



## The relationship between adult romantic attachment anxiety, negative life events, and compliance

Kim E. Drake<sup>\*</sup>, David Sheffield, Deborah Shingler

Department of Psychology, University of Derby, UK

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of attachment anxiety and the experience of intense life adversity in the development of compliance. It also seeks to specify which types of negative life events may be especially relevant in encouraging compliant behaviour, and whether gender may moderate this effect. Participants ( $N = 125$ ) completed the Gudjonsson Compliance Scale, the Life Events Questionnaire and the Relationship Scale Questionnaire. Contrary to previous research, attachment anxiety and the reported experience of intense negative life events appear to be associated with significantly lower compliance scores. Gender appears not to moderate this relationship. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses show that inter-personal negative life events and attachment anxiety together predict lower compliance scores. This is the first study to show that adult romantic attachment anxiety and the experience of intense negative life events can also lead to psychological resilience, reducing the probability of false confessions and statements during police interview.

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### 1. Introduction

The Memorandum of Good Practice (1992) and the [Home Office guidelines on Achieving Best Evidence](#) (2002, 2008) have led to a gradual shift in interviewing practice within England and Wales. Despite this change for the better though, psychological vulnerability during police interview may still be an issue ([Kebbell & Gilchrist, 2004](#)). Concern has also been expressed regarding the use of external pressure during police questioning in countries beyond the United Kingdom (e.g. the interviewer indicating that some responses are wrong; [Milne & Bull, 1999](#)). While some of the police forces are now trying to reduce the use of inappropriate tactics, robust questioning/interviewing – linked to compliant behaviour and false statements and confessions – may still be commonplace in many countries ([Bull & Milne, 2004](#); [Kassin et al., 2010a, 2010b](#)).

Compliance can be a serious psychological vulnerability during interview ([Gudjonsson, 2003](#); [Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Lydsdottir, & Olafsdottir, 2008](#)). Research into understanding the pathways to and specific indicators of compliance is required, as such work will open up avenues for the development of improved interventions and psychological assessment methods for the police and courts. Suspects scoring high on compliance, who ended up being wrongfully convicted, have presented themselves throughout history (e.g. Birmingham Six, Guildford Four,

Judith Ward, and Alfred Allen among others), yet are the least well understood in terms of how such individuals have come to be malleable and less able to cope with the pressure of questioning ([Gudjonsson, 2010](#)).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the background factors of interviewees that may increase the risk of developing compliant tendencies. It specifically focuses on investigating the relationship between attachment anxiety, the reported experience of intense negative life events and compliance, and examines which types of negative life events may be especially relevant (e.g. independent, dependent and/or personal negative life events). This will add to previous research into compliance (see [Gudjonsson et al., 2008](#)) and allow environmental factors, important in the development of compliant tendencies, to become more specified ([Jaffee & Price, 2007](#)).

Research shows that psychologically vulnerable individuals (including those scoring high on interrogative suggestibility and compliance) seem to have an endogenous tendency towards heightened distress and to score high on attachment anxiety (see [Donnellan et al., 2007](#); [Drake, 2010b](#); [Gudjonsson et al., 2008](#)). Attachment behaviour is mainly concerned with the maintenance of emotional, psychological and physical closeness with a significant other person ([Bowlby, 1988](#)). Attachment anxiety (manifest in high preoccupied-anxious attachment and fearful-avoidant attachment scores; see [Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991](#); [Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994](#)) is related to low self-esteem, a negative self-perception and high levels of inter-personal difficulties ([Cyranski et al., 2002](#); [Feldman Barrett, 1997](#); [Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996](#)).

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Address: University of Derby, Department of Psychology, Kedleston Road, Derby DE22 1GB, UK.

E-mail address: [k.drake@derby.ac.uk](mailto:k.drake@derby.ac.uk) (K.E. Drake).

Attachment anxious behaviour can draw out negativity from the environment and increase the likelihood of individuals experiencing negative life events (Jaffee & Price, 2007; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Genetic studies have shown that these adverse experiences can subsequently reaffirm such characteristics culminating in the anticipation of (and sensitivity to) adverse environments (see Reiss, 2010 for a review of the literature). Compliance may be a coping mechanism, employed by such individuals, during tasks or dyadic interactions perceived as stressful (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Attachment anxiety and the experience of negative life events have already been implicated in the development of a suggestible character. Significant correlations have been reported between attachment anxiety, the reporting of intense negative life events, and interrogative suggestibility (Drake, 2010b) and between the report of intense negative life events and interrogative suggestibility (Drake, 2010a; Drake, Bull, & Boon, 2008). Studies in this area so far suggest that attachment anxiety and the experience of intense negative life events may contribute to a lesser ability to cope with the pressure of police questioning. Therefore attachment anxiety and the experience of intense negative life events may also relate to compliant behaviour. To date no research has investigated the relationship between attachment anxiety, the experience of intense negative life events and compliance.

