



Attachment style and self-regulation: How our patterns in relationships reflect broader motivational styles



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ABSTRACT

Individuals orient themselves in relationships using different goals and preoccupations, often conceptualized as four distinct attachment styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Individuals also orient themselves in the social world more broadly using different motivational preferences and styles. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) are two frameworks used to conceptualize these motivational styles. In two studies we investigated the extent to which preoccupations in relationships reflected broader life goals. In Study 1, college participants reported attachment style and self-discrepancies (ideal and ought selves). In Study 2, community participants reported attachment style and regulatory focus (promotion and prevention orientations). Across two different samples, using distinct but complementary theoretical frameworks, we found a consistent pattern whereby a more approach-oriented relationship orientation (secure attachment), was related to a more approach-oriented general life orientation (lower actual-ideal discrepancy and greater promotion focus). Interestingly, attachment style was unrelated to avoidance-oriented motivational styles. These results suggest that motivations within relationships may be specifically related to growth motivations in broader aspects of life.

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1. Introduction

Why are some individuals more prone to form friendships or relationships than others? For people who fear commitment, is their fear limited to a specific relationship, or is it indicative of a broader worldview characterized by risk-aversion? In this paper we look to theories of attachment style and self-regulation to shed light on these questions. Do attachment processes, which begin at birth, spawn a larger array of self-regulatory processes that operate outside of the individual-attachment object relationship? While the cross-sectional findings we present below cannot support a causal hypothesis, we may be able to answer a related question: do relationship patterns and behaviors (attachment) indicate broader themes of more global motivations (self-regulation)? We explore how people's attachment style might be related to the goals and regulatory strategies they use to motivate and control their behavior. Although a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on attachment theory and self-regulation is beyond the scope of this paper, we begin with a brief overview of relevant research.

1.1. Attachment

Attachment theory considers the early bond that develops between caregiver and child as essential for generating schemas about relationships with important others (Bowlby, 1969). The attachment relationship influences expectations about how the world works and how people are supposed to behave and interact (Johnson et al., 2010). Most current research utilizes a two-dimensional model that views attachment as the result of both one's internal model of self (degree to which oneself is worthy of love) and others (degree to which others are worthy of trust; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This framework generates four attachment styles (as opposed to the original three proposed by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Here the secure style is characterized by feeling worthy of love and trusting of others, the preoccupied (or anxious-ambivalent) style is characterized by feeling unworthy of love and trusting of others, the dismissive (or avoidant) style is characterized by feeling worthy of love and untrusting of others, and the fearful style is represents feeling unworthy of love and untrusting of others.¹ The fearful style is characterized as the least secure and

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¹ The style previously referred to as anxious-ambivalent by Ainsworth was called preoccupied by Bartholomew and Horowitz, and the style previously deemed avoidant by Ainsworth was classified as dismissive.

least trusting attachment type (Shaver & Clark, 1994). Even in childhood, the function of the attachment system is to provide a mechanism for regulating both affect and behavior (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Indeed, securely attached children are more socially and emotionally competent, and demonstrate a better capacity for self-control (Jacobsen, Huss, Fendrich, Kruesi, & Ziegenhain, 1997).

The same attachment styles and distributions found in childhood are reflected in adult relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Priel & Shamai, 1995). Importantly, adult attachment styles are linked to the ability to form satisfying, connected relationships with others, which is closely linked to well-being and considered by some as central to the human experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Securely attached adults generally have higher quality relationships, while those who are insecurely attached tend to have volatile, poorly regulated relationships with others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Brennan and Shaver, 1995). Attachment appears to initiate distinct trajectories with life-long implications for adult relationships and broader interpersonal functioning, with effects of early attachment bonds and caregiving styles observed up to 20 years after childhood assessments (Zayas, Mischel, Shoda, & Aber, 2011). Insecure attachment is associated with maladjustment and poorer functioning in both individual and interpersonal domains across the lifespan. Similarly, a different line of research has proposed that the majority of inter-personal and intra-personal problems derive from a failure to self-regulate (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Thus, attachment may indicate broader self-regulation processes and yet, most research that considers the link between attachment styles and self-regulation has largely favored affect regulation and interpersonal models over broader models of self-regulation.

