Chapter 9

What Are the Effects of Context on Attachment?

"The great strength of attachment theory in guiding research is that it focuses on a basic system of behavior—the attachment system—that is biologically rooted and thus species-characteristic. This implies a search for basic processes of functioning universal in human nature, despite differences attributable to genetic constitution, cultural influences, and individual experience."

~ Ainsworth, 1991, p. 33

The aforementioned quote by Mary Ainsworth emphasizes the idea that the attachment system is assumed to be biologically based and active in all humans. And although some researchers have followed Ainsworth's lead and focused on the normative aspects of attachment, there is an emerging sense that the way attachment is expressed can, in fact, vary in interesting ways across contexts. Thus, while humans may have evolved a behavioral system that functions similarly from person to person, Bowlby's emphasis on the dynamic nature of internal working models (see chapter: What Are Attachment Working Models?) makes it clear that context is likely to play an important role in shaping individual differences in attachment.

In this chapter we review a number of contextual factors that have been studied in attachment research. Before delving into a review of the literature it is important to note that our goal in this chapter is not to review all the contexts that have been studied. Rather, our focus is on specific contexts that have either received significant attention in the literature or have important implications for our understanding of adult attachment. In particular, we focus on gender, culture, age, relationship status and length, and one of the most widely studied contexts in adult attachment, romantic relationships. In chapters: How Stable Are Attachment Styles in Adulthood? and To What are the Implications of Attachment Processes for Psychopathology and Therapy?, we also address other important contextual factors, such as the experience of traumatic events, mental health concerns, and stressful life events.

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ARE THERE SEX DIFFERENCES IN ADULT ATTACHMENT?

The question of whether adult attachment differs as a function of sex is one that has been considered extensively over the years. Interest in this issue has emerged due to research in psychology more broadly (social psychology, personality, developmental, and evolutionary psychology) that has found sex differences between men and women in the way they think and act in relationships (eg, Dunbar & Machin, 2014). This research suggests that men are more emotionally guarded than women, and women are more invested in their relationships than men. Because people who are avoidantly attached are also less invested in their relationships compared to those who are secure, it is possible that attachment styles could reflect sex-based biological differences or gender norms rather than attachment-related experiences in particular.

Until recently, attachment researchers have largely been of the view that there are no reliable differences between the sexes when it comes to adult attachment (eg, Beckes & Simpson, 2009; Penke, 2009). Indeed, Bowlby (1969/1982) did not make any claims regarding sex differences in the normative and non-normative functioning of the attachment system. Studies investigating sex differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance either find no differences (eg, Conradi, Gerlsma, van Duijn, & de Jonge, 2006; Donnellan, Burt, Levendosky, & Klump; 2008; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Zakalik, 2004) or differences appear small to moderate (ie, effect sizes usually range in magnitude between $d = 0.01$ and $d = 0.40$; eg, Lopez, 2001; Rogers, Bidwell, & Wilson, 2005).

However, scholars such as Del Giudice (2009a,b) and Kirkpatrick (1998) have suggested that attachment in adulthood may be manifestations of mating strategies known to differ between the sexes. As a way of formalizing these suggestions, Del Giudice (2009a,b) proposed a model based on life history theory (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991) and sexual selection that makes predictions regarding sex differences in adult attachment. This model has received considerable attention in recent years (eg, Del Giudice & Belsky, 2010; Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, & Shaver, 2010; Hoeve et al., 2012). A central premise of Del Giudice's model is that sex differences in attachment should only be expected amongst insecurely attached individuals. Specifically, Del Giudice suggests that harsh and unpredictable environments lead people to adopt a fast life strategy, a strategy that involves greater risk-taking and faster sexual maturation in order to accelerate the opportunities for reproduction in an uncertain environment. As part of this life strategy, individuals typically reach sexual maturation sooner, engage in sex earlier, and engage in more uncommitted and casual sex compared to individuals exposed to stable and predictable environments (Belsky et al., 1991).

