Associations of insecure attachment with extreme pro-group actions: The mediating role of perceived marginalisation

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ABSTRACT

Can personality traits predict willingness to fight or even die for one's heritage culture group? This study examined insecure attachment dimensions – avoidance and anxiety – as predictors of perceived rejection from heritage culture members and, in turn, greater endorsement of extreme pro-group actions. Expressing extreme commitment for the heritage culture may represent an attempt by insecure individuals to reduce their perceived marginalisation and reaffirm their heritage culture membership and identity. Participants completed measures of attachment dimensions, intragroup marginalisation, and endorsement of extreme pro-group actions. Individuals who were high in anxiety or avoidance reported heightened intragroup marginalisation from family and friends. In turn, friend intragroup marginalisation was associated with increased endorsement of pro-group actions. Our findings provide insight as to why insecurely attached bicultural individuals may be drawn to endorse extreme pro-group actions.

"*To many who knew them, all four* [*bombers*] *were described as being well integrated into British society. All four had a Westernized and unremarkable background with secular upbringings… As a teenager, Mohammad Siddique Khan shook off his Pakistani-Muslim identity and presented himself as a Westernized young man.*"-NYPD Intelligence Division Report, 2007, p. 26.

1. Introduction

At approximately 8:50 am on July 7th, 2005, a series of explosions in London killed 52 people and left more than 800 injured. For the first time in modern terrorism, the threat was not wholly external – all four men responsible were British citizens who had been integrated into the mainstream culture. On the surface, they did not appear excluded from the mainstream culture, as one might expect from their radicalisation (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). While there has been much speculation about their attitudes towards their British mainstream culture, comparatively little attention has been given to their interactions and identification with their heritage cultures (BBC News, 2005). By the same token, the heritage culture experiences of the estimated 3000–4000 bicultural individuals with an EU nationality who have travelled to Syria to fight with ISIS as part of their radicalisation have also received little attention (Traynor, 2014).

These examples suggest that radicalised individuals who are citizens of Western countries may be motivated in part by the struggle to find an identity (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). This struggle may stem from the extent to which one feels accepted by their mainstream and heritage cultures. Mainstream culture is defined as the dominant culture where one currently lives (Berry, 2001). Heritage culture is defined as the culture of one's birth or upbringing, or the culture that had a significant impact on previous generations of one's family. Conceptualisations of marginalisation remain focused on exclusion by members of the mainstream culture and an enforcement of culture loss (e.g., Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2005); fewer studies have examined the influence of perceived exclusion by heritage culture friends and family, in spite of its importance for maintaining one's identity. Our study aimed to address this research gap by investigating the association of perceived marginalisation from heritage culture members with extreme pro-group actions, defined as willingness to commit, fight, or even die in aid of one's heritage culture. Thus, this research may shed light on some of the reasons why Westernised bicultural individuals might be drawn to joining extremist groups as a compensatory reaction in response to perceived rejection from their heritage culture.

What role does perceived rejection play in the construction of our identity? Humans share a fundamental need to form meaningful interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Rejection from other heritage culture members – defined as intragroup marginalisation – can occur when individuals develop ties to two or more cultures, and as a result, no longer conform to the expectations of the heritage culture identity (Castillo, Conoley, Brossart, & Quiros, 2007). These detrimental impacts and experiences of intragroup marginalisation may be shaped

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by personality; those who are insecurely attached and chronically perceive rejection report increased intragroup marginalisation (Ferenczi & Marshall, 2014). A compensatory response to intragroup marginalisation may be to reaffirm one's heritage culture identity through endorsing pro-group actions. In an effort to gain acceptance and avoid rejection, do insecurely attached individuals endorse pro-group actions that are extreme?

1.1. Attachment

Attachment is conceptualised as an internal working model of self and others that informs their interactions over the course of their life (Bowlby, 1969). Views of self and other are essential for constructing bicultural identity and perceived rejection from in-group members. Secure attachment is typified by an internalised positive model of the self; that is, one feels worthy of love, and also a positive model of 'other', as significant others are thought of as being available and trustworthy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Secure attachment is conceptualised as low anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid, & Avihou-Kanza, 2009).

Anxious individuals have a negative model of self, and tend to be preoccupied with winning affection from others (Mikulincer, 1998). They endorse positive models of other, which results in the individual feeling unworthy of love (Mikulincer, 1995). For those high in anxiety, the attachment system is hyper-activated in response to perceived rejection threats (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). Anxious individuals are sensitive to rejection, recalling emotionally painful memories with ease whilst unable to repress the resulting negative effects (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). Their difficulty in recovering from past experiences of rejection (Marshall, Bejanyan, & Ferenczi, 2013) may generalise to intragroup marginalisation.

