



Perceived social support as an offshoot of attachment style[☆]

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Abstract

Questionnaires were completed by college students ($N=182$), with the purpose of examining the role of adult attachment and social support as predictors of psychological distress. Factor analyses of the attachment and social support measures yielded three factors for attachment (Preoccupation, Avoidance, Dismissiveness), and two for social support (Intimate, Casual). Both types of support were significant zero-order predictors of distress, but intimate support effects were rendered non-significant when attachment style was controlled for. In contrast, attachment style (Preoccupation) exerted a significant additional effect after social support was controlled for. Analyses of interactions suggested that Preoccupation reduces the effect of Intimate Support, while Avoidance enhances the effect of Casual Support. These results support the hypothesis that perceived social support, and particularly Intimate Support is, to a large extent, a by-product of attachment style, but also point towards possible moderator effects of attachment style upon the impact of support. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Understanding the causes and correlates of emotional distress has always been one of the major goals of psychological research. A good portion of this effort has been invested in exploring the contribution of personal relationships to adaptation in daily life, from widely divergent

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theoretical standpoints (e.g. Hobfoll, 1998; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1951; Sullivan, 1953). Two of the most relevant theoretical concepts in this quest have been social support and attachment.

A huge number of studies are available in the literature demonstrating that social support is negatively related to emotional distress (see Schwarzer & Leppin, 1989, for a meta-analysis), even though the actual causal path is still controversial (Dooley, 1985; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991). One of the factors adding complexity to the research on social support is the multifaceted nature of the construct (Barrera, 1986): social support has been conceptualised as the existence of some kind of intimate tie (e.g. Brown, Bhrolcháin, & Harris, 1975), a structural property of one's personal social network (e.g. Silberfeld, 1978), the provision of specific types of assistance (e.g. Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981), the feeling that support would be available should it become necessary (e.g. Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983), the satisfaction with received social support (e.g. Sarason et al., 1983), etc. Most of the studies comparing the different facets of the social support concept, however, indicate that perceived support, the broad perception that satisfactory support is available, constitutes the crux of the concept (Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987) and is most strongly related to adaptation (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991).

Sarason, Pierce, and Sarason (1990) define perceived social support as the set of "feelings that you are loved, valued, and unconditionally accepted" (p. 110). In addition, it is commonly found that perceived social support remains relatively stable across extended periods of time, suggesting that it would best be seen as an individual difference variable (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986). Other studies have shown that perceived social support is the result of the operation of cognitive personality variables such as attributional style, locus of control, or relational schemas (Yee, Santoro, Paul, & Rosenbaum, 1996). Apparently, these variables influence the perceived supportiveness of support behaviours received (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1992), the ease with which supportive behaviours are recalled (Lakey & Cassady, 1990), and also the attributions individuals provide for unsupportive behaviours (Ross, Lutz, & Lakey, 1999).

Meanwhile, interpersonal schemata of the kind hypothesised to explain social support effects have been given particular attention by attachment theory, originated by John Bowlby (1973, 1980a, 1980b). In line with previous theoretical statements going back at least to Freud (1912/1961), Bowlby claimed that early meaningful relationships lead to the formation of "internal working models" of self and others, and that these models are the basis for perception, feeling and behaviour in all later meaningful relationships, extending into adulthood. The study of individual differences in internal working models, reflected upon behaviour patterns labelled "attachment styles", was developed by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978). Using observational methods with infants, these authors identified three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent. This typology was later applied to adults in a study by Hazan and Shaver (1987), in which the secure style was characterised as feeling comfortable with closeness and not worrying about abandonment, the avoidant style as feeling uncomfortable with closeness and thus keeping distance in relationships, and the anxious/ambivalent (or "pre-occupied") style as showing intense desire for closeness, together with worries about partners' feelings and the possibility of abandonment.

A purported improvement on this typology was proposed by Bartholomew (1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), who differentiated two avoidant styles. Individuals with the fearful-avoidant style admit desire for closeness and intimacy, but interpersonal distrust and fear of rejection lead to avoidance of closeness. The dismissive-avoidant style is characterised by the

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