According to Del Giudice (2011; see also Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007) a fast life strategy is characterized by a short-term relationship orientation (ie, engagement in uncommitted and casual sexual encounters), and is thought to reflect a strategy more commonly used by men and people high on attachment avoidance. In contrast, because women are generally the primary caregivers of

offspring, a fast life strategy in women not only includes some of the characteristics already described (ie, short-term relationship orientation, uncommitted sexual encounters), but also entails eliciting the attention of mates to assist with parenting. Thus for women, a fast life strategy shares similarities with attachment anxiety in that women become more preoccupied with their relationship partners. Del Giudice (2011) notes however that under extremely stressful and dangerous contexts, in which parental investment may not result in the successful survival of progeny, insecurely attached women would also default to a strategy resembling attachment avoidance.

In the context of stable and nonharsh environments, few if any gender differences are expected because the reproductive strategies of men and women should converge with both sexes demonstrating high parental investment and a long-term orientation toward romantic relationships. This life strategy (also known as a slow life strategy) is thought to resemble attachment security (Del Giudice, 2009a, 2011).

Del Giudice (2011) makes an important point about his model: on average, sex differences in adult attachment should be small, as approximately two-thirds of people demonstrate attachment security (eg, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996), and thus are likely to develop in safe, supportive, and predictable environments. However, sizable sex differences in adult attachment should emerge when data are analyzed as a function of contexts indicative of high environmental stress.

To test these predictions, Del Giudice (2011) conducted a meta-analysis that included 100 studies investigating sex differences in adult romantic attachment. The average effect sizes for sex differences in adult attachment were weak ($d = -0.04$ for attachment anxiety, and $d = 0.02$ for attachment avoidance). However, substantial variability was found in these effect sizes as a function of geographic regions. For example, in some regions that were deemed harsh or unpredictable (eg, the Middle East and parts of Europe) the sex differences were larger (eg, ds = 0.28 to 0.34) than in more stable and predictable regions (eg, North America; ds = 0.10). Across unstable regions, men demonstrated higher attachment avoidance compared to females, whereas females demonstrated higher attachment anxiety than males. According to Del Giudice (2011), the findings of the meta-analysis provided support for his life-history take on sex differences in adult attachment. Recently, Del Giudice (2016) has found further support for his model, demonstrating that sex differences appear even more pronounced when attachment is analyzed at the facet level (ie, decomposing attachment style into more fine-grained factors such as self-reliance, discomfort with closeness, preoccupation, and alike) rather than at the broad level of attachment anxiety and avoidance. In summary, Del Giudice's findings suggest that small but reliable sex differences exist in attachment style, but only in contexts indicative of environmental harshness or unpredictability. In these environments, insecure men are characterized by greater attachment avoidance whereas insecure women are characterized by greater attachment anxiety.

Other researchers have interpreted observed sex differences in attachment from a social-developmental perspective rather than from an evolutionary standpoint. In particular, some suggest that sex differences in attachment insecurity may be a product of gender stereotypes (eg, Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Feeney & Noller, 1996; Karantzas et al., 2016). For example, males high in attachment avoidance demonstrate exaggerated features of the masculine gender role such that they are overly self-reliant and minimize the display of emotion or react with little emotion within the context of relationships. In contrast, females high in attachment anxiety display exaggerated features of the feminine gender role such that they are overly emotionally available, and place great emphasis on intimacy. Some theorists contend that gender differences may vary as a function of culture. In which case, these differences will be larger in cultures that more readily endorse masculine and feminine stereotypes. While this may indeed be the case, social-developmental accounts of gender differences in attachment say little about whether the harshness and unpredictability that may be associated with particular cultures or regions around the world play a role in determining sex differences. Given these competing explanations, future work into sex differences in attachment should attempt to test whether evolutionary or social-developmental accounts are better equipped to explain such differences.