Conversely, individuals who are avoidant perceive others as untrustworthy and unreliable, and hold positive views of their self, resulting in exaggerated self-reliance (Li & Chan, 2012). Avoidant individuals engage in deactivating strategies in response to threat, such as moving away from attachment figures and suppressing emotions to pre-empt the frustration and pain arising from rejection (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Although they may appear to have high self-esteem (Mikulincer, 1998), it may be little more stable than a house of cards. Highly distressing events can unearth anxiety (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995) and result in difficulties coping with rejection (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997). Although they may be adept at suppressing negative impacts of mild threats, they nonetheless experience heightened psychological distress in response to stress (Stanton & Campbell, 2013). Despite their defences, they report a need to belong to close others (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). We argue that perceiving rejection from close others qualify as severe threats. Thus, we expected that individuals high in avoidance would also perceive greater intragroup marginalisation from close others such as family and friends.

1.2. Intragroup marginalisation

Social rejection can be conceptualised as a social death (Williams & Nida, 2011). The negative effects of rejection remain even if it is merely perceived (Smith & Williams, 2004). Individuals who perceive rejection in the form of intragroup marginalisation may face accusations of betraying their heritage culture, such as by assimilating into the mainstream culture (Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012). They may perceive that family and heritage cultural friends view them as threatening the distinctiveness of the cultural group through deviating from the prescribed social identity (Castillo et al., 2007). Thus, no longer meeting the expectations of the heritage culture, individuals may feel rejected, regardless of their own wishes to maintain their heritage culture identity (Ferenczi & Marshall, 2014). We hypothesised that those individuals high in anxiety or avoidance, who have a heightened sensitivity to rejection

(Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002), would report greater intragroup marginalisation (Ferenczi & Marshall, 2014). In turn, what compensatory actions would they endorse in striving for acceptance and positive perceptions of their self from their heritage culture in-group?

1.3. Extreme pro-group actions

Individuals strive for others to perceive them as they do themselves (Swann, 1983). In fact, we engage in a continuous construction of ourselves that draws the feedback from close others (Swann & Brooks, 2012). Reflected appraisals – perceptions of how others perceive oneself – play an important role in constructing identity, in particular for individuals who may experience ambiguity resulting from a dual identity (Khanna, 2004). If there is an indirect threat to one's opportunity to self-verify, then they may engage in compensatory self-verification to re-establish coherence (Swann & Brooks, 2012). Self-verification can occur at the level of the collective self – the evaluation of the self in relation to one's in-group (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004). In the context of the current study, if a British Asian woman perceives herself as Punjabi, yet finds her family criticising her Punjabi language skills, then she might come to question her knowledge of herself. To avoid threats to the very foundation of her identity, what can she do? We hypothesised that those who experience intragroup marginalisation will self-verify by endorsing extreme pro-group actions, in the hope of reaffirming their heritage culture identity. Thus, by supporting attitudes which are extreme, individuals can demonstrate their loyalty and commitment. Our study is, to our knowledge, the first to link attachment, intragroup marginalisation, and extreme pro-group actions. We hypothesised that insecure attachment would be linked with intragroup marginalisation, and, in turn, with greater endorsement of extreme pro-group actions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

208 participants (M_{age} = 30.29, *SD*: 11.74; female: 105, male: 100; missing: 2, transgender: 1) completed the measures. Inclusion criteria for the study required each participant to have a different heritage and mainstream culture (i.e., they were a first- or later-generation migrant). 49% of participants reported that they were first-generation migrants ($M_{years\ residing\ in\ mainstream\ culture}$ = 11.27, *SD*: 8.47); 51% were born and raised in a mainstream culture that was different to their heritage culture (second- or later-generation migrants). Participants reported the following heritage cultures: European (23%), Latin American (18%), East Asian (17%), South Asian (9%), Southeast Asian (9%), Middle Eastern/North African (8%), African (7%), Jewish (3%), Native American/First Nations (3%), Caribbean (1%), Mixed (1%), and North American (1%). The majority of participants reported living in a North American mainstream culture (83%); they also reported living in Europe (15%), East Asia (1%), and the Middle East (1%). The majority of participants reported being in a relationship (65%). Participants were recruited online via Amazon MTurk (paid $0.30), or through the Social Psychology Network (no reward). As an attention-check measure, we asked participants to report the date, and compared this with their timestamp. All materials were in English.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Berkeley personality profile

Neuroticism refers to emotional instability and correlates with increased insecure attachment (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). We included seven items from the neuroticism subscale (Harary & Donahue, 1994; α = .82; e.g., "I worry a lot"; 1 = Disagree strongly, 5 = Agree strongly) to establish that the association of insecure attachment with intragroup marginalisation could not be attributed to neuroticism.