaction is mediated by low endorsement of such strengths. In this study 394 individuals completed the ECR measure of attachment orientations, the VIA-IS measure of virtues and character strengths, and the SWLS measure of life satisfaction. Results showed that most strengths were negatively associated with both avoidant and anxious attachment orientations. A bootstrapping procedure revealed that: (a) Love, zest, gratitude and hope fully mediated the association between avoidance and lower life satisfaction. (b) Hope, curiosity and perspective partially mediated the association between attachment anxiety and life satisfaction. These findings suggest that the mechanisms underlying life satisfaction are different for avoidant and for anxious individuals, although hope is prevalent for both attachment orientations. The theoretical and clinical implications of the findings are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

There is growing interest in life satisfaction and its antecedents in the recent years (e.g., Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008). Papers published in psychology and other disciplines show that life satisfaction is associated with physical health and lower substance abuse, less unemployment and financial strains, better ability to meet personal standards, optimism/hope, self efficacy, more social support and less behavioral problems, and higher interpersonal and cognitive functioning (Dolan et al., 2008; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009).

Research has also shown that for some individuals it is more difficult to achieve life satisfaction than for others. Such individual differences were related to age, gender, and ethnicity (Dolan et al., 2008; Proctor et al., 2009), but also to personality factors. In fact, Proctor et al. (2009) argued that “personality and temperament variables were found to account for a large portion of the individual variance in well being” (p. 587), basing their claim on several youth studies (e.g., Emmons & Diener, 1985). More specifically, DeNeve and Cooper’s (1998) meta-analysis of well-being in adulthood showed that the traits most closely associated with it were repressive-defensiveness, trust, emotional stability, locus of control, desire for control, hardiness, positive affectivity, self esteem, and tension.

#### 1.1. Attachment orientations and well-being

Interestingly, the traits most highly associated with well-being, repressive-defensiveness and emotional stability, were also found to be highly associated with attachment orientations (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment orientations reflect internal working models of one’s self, others, and relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Bowlby, 1982). High attachment anxiety characterizes individuals who are anxious, clingy and dependent on their relationship partners, have negative representations of themselves (i.e., lower self-esteem), are preoccupied about their interpersonal relationships, and fear abandonment. High attachment avoidance characterizes individuals who are compulsively self-reliant, avoid intimacy in close relationships, tend not to trust others and usually prefer to do things alone (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007 for review).

Several studies have shown that these two dimensions of attachment orientations (anxiety and avoidance) were directly associated with higher levels of emotional distress and negative affect (Simpson, 1990), higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of emotional well-being (Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994; Priel & Shamai, 1995), higher loneliness, hostility, and psychosomatic symptoms (Hazan & Shaver, 1990).

In this paper we suggest that the underlying reason for these negative associations between attachment orientations and well-being (and more specifically – life satisfaction) may stem

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from avoidant and anxious individuals' lower tendency to endorse certain culturally valued human strengths, due to their negative basic perceptions of themselves and/or of others in the world. More specifically, we believe that character strengths, which are highly related to life satisfaction, mediate these negative associations.

### 1.2. Character strengths and life satisfaction

Character strengths are “positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They exist in degrees and can be measured as individual differences” (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004 p. 603). Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification and an assessment tool of character strengths, which includes 24 character strengths, each related to one of the following six broader virtues: (a) wisdom and knowledge (includes the strengths of creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, and perspective/wisdom); (b) courage (including bravery, honesty, persistence, and zest); (c) humanity (including kindness, love, and social intelligence); (d) justice (including teamwork, fairness, and leadership); (e) temperance (including forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation); and (f) transcendence (including appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness).

Almost all of these 24 character strengths were shown to promote positive outcomes such as competency and life satisfaction (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Love, hope, curiosity, zest and gratitude were the strengths most highly linked to life satisfaction in a few studies (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007).