In a related line of work, researchers have investigated whether the associations between attachment insecurity and various outcomes, such as partner support, sexual coercion, and communication are related to sex differences. Generally, no consistent sex differences are found for associations between adult attachment style and relationship outcomes (eg, Donovan & Emmers-Sommer, 2012; Karantzas, Feeney, Goncalves, & McCabe, 2014; Karantzas et al., 2016). For example, in a study of heterosexual couples, Karantzas et al. (2014) found no sex differences in actor effects linking attachment anxiety and avoidance with partner support and trust. In contrast, in a meta-analysis examining the association between adult attachment style and sexual coercion, Karantzas et al. (2015c) found that attachment avoidance in men was associated with the perpetration of sexual coercion, while no such association was found for women.

Summary

Del Giudice's meta-analytic work suggests that, although sex differences are small and not easy to detect in individual studies, there are sex differences in adult attachment styles. Namely, men are more likely to demonstrate attachment insecurity in the form of attachment avoidance while women demonstrate insecurity in the form of attachment anxiety. Evolutionary perspectives that incorporate life history theory and sexual strategies may be especially important in understanding sex differences in attachment. Del Giudice (2011) suggests that the sex-neutral assumptions about adult attachment require revision to acknowledge variation in attachment as a function of sex. Although this is a reasonable conclusion based on the existing literature, van IJzendoorn and colleagues

(eg, Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2009; van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010) claim that there is too much inconsistency in the findings to draw any firm conclusions regarding sex differences. So the most appropriate way forward may be to take a conservative approach to claims regarding sex differences in adult attachment. Namely, differences may well exist but they are likely to be pretty small at best.

ARE THERE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN ADULT ATTACHMENT?

According to Bowlby (1969/1982) the attachment system is an evolved behavioral system that governs the development and maintenance of the bond between an individual and his or her primary caregiver. Thus, all humans, regardless of cultural context, have the ability to form attachment bonds. However, researchers have been interested in determining whether individual differences in adult attachment differ across cultures (eg, Schmitt et al., 2004). The premise behind this research is that cultural differences including, but not limited to, parenting practices, the expression of emotion, and the collectivist or individualist nature of cultures may influence the degree to which individual differences in adult attachment are expressed. Differences as a function of culture may then have important implications for how broad contextual factors impact the way in which individual differences in attachment develop and are maintained.

To date, considerable attempts have been made to understand the role of culture in the study of attachment. When it comes to the relative distributions of attachment styles in different cultures, some studies find no differences whereas other studies demonstrate clear cultural variability. For instance, a study by Doherty, Hatfield, Thompson, and Choo (1994) did not find significant differences in the distribution of attachment styles across cultures (ie, European-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Pacific Islanders). Doherty and colleagues found that across cultures, over 60% of individuals were classified as secure, approximately 25% were classified as avoidant, and 8% were classified as anxious. Meta-analytic studies (that focused on AAI assessments of attachment) have found similar distributions in attachment styles across cultures (eg, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996, 2010).

Schmitt and colleagues (Schmitt, 2008, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2004) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of culture and attachment and found cultural variability in adult attachment. Specifically, Schmitt and colleagues studied over 17,000 individuals across 62 cultures from 11 regions around the world. They found that secure attachment was the most prevalent adult attachment style in 79% of cultures. However, preoccupied attachment was more prevalent in East Asian countries compared to other regions (Schmitt et al., 2004; Schmitt, 2011). Dismissive attachment was more prevalent in countries located in Africa and Southeast Asia (Schmitt et al., 2004; Schmitt, 2008).

Other studies have reported cross-cultural differences in adult attachment. A number of these studies have focused on comparing African-American, Asian, and

Hispanic cultures with Caucasian or European-American cultures. For example, there are a number of studies that find African-Americans rate higher on attachment avoidance than European Americans (eg, Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000; Magai et al., 2001; Wei et al., 2004). Other studies suggest that people in some Asian cultures, such as Japan and Korea, report higher attachment anxiety than people in Western cultures (eg, You & Malley-Morrison, 2000). For example, Agishtein and Brumbaugh (2013) found that individuals who identified themselves as Asian rated significantly higher on attachment anxiety compared with other ethnicities (eg, Asian-Indian, African-American, Caucasian, and Hispanic), while no ethnic differences emerged in terms of attachment avoidance. Interestingly, greater identification with one's culture was negatively associated with both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. However, other studies conducted on Asian cultures report different findings. For instance, Kim and Zane (2004) found that individuals of Korean descent reported higher attachment avoidance than people of European backgrounds. In relation to people of Hispanic background, Wei et al. (2004) found Hispanic-Americans to be higher on attachment anxiety compared to Caucasians, while Lopez et al. (2000) found differences in attachment avoidance but not in attachment anxiety between the two cultural groups.