The specific types of negative life events most associated with attachment anxiety and conducive to bringing about compliant behaviour will also be investigated. Negative life events can be split into categories: independent, dependent, and inter-personal negative events (see Jaffee & Price, 2007). Independent negative events include the death of a loved one, losing one's home in a natural disaster; whilst dependent negative events are heritable, controllable, and dependent upon a person's behaviour (e.g. losing your job, getting divorced). Inter-personal negative life events are specific type of dependent negative events and refer solely to inter-personal difficulties (i.e. relationship issues, conflicts with friends, co-workers, and family).

Dependent and inter-personal negative events (compared with independent negative events) are associated with a range of psychological vulnerabilities such as depression, anxiety, and a lesser ability to cope with social challenge (Eley et al., 2004; Jaffee & Price, 2007). Individuals who score high on attachment anxiety (neuroticism and negative emotionality being a feature of this) may be prone to the experience of dependent and inter-personal stressful life events (e.g. conflict within romantic relationships, with colleagues and with friends).

Characteristics (such as attachment anxiety) can have a lasting effect on the social environment, evoking hostile and critical responses and [negatively] influencing life choices. Inter-personal negative experiences can amplify those attachment anxious characteristics, confirm negative self-perceptions, and encourage a fear of abandonment (Brennan & Shaver, 2002; Brown, Harris, & Bifulco, 1986; Reiss, 2010). This fear of abandonment and emotional rejection, encouraged through the experience of negative inter-personal events, may lead to an increased risk of compliance (Gudjonsson et al., 2008). No research exists investigating this particular issue.

The study by Gudjonsson et al. (2008) suggests however that the relationship between adult romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance and compliance may be specific to females (by virtue of recruiting a female sample). Males scoring high on attachment anxiety also experience problematic relationships, negative events, and are stress-sensitive (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Studies show that men are more sensitive to the effects of divorce or separation and work problems (Kendler, Thornton, & Prescott, 2001). Therefore research suggests that men can also become psychologically vulnerable as a result of the experience of [dependent] – personal

negative life events. This gender effect needs therefore to be investigated.

### 1.1. Predictions

Attachment anxiety (manifest in preoccupied-anxious attachment and fearful-avoidant attachment scores) and the experience of intense negative life events will correlate with and predict compliance in both males and females.

The reported experience of dependent and inter-personal negative life events will be more strongly related to attachment anxiety and compliance (compared with independent negative life events).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 125 participants, 61 females and 64 males (mean age = 40.27, standard deviation = 11.61, range = 18–64 years). Participants are an opportunity sample, consisting of staff and students within a UK university.

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. The Gudjonsson Compliance Scale (GCS) (Gudjonsson, 1989)

This 20-item, true/false, instrument measures the extent to which individuals tend to comply with others' requests. Scores range from 0 to 20. The scale was originally developed for two reasons: (i) to identify those individuals who may be more likely to make false confessions under pressure during interview; and (ii) to identify individuals who are more likely to be coerced into crime by peers and others. Scale validity is well documented (see Gudjonsson, 2003), with Cronbach's alpha coefficient in past studies ranging from 0.71 to 0.75.

#### 2.2.2. Life Events Questionnaire (LEQ) (Norbeck, 1984)

The LEQ contains 82-items in total and is a modification of the instrument developed by Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel (1978), in that it has nine items of particular relevance to women. These include items such as "Major difficulties with birth control pills or devices". The nine additional items in the LEQ were introduced to reduce the gender bias in the Sarason et al. (1978) version.

The 82 different life events can be categorised into the following: independent life events, dependent life events, and inter-personal life events. Independent negative events include the death of a loved one, losing one's home in a natural disaster; whilst dependent negative events are heritable, controllable, and dependent upon a person's behaviour (e.g. losing your job, getting divorced). Inter-personal negative life events are a particular type of dependent negative events, and include adverse events that occur during dyadic interaction (e.g. inter-personal conflicts, relationship break-ups) (Jaffee & Price, 2007).

Participants were required to go through all the events listed, and if they had experienced them at any point of their life, to circle whether it had been a "good" experience or "bad" experience. They were then instructed to rate the extent to which those events had an effect on their lives at the time. The ratings went from 0 ("no effect") to 3 ("large effect"). The LEQ has good test-retest reliability, with test-retest reliabilities of 0.78–0.83 and is a significant predictor of measures of (unfavourable) psychological and psychiatric symptoms.

The questionnaire was originally designed to examine life events experienced over the past year. However, research has shown the importance of studying life events during adolescence, as this period is characterized by many physical, social and

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