



What can you do for me? Attachment style and motives underlying esteem for partners ☆

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Abstract

Two event-contingent diary studies investigated whether people of different attachment styles value partners for different reasons (e.g., self-esteem regulation, closeness). In Study 1, preoccupied individuals more positively regarded partners when they provided help with self-regulatory functions, and they did so to a greater extent than either secure or dismissing-avoidant individuals. In Study 2, preoccupied and fearful-avoidant individuals were more likely to want to gain approval from partners. Also, when preoccupied individuals obtained partner approval, they valued their partner more, and they did so to a greater extent than secure individuals. Continuous attachment measures produced weaker findings, but people higher in anxious-ambivalence generally showed patterns similar to those found for preoccupied individuals. Findings suggest that the process by which people come to positively view their partners may vary depending on their attachment-related goals.

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1. Introduction

Most people are motivated to form relationships with others. This assertion is hardly controversial, and it appears in many psychological theories (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Epstein, 1990; Maslow, 1968; Murray, 1938). The reasons why people value their relationship partners, however, are less clear. Although several motives may exist for forming and maintaining interpersonal bonds and for valuing relationship partners (e.g., see Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the present work focuses on two: a desire for closeness or belonging and a desire for help with self-esteem regulation.

Discussions of the goals of wanting closeness and wanting self-regulatory help appear in several different places in the psychological literature. A desire for closeness, relatedness, or belonging has been identified as a fundamental human need by a variety of psychological theorists (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Epstein, 1990; Maslow, 1968). A sense of belonging comes from interacting with and feeling close to others and leads people to value those others (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A desire for help with self-regulation is highlighted in the research on social support. People turn to others for support and comfort in times of distress, and such interactions can help people to regulate their emotions (Rook, 1987; Rook & Pietromonaco, 1987) and bolster feelings of self-competence and self-worth (Markus & Cross, 1990). Likewise, theory and research on attachment processes (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Murray & Holmes, 2000; Reis & Patrick, 1996) emphasize that close others play a role in regulating feelings about the self and in achieving a sense of “felt security” (Ainsworth, 1989; Sroufe & Waters, 1977).

The distinction between these two motives is captured within the psychoanalytic literature on self psychology. In self psychology terms, another person can function as an “object” or a “self-object” (Kohut, 1977, 1984). An interaction partner as an “object” provides a sense of closeness or pleasure, which can come from companionship and shared activities (Rook, 1987) that are independent of any self-regulatory functions the partner might serve. For example, two people may positively regard each other because they feel happy and relaxed when doing activities together (e.g., going out to eat or going to a movie). In this case, they may like each other for reasons that are unrelated to enhancing or maintaining their sense of self, and intimacy in the relationship might serve the function of providing a sense of closeness and connectedness, independent of self-regulatory needs. An interaction partner, as a “self-object,” provides help with regulating feelings about the self. In this case, the relationship serves the function of enhancing or restoring positive feelings about the self, or providing “esteem support” (Wills, 1985). While the desire to belong and to derive pleasure from interacting with others appears to be a widely held (and possibly

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