In a related line of work, Mak, Bond, Simpson, and Rholes (2010) and You et al. (2015) examined the extent to which cultural differences moderated the direct and indirect effects of attachment anxiety and avoidance on depression. Across these studies, partner support, relationship satisfaction (Mak et al., 2010), and relational conflict (You et al., 2015) were examined as mediators of the direct associations between attachment and depressive symptoms. Analyses revealed that partner support and relational conflict mediated the link between attachment avoidance and depressive symptoms to a greater extent in the Hong Kong-Chinese sample relative to the sample from the United States.

Some scholars (eg, Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013) have suggested that the differences found between cultures reflect variation in different socio-developmental factors. For example, African-Americans tend to respond more punitively to emotional expression than Caucasians (Montague, Magai, Consedine, & Gillespie, 2003). This, in turn, may contribute to higher levels of avoidance, and to the variability in attachment avoidance between cultures. Similarly, differences in attachment anxiety between Eastern and Western cultures may reflect variation in individualism versus collectivism (ie, the extent to which cultural norms emphasize the goals of the individual above the goals of groups versus cultures where the goals of groups are prioritized above the goals of a given individual). The highly interdependent nature of collectivist cultures may place a greater emphasis on seeking the approval of others and maintaining vigilant monitoring of their relationships with others than is the case in individualist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To this end, attachment avoidance may be viewed as more problematic in collectivist cultures as it explicitly violates cultural norms of investing in and tending to one's relationships (Mak et al., 2010; You et al., 2015).

Schmitt and colleagues (eg, Schmitt, 2008, 2011; Schmitt, 2005) suggest that differences in attachment avoidance (ie, dismissing attachment) across cultures may be best explained through life history theory and sexual mating strategies. Drawing on the work of Belsky et al. (1991), Schmitt (2005) suggest that attachment avoidance, and a focus on short-term mating strategies, are likely adaptations to harsh/high-stress environments. In support of this explanation, Schmitt et al. (2004) found that regions of high stress (characterized by low Gross Domestic Product output, lower life expectancy, higher incidence of infectious disease, lower adult literacy, and political freedom) had a higher proportion of individuals with a dismissing attachment style. These ideas are similar to the explanations proposed by Del Giudice (2009a, 2011) regarding sex differences.

Discrepant findings across studies investigating the same culture require a different explanation, however. Oftentimes, discrepancies may reflect sampling differences between studies. For example, some studies of Asian cultures, such as Japan or Korea, are conducted with residents who still live in Japan or Korea. In contrast, other studies include participants whose ethnic background is Japanese or Korean, but who reside in a Western society such as the United States. Potentially the different findings in studies on similar culture groups are due to the different origins of the samples.

Summary

The findings relating to culture and adult attachment suggest that cultural differences are not always found. Explanations for why cultural differences exist are largely speculative. That is, researchers make assumptions about why culture may moderate individual differences in adult attachment but these assumptions are rarely operationalized and tested as part of studies. Studies that test these assumptions are likely to significantly advance our understanding as to the precise mechanisms by which culture influences adult attachment.

ARE THERE AGE DIFFERENCES IN ADULT ATTACHMENT?

Bowlby believed that attachment was relevant across the lifespan. And although researchers have studied attachment in samples of various ages (eg, children, young adults), only recently have researchers begun to explore the way in which attachment styles might vary across age periods. This kind of research is important because it can help us understand whether attachment plays out differently at various stages of the lifespan. It may be that age differences reflect the impact of important developmental tasks and transitions that tap into attachment-related processes and experiences such as the transition to marriage or parenthood, or dealing with the loss of a spouse after illness during old age (Chopik & Edelstein, 2014; Karantzas, Feeney & Wilkinson, 2010; Magai, 2008).