1.2. Self-regulation

The ability to identify and pursue personal goals is what makes us civilized (Freud, 1961). Self-regulation processes enable people to monitor and alter their behavior to accomplish long-term goals. These processes are usually distinguished by whether people are moving toward a desired state or away from an undesired state (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000). Previous research has identified links between basic regulatory orientations and attachment style. Securely attached adults tend to engage in approach-oriented behaviors in response to stressful situations that represent either self or relational threats while insecurely attached adults (specifically those with an preoccupied attachment style) rely more heavily on avoidance-oriented behaviors (for a review, see Park, 2010). This suggests that when people feel confident in themselves and in their relationships (i.e., securely attached), they may be more likely to adopt a focus on growth and advancement. Both attachment styles and motivational tendencies seem to have important implications for the goals that guide interpersonal behavior (Gable & Impett, 2012). This line of research provides converging evidence for the notion that attachment styles are linked with motivational orientations, at least in a relational context.

Other research suggests that attachment style plays a role in people's ability to modulate their affective responses to a variety of stimuli (e.g., Rowe & Carnelley, 2003). People who are securely attached tend to capitalize on positive experiences and emotions, leading to a positive view of themselves and their past. People who have a preoccupied attachment tend to be overwhelmed by negative thoughts and memories, leading to a very poor view of themselves and their past (Mikulincer, 1998b). Interestingly, dismissive people do not appear to be influenced by positive or negative experiences, yet they recall almost solely positive memories, possibly as a defense for their own positive, yet fragile, view of themselves (Mikulincer, 1995; Mikulincer & Sheffi, 2000). These findings highlight the influence of attachment style on the affective component of self-regulation and suggest the possibility that attachment may impact regulatory styles more broadly.

Two related theories of self-regulation—self-discrepancy theory (SDT; Higgins, 1987) and regulatory focus theory (RFT; Higgins, 1997)—provide a framework for exploring the connections between attachment style and self-regulation more broadly. Both SDT and RFT suggest that self-regulation is facilitated by comparisons between the current perception of self and positive and negative possibilities for the future self. At the individual differences level, these theories differentiate people who are focused primarily on advancement and growth from those who are concerned primarily with protection and security. SDT focuses on how these differences emerge in the context of views about the self, while RFT considers how these differences emerge in the context of views about the larger social world.

1.2.1. Self-discrepancy theory

SDT is a theory of self-regulation involving standards for self-evaluation called self-guides, specifically the ideal self and the ought self (Higgins, 1987). A person strives to change their behavior to either become more like their ideal self, which is what they aspire or dream to be, or become more like their ought self, which is what they feel responsible or obligated to be. Regulation guided by the ideal self tends to be focused on approaching desired ends states, which has been associated with a decreased actual-ideal discrepancy (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). Regulation guided by the ought self is characterized by a focus on avoiding undesired end states, and has been associated with a decreased actual-ought discrepancy (see Higgins, 1998 for a review).

Previous research has linked attachment style with types of self-discrepancies. Mikulincer (1995) found that securely attached adolescents had less ideal-actual and less ought-actual self-discrepancy than their insecurely attached counterparts, which suggests that individuals who are securely attached may be more effective at aligning their actual selves with these self-guides than those with an insecure attachment style. These findings are consistent with research on attachment and affect-regulation. Insecure attachment styles are associated with negative affect (Mikulincer, 1995), which prompts specific regulatory behaviors to minimize that negative affect. Substantial self-discrepancies are likewise thought to lead to negative affect (Higgins, 1987) and associated regulatory behaviors. It would seem that both attachment style and the self-guides of SDT are tools for assessing the self, and motivate change through undesirable states caused by negative evaluations. Yet it is still unclear whether the parallels between attachment and regulation exist solely in the context of affective responses to interpersonal stimuli (as the affect-regulation literature might suggest), or also extend to reflect an individual's overarching worldview (as RFT would imply).

1.2.2. Regulatory focus theory

RFT (Higgins, 1997) extends the concept of self-guides posited by SDT into broader regulatory orientations. Referred to as promotion and prevention, these motivational systems are postulated to influence cognitive processes associated with decision-making, as well as more general worldviews. These orientations map on to the ideal and ought selves of SDT, respectively (see for example, Higgins, 1997; Strauman, 1996). A promotion focus is characterized by a person's motivation to "make good things happen," of which striving to attain an ideal goal is a specific example. A prevention focus, on the other hand, is also characterized by a motivation to attain positive outcomes, but instead by "keep bad things from happening" (Higgins, 1997), where striving to attain an ought goal is a specific example. Individual differences in regulatory focus are thought to emerge over childhood and adolescence from interactions with significant others (Higgins & Silberman, 1998; Manian, Papadakis, Strauman, & Essex, 2006).

Thus, some researchers have speculated that secure attachment may be linked to a promotion orientation (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005), while insecure styles should correspond with a prevention orientation (Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). Indeed, promotion/

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