Attachment anxiety and friendship group identification under attachment threat: The moderating role of priming support network expectations

Harriet E.S. Rosenthal [a,*], Judi Walsh [b], Richard J. Crisp [c], Claire V. Farrow [d], Meghan J. Waugh [a], Jackie Blissett [e], Abigail Millings [f]

[a] Department of Psychology, Durham University, Science Site, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK
[b] University of East Anglia, School of Psychology, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK
[c] University of Kent, School of Psychology, Keynes College, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NP, UK
[d] Loughborough University, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Ashby Road, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK
[e] University of Birmingham, School of Psychology, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
[f] University of Bristol, School of Experimental Psychology, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK

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ABSTRACT

We examined the role of priming participants' own network expectations on their subsequent identification with their friendship group. We examined this prime alongside attachment anxiety and attachment threat, as predictors of friendship group identification. Previous research has suggested that attachment anxiety is associated with negative network expectations. In this study, we extended this work to show that when a network expectation prime was absent, higher attachment anxiety was associated with lower group identification under attachment threat, compared to a control condition. However, when expectations of support network were primed, attachment threat no longer affected group identification, so that only attachment anxiety predicted group identification. This suggests that priming participants who are high in attachment anxiety with their own network expectancies (which are negative), results in participants dis-identifying with their friendship group, regardless of whether or not they have experienced attachment threat.

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1. Introduction

Group identification (feeling a sense of belonging to a group), has been linked with a number of positive benefits, such as improved mental health (Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009). Social support is more likely to be offered, received, and used, if those providing and receiving the support share a social identity (for a review see Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). However, the strength of identification with a group may depend on individual differences in attachment orientation and perceptions of the usefulness of a support network. Previous work has found that individuals higher in attachment anxiety have a tendency to dis-identify (lower their level of identification) from friendship groups when an interpersonal relationship is threatened; that is, at the very time their friendship group might be most beneficial as a source of support (Crisp et al., 2009). We propose that this effect may occur because individuals high in attachment anxiety have more negative expectations of their support network. In order to explore this mechanism, we propose that for those high in attachment anxiety, priming support network expectations (i.e., making their negative

expectations salient) should result in dis-identification (lowered identification) from their friendship group, regardless of whether or not their primary relationship is threatened.

1.1. Attachment

The attachment system is an evolutionary based control system designed to ensure proximity to, and elicit security and safety from, attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Individuals can be situated along two continuous dimensions of attachment: *anxiety* about abandonment and *avoidance* of intimacy (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Individuals who have experienced sensitive, responsive, and appropriate care from their attachment figures tend to be low in both anxiety and avoidance, which characterizes secure attachment. Individuals high in attachment anxiety often have a history of unpredictable and inconsistently responsive caregivers (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). They are hyper-vigilant to attachment-related threat and hyperactivate the attachment system, becoming preoccupied by the availability of potential caregivers and the likelihood of rejection (Main, 1990). Individuals high in attachment avoidance often have a history of rejecting or over-intrusive caregivers and deactivate their attachment system under threat by downplaying negative affect,

avoiding intimacy, and endorsing independence and self-reliance (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

A large body of research has explored the impact that attachment orientation can have on intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. For example, securely attached individuals are comfortable with closeness to attachment figures, seek out these figures in times of need, and find thoughts of them comforting (McGowan, 2002; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2004). By contrast, individuals who are high in attachment anxiety report feeling more general anxiety, negativity, and rejection in interpersonal relationships (Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2002; Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996). Furthermore, those high in attachment avoidance may be less involved, seek less support, and disclose less in interpersonal relationships (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995).

While research has tended to focus on the impact of the attachment system on intra- and inter-personal processes, to date there has been relatively less research on the impact that the attachment system can have upon *group* based behaviors, relationships, and cognitions. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007a) have suggested that attachment functions can be served by groups (Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999) and an individual may transfer their own working models of relationships onto the group. Research has found that individuals high in attachment anxiety relate to groups in a way similar to that expected in a dyadic relationship, by appraising group processes as threatening, and reacting more negatively to out-group members (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001; Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). Individuals high in attachment avoidance are more surprising in their group relationships, for the most part negatively appraising group members as expected, but under certain circumstances, such as being required to interact with group members, demonstrating behaviors which indicate that their deactivating strategies may collapse under pressure, so that negative emotions can no longer be suppressed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a; Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). Although these strategies have often been seen as less than optimal, developments such as social defense theory suggest that groups may function better precisely because they have members who are heterogeneous (i.e., differ in attachment patterns) serving different functions within the group (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, & Shaver, 2010). Despite the valuable insights this work gives us, research on attachment and group processes is scant, and few studies have attempted to look at how intrapersonal attachment orientation may interact with contextual factors to affect how an individual thinks about, identifies with, or acts towards a group (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a).