Over the last two decades, a small but nonetheless important body of research has built up to address the question of age differences in attachment during

different stages of adulthood (eg, Antonucci, Akiyma, & Takahashi, 2004; Diehl, Elnick, Bourbeau, & Labouvie-Vief, 1998; Karantzas et al., 2010). Using either interview or self-report measures of attachment, studies suggest that individuals in middle to late adulthood report higher attachment avoidance (or dismissing attachment) compared to young adults and youth (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006; Magai, Hunziker, Mesias, & Culver, 2000; Magai et al., 2001; Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997; Segal, Needham, & Coolidge, 2009; Webster, 1997; Wensauer & Grossmann, 1995). In contrast young adults report significantly higher attachment anxiety (or preoccupied attachment) compared to adults in the middle or later stages of life (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006; Magai et al., 2001; Mickelson et al., 1997; Segal et al., 2009). Some studies find no age differences in adult attachment (eg, Consedine & Magai, 2003; Montague et al., 2003; Noftle & Shaver, 2006). Like with sex and culture, it is unclear whether inconsistencies reflect differences in methodology and measurement of attachment (ie, categorical versus self-report assessments), differences in sample sizes across studies (see Van Assche et al., 2013), or the actual lack of age-related differences.

In an attempt to address the limitations and inconsistencies of past research, Chopik, Edelstein, and Fraley (2013) conducted a large-scale study ($N > 86{,}000$) investigating age differences in adult attachment. In line with a number of previous studies, young adults tended to score significantly higher on attachment anxiety compared with middle and older adults. Attachment avoidance was found to be higher in middle adults and lower in both young adults and older adults (though the differences between age groups for avoidance were smaller compared to the age differences for attachment anxiety). Chopik and Edelstein (2014) replicated these age group findings using a similarly large sample ($N > 90{,}000$). Furthermore, they found little difference in these findings across cultures, suggesting the trends observed as a function of age appear to be universal.

Research into age differences in adult attachment is largely based on cross-sectional findings, with little by way of longitudinal research to systematically investigate age groups across time. However, existing longitudinal studies provide findings consistent with those emerging from cross-sectional studies. For example, in a 6-year longitudinal study, Zhang and Labouvie-Vief (2004) found that while attachment demonstrated a high degree of average stability over this period, older adults compared to younger adults became either more avoidant or secure and less anxious over time. Likewise, in a 25-year longitudinal study of women, Klohnen and John (1998) found attachment anxiety to decrease as individuals aged.

The evidence to date suggests that there are modest but consistent differences in adult attachment as a function of age. This raises the question of why age differences exist. A number of explanations have been proposed. Chopik et al. (2013) and Karantzas and colleagues (Karantzas & Cole, 2011; Karantzas et al., 2010) suggest that age differences in attachment may reflect normative age-related developmental imperatives. That is, it may be developmentally

appropriate, even functional, for levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance to spike and attenuate at different ages. Having a slightly heightened level of anxiety during young adulthood may serve to assist with emotional bonding during the development of new romantic relationships. In fact, the forming of long-term adult relationships is regarded as a novel but key developmental task for young adults according to major lifespan developmental theories (eg, Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Levinson, 1986). Therefore, the uncertainty regarding how romantic relationships should be navigated is likely to manifest in some trepidation and ambivalence for young adults. As individuals become more mature and experienced in navigating romantic relationships, attachment anxiety may attenuate, that is, people become more secure in themselves, their relationships, and their skills and abilities to manage relationships.