We hypothesized that attachment orientations would be negatively associated with character strengths. Because high attachment anxiety and avoidance generally reflect lack of trust in oneself, in others (i.e., in the world), and in relationships (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), we predicted that highly avoidant and anxious individuals will be less inclined to endorse strengths related to these facets. Thus, avoidance would be negatively associated with endorsement of “social strengths”, related to interactions and relationships with others (i.e., social intelligence, kindness, love, teamwork, gratitude and forgiveness), and of strengths related to positive thoughts about others and about the future (i.e., hope and perhaps zest). We thought that anxiety would be negatively associated with strengths that indicate emotional balance (i.e., self regulation and perspective), and those that reflect joy from seeking new information and experiences, that anxious individuals fear (i.e., curiosity and love of learning).

Previous studies showed some indirect support of these predictions, by revealing associations between attachment orientations and personality traits that are conceptually related to certain character strengths. For example: anxious and avoidant individuals expressed lower levels of self esteem (e.g., Davila & Bradbury, 2001) and social and academic competence (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). They displayed lower trust in others and perceived others as more disgusting, hurtful and disapproving (Avihou, 2006). Both attachment orientations were also associated with lower relationship satisfaction measured in various ways (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Moreover, some links have already been found between specific character strengths and attachment orientations: In their Israeli-American study, Mikulincer, Shaver, and Slav (2006) found that avoidance was associated with less dispositional gratitude and with experiencing gratitude as a negative feeling. Attachment anxiety was associated with a more ambivalent experience of gratitude-arousing interactions, as anxious individuals often felt that they were unworthy of other people's kindness. In a similar way, these researchers found that avoidance was associated with a lower tendency to forgive others, and anxiety was associated

with experiencing forgiveness in conjunction with lowered self-worth.

These findings, suggest that the attachment orientations that develop early in life (Bowlby, 1982) affect the endorsement and use of certain character strengths in adulthood, that in turn may have an effect on individuals' life satisfaction (as suggested by the empirical evidence described above). Thus, certain character strengths may in fact mediate the negative associations between attachment avoidance and anxiety and life satisfaction.

We hypothesized that this mediation will be relevant especially for avoidant attachment: As mentioned above, avoidant individuals' lack of trust in others leads to their avoidance of intimacy, disclosure, and involvement in meaningful relationships. They rely mostly on themselves, and feel threatened by signs of love, care, and closeness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Two of the strengths most highly related conceptually to these characteristics, love and gratitude, were among the five strengths most highly correlated with life satisfaction in recent studies in the US, Switzerland (e.g., Peterson et al., 2007), and Israel (Littman-Ovadia & Lavy, under revision). Thus, we hypothesize that these two strengths mediate the negative association between avoidance and life satisfaction, although other strengths may also have such a mediating role. Even more specifically, we think that the strength of love will be the most important mediator of this link. Defined as the capacity to love and be loved (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004 for a broader definition), love reflects the basic abilities that avoidant individuals discard, and that threaten them. We think that their failure to endorse it may be the source of their unhappiness.

For attachment anxiety, our hypotheses were less specific. We speculated that it would be harder to find specific strengths that mediate the association between anxiety and life satisfaction. If such strengths would be found, they would be related to emotion regulation and stability (i.e., self-regulation), and to anxious individuals' fear of exploration and experiencing new things (reviewed at Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), leading to distortion of perspective and suppression of curiosity- one of the strengths highly associated with life satisfaction in previous studies (e.g., Park et al., 2004). Their general fear that others will disappoint them may also lead to low levels of hope, another strength that was found to be highly associated with life satisfaction, and thus may also mediate the association between anxiety and life satisfaction.

The above hypotheses are based on the links between character strengths and life satisfaction found in large American and European samples and in a smaller Israeli sample (mentioned above). However, as this is one of the first studies to explore this association in Israel, the results may be different. Thus, despite having specific hypotheses, we allow exploration of other mediation routes based on the findings.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The study surveyed 394 Jewish Israeli individuals (147 men, 243 women, 4 unspecified), aged 18–67 (Mean = 25.99, SD = 6.82).

### 2.2. Materials

Participants' strengths were measured using the VIA inventory of strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA is a self-report questionnaire, assessing the endorsement of 24 character strengths. Ten items are used to evaluate each strength, resulting in a total of 240 items (e.g., “Being able to come up with new and different ideas is one of my strong points” for creativity; “I never quit a task before it is done” for persistence). Participants

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