
Attachment and Close Relationships: An Individual-Difference Perspective

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Attachment and Close Relationships: An Individual-Difference Perspective

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As developmental psychologists studying attachment relationships in infancy and childhood (Belsky & Cassidy, in press), we have found it fascinating to watch the increased applications of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1969/1982) to the study of close relationships in adulthood (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989; Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988; Weiss, 1982). Hazan and Shaver's promising analysis of how attachment theory can serve as an organizational framework for research on close relationships (actually romantic relationships), in concert with their own and others' empirical studies on this topic, makes

it not inconceivable that, some time in the future, attachment research on such relationships might actually overshadow the work in infancy and childhood that gave rise to it. Although such growth would attest to the fundamental and enduring contribution of attachment theory to the field of psychology, a far more desired goal is the eventual (and, we hope, inevitable) linkage of these two schools of attachment inquiry. Only this would permit the testing of fundamental propositions of attachment theory concerning continuity and discontinuity in attachment relationships within and across generations.

One of the most noteworthy contributions that Hazan and Shaver make in their effort to apply attachment theory to the study of close relationships concerns the integration of ideas central to the study of social psychology with those central to developmentalists interested in attachment. For years, we have been impressed by the fact that many notions held by social psychologists regarding expectancy confirmation (e.g., Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992) are strikingly similar to Bowlby's notion of "internal working models." Both notions address the affective-cognitive templates that influence what individuals attend to, encode, and recall—which, in turn, influence individuals' interpersonal experiences. It is equally striking that these truly independent schools of psychological thought have remained, for the most part, just that. Perhaps this is because attachment researchers have expended most of their empirical energies examining the origins of individual differences in these affective-cognitive biases rather than studying the workings of these biases directly, whereas social psychologists have focused, in contrast, on the nature of these biases, showing little concern for the origins of individual differences. The time has clearly arrived to integrate these two fields of inquiry. Hazan and Shaver are to be applauded for fostering a close relationship between developmental and social psychologists interested in the ways in which individuals, through their relationship-generated expectations, shape their own day-to-day experiences and long-term psychological and behavioral development.

Because of our own focus on the measurement, antecedents, and sequelae of individual differences in attachment relationships, we found ourselves repeatedly responding to Hazan and Shaver's analysis from this perspective. In fact, we could not help speculating that recasting Hazan and Shaver's core questions into an individual-differences framework would also advance both attachment theory and its application to the study of close relationships. Thus, for example, we were stimulated to reformulate their question "What makes a potential relationship partner appealing?" as "What makes different relationship partners appealing to different people?"

Before examining in the remainder of this commentary Hazan and Shaver's core questions from the perspective of individual differences, it is essential to consider what is known generally about the "state of mind" regarding attachment of individuals presumed to vary on this psychological parameter (Main & Goldwyn, in press). Individuals classified as insecure-dismissing tend to devalue the importance of close relationships to their psychological well-being; to emphasize autonomy and separateness at the expense of connectedness and intimacy; and to appear threatened by the relational needs of others. Those classified as

insecure-preoccupied tend to emphasize in an exaggerated manner issues of attachment (i.e., proximity, intimacy, involvement, connectedness), almost to the point of interpersonal fusion; to feel uncomfortable with and threatened by separateness and autonomy; and to have a fundamental fear of abandonment. Last, those classified as secure-autonomous tend to value attachment in a more balanced manner—recognizing, appreciating, and desiring both intimacy and autonomy, separateness as well as connectedness (Cassidy & Berlin, 1992; Main, 1990; Main & Goldwyn, in press; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

Returning, then, to our reformulation of Hazan and Shaver's first question, we contend that attachment theory addresses issues beyond such widely studied partner features as physical attractiveness and economic resources (e.g., Bersheid, 1984; Buss & Barnes, 1986), predicting that what appeals to an insecure-dismissing individual in a relationship partner may differ from what appeals to an insecure-preoccupied or secure-autonomous individual. On first consideration, and in accordance with the notion that like attracts like, it might be expected that what a dismissing individual finds appealing is another dismissing individual—that is, someone who will value separateness and make minimal demands for connectedness. Within this scheme, what should be appealing to a preoccupied person is a partner who desires interpersonal fusion but who also fears abandonment (i.e., another preoccupied person).

However, compatible with attachment theory is the notion that individuals may seek to have their relationship-derived expectations (their internal working models) confirmed. Thus, the dismissing person, whose devaluation of attachment and closeness derived from a history of rejection, may seek, fundamentally, a close relationship that fulfills his or her expectations of rejection. Similarly, the preoccupied individual, whose neediness and dependency derive from anxious uncertainties about the availability of the attachment figure, may seek confirmation of his or her fears of abandonment. As counterproductive as it might sound, then, dismissing individuals may be attracted to those who will eventually reject them, and preoccupied individuals may find most appealing partners who will eventually abandon them.