In relation to attachment avoidance, Chopik et al. (2013) suggest that higher levels of avoidance in middle adulthood relative to young adulthood may be indicative of developmental processes associated with individuation. While individuation begins in young adulthood, it may be that it is consolidated and manifested in middle adulthood (eg, Buhl, 2008). Alternatively, Magai and colleagues (eg, Fiori, Consedine, & Magai, 2009; Magai, 2008; Magai et al., 2001) propose that increases in attachment avoidance as a function of age may reflect person by environment interactions. Specifically, socio-historical factors (such as the Great Depression and the World Wars) may have meant that older generations have experienced significant life adversity and interpersonal losses. These difficult life circumstances may have given primacy to self-reliance and the need to develop a sense of stoicism. These personal responses to harsh contexts may manifest in the form of attachment avoidance. While Magai and colleagues frame their explanation in socio-historical terms, this explanation resonates with the life history perspectives proposed by Del Giudice (2011) and Schmitt (2005) in their discussion of sex and cultural differences. That is, environments characterized by greater harshness and unpredictability may bias individuals to demonstrate greater attachment avoidance during middle adulthood and possibly beyond.

Summary

Evidence suggests that age has a small to moderate but consistent association with individual differences in adult attachment. Specifically, attachment anxiety appears to peak in young adulthood while attachment avoidance seems most pronounced during middle adulthood. We reviewed a number of the proposed explanations for these age differences in adult attachment. The explanations put forward by attachment researchers largely focus on normative age-related processes or on the role of socio-historical factors. We further contend that socio-historical explanations share much in common with life history perspectives. Thus, it appears that development, historical, and evolutionary perspectives may provide important insights into future research examining age-related differences in adult attachment.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP STATUS AND RELATIONSHIP LENGTH IN ADULT ATTACHMENT?

There exists a significant body of research demonstrating that people who are in a romantic relationship experience a greater number of physical and mental health benefits than people who are single (eg, deVaus, 2002; Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008; Uecker, 2012). Various relationship theorists contend that the benefits associated with being in a romantic relationship tap into humans' innate needs for social affiliation, love, and comfort (eg, Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). The research outlined in chapter: What Is an Attachment Relationship? suggests that romantic partners assume the role of the primary attachment figure in adulthood, and are relied upon to fulfill various attachment functions (eg, Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Pitman & Scharfe, 2010). It thus stands to reason that relationship status (eg, single, dating, cohabiting, married) and relationship length may be important factors that influence individual differences in adult attachment.

Attempts specifically aimed at investigating the role of relationship status and relationship length in romantic adult attachment are few and far between. However, in recent years, there has been increasing interest in understanding how relationship involvement (either the type of relationship people are in [eg, cohabiting, married], or the time spent together) moderates adult attachment. The research conducted to date demonstrates some consistency in the moderating role of relationship status, but little by way of consistency in terms of relationship length.

Relationship Status

A number of studies have found that people in romantic relationships report lower attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance compared to people who are not in a relationship (eg, Edelstein & Gillath, 2008). In a study of Polish young adults, Adamczyk and Bookwala (2013) found that partnered individuals demonstrated significantly lower attachment anxiety than single individuals. A similar finding was reported by Brown and Trevethan (2010) who found that single gay men reported greater attachment insecurity (higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance) compared to gay men that had been previously married. The cross-cultural work of Schmitt and colleagues (Schmitt, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2004) demonstrated that a higher proportion of secure attachment was found amongst partnered individuals (steady dating, cohabiting, engaged, married) compared to individuals who were single or dating multiple people (eg, Schachner, Shaver, & Gillath, 2008). When studying over 86,000 individuals, Chopik et al. (2013) found that partnered individuals demonstrated lower attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance compared with single individuals. Furthermore, these findings were largely consistent across different age groups ranging from young adults to older adults.

Longitudinal studies that have examined the effects of relationship status have found status to moderate attachment security over time. For example, in a study of newlyweds, Davila, Karney, and Bradbury (1999) found attachment security increased over a 2-year period as couples transitioned into married life. Tarabulsy et al. (2012) found that, over a 1-year period, individuals who remained single demonstrated greater preoccupied attachment than partnered individuals. These effects held even when controlling for the experience of different life events, personal adjustment, and socioeconomic status (SES).

However, studies also exist that have found no differences in adult attachment as a function of relationship status. For example, Schachner, Shaver, and Gillath (2008) found no differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance between long-term singles and those who were in a relationship. Likewise, Mickelson et al. (1997) found no difference in the attachment classifications of individuals who were married compared to those who were never married.

Like with, sex, culture, and age, relationship status was also found to moderate the associations between attachment style and relational outcomes. For example, Kafetsios, Andriopoulos, and Papachiou (2014) found that individuals in a romantic relationship who were also high on attachment avoidance demonstrated lower accuracy in decoding facial expressions of positive affect compared to those who were not in a relationship. According to Kafetsios et al., being in a relationship may trigger avoidant individuals' defensive strategies. As a result, avoidant individuals are likely to ignore positive affirming and affiliative signals from romantic partners, a point echoed by Edelstein and Gillath (2008). Young and Acitelli (1998) found that relationship status moderated the association between individuals' positive appraisals of partners and attachment style. Specifically, married men high on attachment anxiety perceived their partners less positively than married men that were securely or avoidantly attached. Furthermore, securely attached married women appraised their partners more positively than insecurely attached married women. No such differences were found for unmarried men and women.

Relationship Length

The findings for relationship length appear to be far less consistent compared to those for relationship status. For instance, Henderson, Bartholomew, and Dutton (1997) found that in abused women, relationship length was negatively associated with preoccupied attachment and positively associated with fearful attachment. In a prospective dyadic study, Duemmler and Kobak (2001) found relationship length was positively associated with attachment security in dating couples. In a prospective study of couples, Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) found that relationship duration did not impact the stability of attachment style in couple members.

In a field study, Fraley and Shaver (1998) observed the attachment behaviors of couples in an airport in which partners were either separating from one

another or flying together. That is, the study focused on behaviors indicative of attachment system functioning rather than individual differences in attachment style. Findings revealed that attachment behavior (eg, proximity maintenance and proximity seeking, resistance, sadness) was negatively associated with relationship length. That is, couples that had been together longer demonstrated less attachment behavior when separating. Fraley and Shaver suggested that this finding may indicate that couples with a longer relationship history may perceive short periods of separation as unlikely to threaten the longevity of the relationship.

There are a number of studies that however find relationship length does not moderate attachment processes (eg, Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010). For example, in a study of couple functioning, Karantzas et al. (2014) found that relationship length did not moderate the strength of the direct and indirect associations between attachment anxiety and avoidance and relationship factors such as trust, social support, intimacy, conflict-centered communication, and relationship satisfaction.

In an attempt to reconcile the extent to which relationship length moderates the associations between attachment style and relationship outcomes, Hadden, Smith, and Webster (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 57 studies examining the impact of relationship duration on the links between adult attachment and relationship satisfaction and commitment. The findings demonstrated that as relationship duration increased, the negative associations between attachment anxiety and avoidance and relationship satisfaction strengthened. No such findings were observed in relation to commitment, with the authors citing a lack of statistical power to find moderation effects.

Summary

Research on relationship status generally suggests that being in a more committed relationship is associated with greater attachment security and attenuates the effects of attachment insecurity on relationship processes and outcomes. In contrast, the effect of relationship length demonstrates a somewhat inconsistent picture, enhancing attachment security in some studies (eg, Duemmler & Kobak, 2001) while yielding little to no effects or negative effects in other studies (eg, Hadden et al., 2014; Karantzas et al., 2014).

So, why would relationship status appear to demonstrate consistent and facilitative effects when it comes to adult attachment? A relationship status that reflects greater involvement and commitment may be characteristic of a relationship context in which partners can more readily develop common relationship goals and fulfill one another's socio-emotional needs. Therefore, the inherent properties associated with more involved relationships may enhance attachment security and relationship functioning in couples. However, this explanation assumes that relationship status has some causal influence over attachment processes. We acknowledge that it is just as plausible that relationship

partners' attachment styles may propel couples into a particular relationship status. That is, couples that report a more secure attachment may be more inclined to pursue either a steady dating, cohabiting, or marital relationship compared to insecurely attached couples.

HOW DO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTACHMENT MANIFEST IN DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP STAGES?

Up until this point in the chapter we have focused on how particular contexts may influence individual differences in adult attachment. In the remainder of this chapter, we switch tack somewhat and approach the topic of context from a different angle. Here we focus on how attachment styles are associated with various relationship processes across three different relationship phases. These phases represent the life cycle of romantic relationships, their formation, maintenance, and dissolution. We regard each of these phases as contexts unto themselves, milieus that individuals must navigate when forming lasting relationships with romantic partners.

In outlining a case for how attachment theory can be used as a framework for understanding romantic relationships, Hazan and Shaver (1994) noted (in part) that attachment dynamics can be best understood across these three stages of the relationship life-cycle. Indeed the study of attachment dynamics during the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic relationships provides important insights into the reasons behind individuals' cognitive-affective and behavioral responses within their most intimate of adult relations.

Relationship Formation

The attachment system is likely to be highly active in the early stages of a relationship because people are likely to experience trepidation and uncertainty about how the relationship will progress. Thus, it is assumed that individual differences in attachment style are associated with the extent to which an individual seeks proximity and closeness to the dating partner as well as engages in flirtatious behavior with a potential romantic partner.

Shaver and Mikulincer (2006) suggest that securely attached individuals feel more comfortable seeking proximity and engaging in flirting behavior with a romantic partner during the early stages of a relationship compared with insecure individuals. Shaver and Mikulincer contend that this flirtatious approach is underpinned by securely attached individuals' positive working models of self and others and their propensity to cope with novel situations in an optimistic and constructive manner. Moreover, securely attached individuals tend to report more positive interactions in the initial phase of a relationship than individuals that are insecurely attached (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). These positive interactions, coupled with their positive working models of themselves and others, mean that securely attached individuals hold

optimistic views about the longevity of relationships from early on (eg, Creasey & Jarvis, 2009). Furthermore, securely attached individuals present themselves in an authentic manner, reducing the need or desire to engage in self-presentation tactics designed to inflate one's self-image in the eyes of one's partner (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). Securely attached individuals tend to self-disclose in the early stages of a relationship; however, the self-disclosure is generally in proportion to the degree of partner self-disclosure (eg, Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002; Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991).

In contrast, the behaviors of anxiously attached individuals can make relationship interactions early in the relationship seem tense and distressing which can reduce partner interest and may precipitate early breakup (McClure & Lydon, 2014; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). Thought to be underpinned by anxious individuals' hyperactivating behavioral strategies, and the desire to solicit sympathy and compassion, anxious individuals can often be perceived as overly needy, weak, or helpless, thus compromising the longevity of one's relationship. When it comes to self-disclosure, anxiously attached individuals tend to engage in frequent and indiscriminate disclosure early in a relationship, perhaps in an attempt to foster intimacy and a connection with one's romantic partner. However, Reis and Shaver (1988) propose that intimacy is a dyadic process in which the disclosure by one partner needs to be met with a sensitive response by the other. In the case of attachment anxiety, anxious individuals focus on their own self-disclosure, leaves little by way of cognitive and affective resources to attend sensitively to the disclosure of a romantic partner. Thus intimacy is likely to suffer as a function of anxious individuals' high and indiscriminate self-disclosure. In addition to issues of self-disclosure, anxiously attached individuals can exaggerate or spend considerable time worrying over real or imagined instances of partner rejection (eg, Besser & Priel, 2009; Downey & Feldman, 1996). To this end, anxiously attached individuals can experience the stage of relationship initiation/formation as one filled with greater tension, distress, and worry compared to individuals who are securely attached (McClure & Lydon, 2014).

That being said, research by Brumbaugh and Fraley (2010) suggests that anxious individuals are particularly good at portraying a very positive persona in the very early stages of a romantic relationship. According to Fraley and Brumbaugh, individuals high in attachment anxiety may have a degree of awareness regarding some of their more negative characteristics. To avoid making a poor first impression, anxious individuals attempt to conceal their negative characteristics when meeting a potential mate. By reaching out to a potential romantic partner and eliciting conversation, anxious individuals increase the likelihood of coming across as interesting and friendly. