



## Autonomy–proximity imbalance: An attachment theory perspective on intrusiveness in romantic relationships

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### ABSTRACT

We examined associations between two kinds of attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) and intrusiveness in couple relationships. One hundred fifty-six adults completed measures of attachment insecurities and variables related to intrusiveness (engaging in intrusive behavior, perceiving a partner as intrusive, subjective experiences of being intrusive, and reacting to intrusive behavior). Attachment anxiety was associated with more intrusive behavior, more ambivalent reactions to partner intrusiveness, and greater emotionality when being intrusive. Avoidance was associated with perceiving a partner as intrusive, reacting critically and establishing distance in response to partner intrusiveness, and feeling concerned and caring when being intrusive. Results and their implications are discussed from an attachment theory perspective.

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### 1. Introduction

Autonomy and relatedness, or interdependence, are important issues in most close relationships (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Achieving balance between them is often challenging yet necessary for partners' mutual satisfaction (e.g., Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Here, we focus on one kind of imbalance between autonomy and relatedness – intrusiveness – viewed from the perspective of attachment theory. This theory is a broad and extensively researched framework for understanding normative interpersonal processes as well as individual differences in couple relationships (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for reviews). In the study reported here we explored individual differences in the behavioral and experiential processes involved in regulating closeness and autonomy in couple relationships.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) conceptualizes human motivation in terms of several biologically evolved “behavioral systems,” including attachment, exploration, caregiving, and sex. According to the theory, the attachment system evolved to respond to threats and stresses by causing a person to seek protection and comfort from familiar caregivers. If proximity-seeking reduces the threat and distress, the threatened person's mind turns to activities

governed by other behavioral systems such as exploration. Engaging in what Bowlby called exploration leads to increased cognitive, behavioral, and social skills, which contribute over time to the development of secure autonomy. When a person has regulated emotions effectively by relying on security-providing “attachment figures” (relationship partners who provide a “safe haven” and a “secure base for exploration”; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), then the person can alternate, at will, between comfortable closeness and self-confident autonomy.

Problems develop when a primary caregiver is either self-preoccupied and intrusive or intimacy-avoidant and unsupportive. Voluminous research, both correlational and longitudinal, indicates that a child raised under these conditions develops what Bowlby (1982) called attachment insecurity (see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, for reviews). Early in the history of attachment research, Ainsworth et al. (1978) conceptualized the major forms of insecurity in terms of two categories, anxious and avoidant attachment, and discovered that the anxious, clingy pattern was associated with interactions with a self-preoccupied and intrusive attachment figure, whereas the avoidant, compulsively self-reliant pattern was associated with interactions with a caregiver who was distant and unsupportive. A third insecure pattern, described and labeled “disorganized” by Main and Solomon (1990), is characterized by conflicting components of the other two insecure patterns.

Personality and social psychologists who study attachment-related mental processes and behavior in adolescents and adults

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(e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) have designed self-report measures of the two major dimensions identified by Ainsworth et al. (1978), attachment anxiety and avoidance, which reflect two learned ways to regulate the attachment behavioral system: *hyperactivation* (vigilance regarding a partner's interest or disinterest and clingy, intrusive behavior) and *deactivation* (avoidance of intimacy and strong efforts to remain self-reliant). These patterns have been empirically associated with theoretically predicted defensive strategies, relational behaviors, and indicators of poor personal and social adjustment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

According to Pistole (1994), the anxiously attached person's desire for extreme closeness and the avoidant person's extreme self-reliance often disrupt or damage couple relationships because they interfere with the negotiation of mutually satisfying closeness and autonomy. Pistole suggested that avoidant individuals' distancing behavior interferes with their own (assumed) needs for closeness and with their responsiveness to their partners' needs for closeness. In contrast, anxious individuals' extreme need for closeness and fear of abandonment can lead to intrusive behavior and to misinterpretations of partners' moves toward autonomy as signs of rejection. Pistole's analysis was empirically supported (Feeney, 1999; Feeney & Noller, 1991).

In the study reported here, we sought to deepen our understanding of insecure people's difficulties in regulating closeness and autonomy in romantic relationships by examining the issue of *intrusiveness*. Intrusiveness has been mentioned in descriptions of pathological relationships, mainly pursuer–distancer relationships (in which one person seeks more closeness and the other backs away) and pursuer–pursuer relationships (in which the two partners both desire closeness but seek it in ways that do not result in the desired outcome). These two patterns are common in cases of marital breakdown and divorce as well as cases of domestic violence, because one partner intensively seeks closeness and reassurance and the other responds with either intensified efforts to maintain autonomy and independence or awkward efforts to achieve extreme closeness and dependence (e.g., Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Betchen & Ross, 2000; Fogarty, 1979).

Intrusiveness in these kinds of relationships is thought to be manifested in various ways, such as attempts to monitor and influence a partner's attitudes and behaviors, invade the partner's self-boundaries, make unsuitable relational demands (Lavy, Mikulincer, Shaver, & Gillath, 2009), and be clingy, controlling, and critical (e.g., Savage, 2000). Intrusiveness in couple relationships is reportedly common in couples seeking counseling (Betchen, 2005), and in extreme cases it may provoke domestic violence (e.g., Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Dutton, 2007). However, intrusiveness is also quite common in nonpathological relationships (Lavy et al., 2009).

Aside from preliminary, mainly clinical studies (e.g., Green & Werner, 1996; Werner, Green, Greenberg, Browne, & McKenna, 2001), little is known about how intrusiveness operates in more typical romantic relationships. In the study reported here, we sought to examine how attachment insecurities are related to (1) intrusive behavior in romantic relationships, (2) perceptions of a partner's intrusive behavior, (3) reactions to a partner's intrusive behavior, and (4) the subjective experience of being intrusive.

Regarding the first and second issues, adult attachment research suggests that anxiously attached individuals are especially clingy, controlling, and preoccupied by an intense desire for closeness. In contrast, avoidant individuals are especially vigilant and self-protective with regard to a partner's attempts to increase closeness (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). Thus, we hypothesized that anxious individuals would be more intrusive, and avoidant individuals would be more sensitive to threats to their autonomy and would therefore tend to view their partners as intrusive.

With regard to the third research issue, we hypothesized that reactions to a partner's intrusive behavior would differ among individuals with different forms of attachment insecurity. For anxious individuals, there were two possibilities: (1) They might react positively to a partner's intrusiveness, being grateful for signs of interest and involvement. But if the intrusive behavior was perceived as critical or unpleasant, (2) they might behave as they often do in response to relationship conflict, displaying and expressing strong negative emotions. From avoidant individuals we expected distancing responses to partner intrusiveness, responses that restored personal boundaries and a sense of autonomy.

Regarding the fourth research issue, we hypothesized that people with different attachment orientations would have different subjective experiences of being intrusive. Specifically, we expected more anxiously attached people to experience more negative thoughts and feelings when being intrusive, because their intrusive behavior would be motivated by fear of rejection and a perceived shortage of partner affection. We were unsure what to predict about avoidant individuals' experiences, because intrusiveness should be an unusual form of behavior for them.

In this study, participants' attachment anxiety and avoidance were assessed with the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998). Their intrusiveness, perceptions of their partners' intrusiveness, reactions to partner intrusiveness and subjective experiences of being intrusive were assessed with new questionnaires designed especially for that purpose. We expected attachment anxiety to be associated with more intrusive behavior, more ambivalent reactions to a partner's intrusiveness (a combination of negative emotions and willingness to accept the partner's behavior rather than risk jeopardizing the relationship), and more negative experiences of being intrusive. We expected avoidant attachment to be associated with more perceived intrusive behavior by the partner and distancing reactions to a partner's intrusiveness.

We also considered possible gender differences, because gender roles assign greater proximity-seeking motivation to women and greater autonomy-seeking motivation to men (e.g., Schmitt, 2008; Werner et al., 2001). We hypothesized that men would perceive their female partners as more intrusive, and that men's negative reactions to intrusiveness would be stronger.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

One hundred fifty-six adult Israeli volunteers (76 men, 80 women, aged 18–42, mean = 25.8, SD = 3.66) with 12–20 years of education (mean = 14.61, SD = 2.35) participated in the study. Most were university students who completed the survey during or after various classes (e.g., psychology, math). Some were acquaintances of students who voluntarily completed the survey and returned it to the researchers. Participants did not receive monetary compensation. Over 90% of the participants were involved in a romantic relationship that had lasted at least three months at the time of the study; the other 10% were asked to describe a previous relationship that had lasted at least three months.

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

Questionnaires were completed in a random order by individuals tested either separately or in small groups. Attachment insecurities were assessed with the ECR, which includes two groups of 18 items, one measuring attachment anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned") and the other measuring avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down"). Each item was

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