Intriguing data from a study by Kirkpatrick and Davis (in press) are relevant to this issue. Of 250 dating college students, not a single dismissing-dismissing or preoccupied-preoccupied pairing occurred, whereas dismissing-preoccupied pairings occurred at a significantly disproportionate rate. Why should this pattern of "partner appeal" have occurred? Perhaps it is because what a dismissing person fundamentally expects is rejection, which is exactly what he or she will receive

from a partner with exaggerated needs for closeness when the dismissing individual fails to provide anything close to the support desired. Similarly, what makes the dismissing individual “appealing” to the preoccupied person is that the dismissing individual virtually ensures that the preoccupied individual will end up feeling abandoned, thereby confirming exactly what the preoccupied individual has been led to expect on the basis of his or her past relationship experience. Needless to say, before this interpretation of the Kirkpatrick and Davis (in press) data can be embraced, their findings need to be replicated, especially with a variety of methods of evaluating “state of mind” regarding attachment. In addition, more research will be required to illuminate precisely the process through which relevant information about attachment characteristics is communicated between partners.

Hazan and Shaver ask a second question: “How is a relationship formed, and how does it develop?” When we reformulate this question as “Do relationships form and develop differently for different people?” attachment theory leads us to speculate that relationship formation and development are likely to vary depending on whether the relationship involves dismissing, preoccupied, or autonomous individuals. Actually, Hazan and Shaver implicitly if not explicitly acknowledge this likelihood toward the end of their essay, when they cite findings that preoccupied individuals fall in love easily (Collins & Read, 1990) and that dismissing individuals have a high rate of relationship dissolution (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Beyond these preliminary findings, we suggest that the process of self-disclosure may interact with attachment to influence relationship formation. For instance, secure-autonomous individuals may be more likely to find themselves in close relationships founded on reciprocal self-disclosure, which continues to develop throughout the relationship. In such a relationship, mutual knowledge and understanding form the basis of closeness. We suspect that, for insecure-dismissing individuals, self-disclosure may be prematurely foreclosed so that this critical feature of intimacy maintenance does not develop beyond its peak in the formative stages of dating and mating. In contrast, insecure-preoccupied individuals may be characterized by excessive self-disclosure. The documented tendency for preoccupied individuals to self-disclose almost indiscriminately (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991) may be a means by which dismissive mates are “chased” away—psychologically, if not physically—and the preoccupied individual’s expectations of abandonment come to be realized.

Hazan and Shaver’s third question, “What makes relationships satisfying and/or enduring?” leads to our reformulated question, “What different things make relationships satisfying and enduring for different people?”

In terms of the three central components of close relationships discussed by Hazan and Shaver—attachment/anxiety reduction, caregiving, and sex—we hypothesize that secure-autonomous individuals find relationships most satisfying when both partners participate flexibly in all three components (i.e., receive emotional support, provide such support, and enjoy sexual relations). Relationships involving insecure individuals may be less mutual, in part because of the role rigidity of individuals who have difficulty either providing or receiving care. Thus, we might expect preoccupied individuals to profess that relationships in which they receive a lot of care are most satisfying and dismissing individuals to profess that relationships in which they do not have to provide much care are most satisfying.

Upon reformulating Hazan and Shaver’s fourth question, “What are the precursors and reactions to relationship dissolution?” to focus on individual differences, we hypothesize that dismissing persons will be more likely to initiate separation or divorce, whereas preoccupied individuals will resist separation and may initiate couples therapy instead. Secure-autonomous persons, we hypothesize, would be most realistic in appraising the viability of a relationship—being neither likely to leave too soon (as dismissing individuals might) or to hang on too long (as preoccupied individuals might). With regard to reactions to relationship dissolution, we might expect dismissing individuals to overcontrol their reactions and make light of the termination of a long-standing “close” relationship; preoccupied persons to become overtly distressed, perhaps to the point of clinical depression and suicidal ideation; and secure-autonomous individuals to express and acknowledge their distress and appropriately mourn the loss of the relationship but, in consequence, to experience fundamental recovery that might make them less likely to establish prematurely a new, “rebound-driven” relationship substitute.

The final question we reformulate relates to overall functioning: “What is the role of relationships in overall functioning for different people?” We focus here on the linkage between work and family. When a close relationship is going poorly at home, we expect maximum and negative spillover to occur in the workplace (inefficiency, absenteeism, mistakes) for preoccupied individuals who have problems with boundary maintenance (self–other, work–family). When work experiences are going badly, we expect dismissing individuals to be least likely to communicate their problems directly to their partner (i.e., low self-disclosure). Moreover, we suspect that, rather than expressing their negative affect at work or seeking emotional support at home, they would displace negative emotions onto intimate relationships perhaps because they are

more concerned with occupational success than with success in intimate relationships. Secure-autonomous individuals may be the most likely to seek and find support for work stress at home and yet might not monopolize the relationship with occupational problems. Given their valuation of both separateness and connectedness, they should be more likely to have flexible boundaries that permit supportive, yet not interfering, affective flow across psychological worlds.

There is little in science that carries as much value as ideas that stimulate others and generate testable propositions. As Hazan and Shaver, as well as many others, have demonstrated, this is what makes attachment theory so attractive and enduring—its generativity. In this brief commentary, we have tried to highlight some of the fundamental value of Hazan and Shaver's contribution by elaborating on what we see as its implications for the study and understanding of individual differences in close relationships. We are very much aware not only that there is much else of value in their essay beyond the questions around which we have organized our commentary, but also of the speculative nature of much of our discussion as well. As Hazan and Shaver acknowledge, much more theory building and empiricism are called for if the implications of attachment theory for the study of close relationships are to be fully realized. In the target article and in other work, Hazan and Shaver have played an important role in extending the theory. We have endeavored to build on their contribution and, in so doing, await with great anticipation what future scholarship and research on attachment theory will bring.

Notes

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