1.2. Attachment and group identification

In close relationships, the goals for individuals with higher attachment anxiety are support, comfort, and maintenance of extreme closeness to prevent rejection and uncertainty about reliability (see Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Similar goals can be extrapolated to groups. For example, individuals with higher attachment anxiety are driven to maintain "an illusion of connectedness" (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002, p. 143) by exaggerating personal weakness and attempting to elicit compassion from their fellow in-group members. In contrast, when individuals suffer interpersonal distress, those low in attachment anxiety and avoidance (i.e., people with greater attachment security) seek emotional and social support from others (Florian, Mikulincer, & Bucholtz, 1995), while those high in attachment anxiety might fixate on their attachment figure, rather than seek support elsewhere (Crisp et al., 2009).

1.3. Network expectations

Attachment orientations can be conceptualized as *working models*, which are cognitive templates of self-views and expectations of interactions with others (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Collins & Read, 1994; Waters & Waters, 2006). Previous studies have argued that working models of the self and others play an important role in determining expectations (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990), and individuals characterized by a secure model (positive models of both self and others) expect positivity from others and can utilize them effectively (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Negative expectations of network support can be defined as "a set of expectations or beliefs that it is inadvisable, impossible, useless, or potentially dangerous to draw on network resources" (Vaux, Burda, & Stewart, 1986, p. 413). Previous research has found secure individuals to hold more positive network expectations than insecure individuals (Wallace & Vaux, 1993), with both avoidant and ambivalent (also known as *anxious*) attachment styles associated with negative network expectations (Larose, Bernier, Soucy, & Duchesne, 1999).

1.4. The current research

The findings of Wallace and Vaux (1993) and Larose et al. (1999) suggest that expectations of the usefulness of one's support network may be an important additional aspect to consider when examining the association between attachment anxiety and interpersonal threat as predictors of group identification. Crisp et al. (2009) examined the link between attachment anxiety and group identification under conditions of attachment threat (i.e., separated, ignored, or rejected, see Dewitte, Koster, De Houwer, & Buysse, 2007), and found that under threat (an envisaged argument with partner), individuals higher in attachment anxiety identified less with their friendship group than those lower in attachment anxiety. In the control condition (an envisaged 'bad day' with no attachment associations), there was no significant association between attachment anxiety and group identification, and in contrast to the threat condition, there was a non-significant tendency for participants high in attachment anxiety to identify more with their group than participants lower in attachment anxiety. It is possible that the dis-identification effects seen under attachment threat for those higher in attachment anxiety may be because attachment threat reminds individuals of their negative network expectations. In other words, attachment threat may make support network expectations more salient, which in turn affects friendship group identification. Importantly, for those higher in attachment anxiety these network expectations are negative, which should result in lower identification, while for those lower in attachment anxiety, these network expectations are positive, which should result in higher identification.

In order to test this assumption, we first carried out a pilot to further establish the link between attachment anxiety and friendship group identification. The main study examined the effect of network expectation activation prior to receiving an attachment threat/control scenario. It was expected that activating network expectations would eliminate the previously observed interaction between attachment anxiety and threat in predicting group identification (Crisp et al., 2009). Specifically, previous research has suggested that those higher in attachment anxiety hold more negative expectations about their network than those lower in attachment anxiety. If negative expectations are a mechanism in the link between attachment anxiety under threat and group identification, then activating awareness and salience of those expectations should result in lower friendship group identification for those high in attachment anxiety, regardless of whether or not an attachment threat is present. While attachment is generally perceived to consist of anxiety and avoidance dimensions, following the example of Crisp et al. (2009), the research we present here focuses on attachment anxiety.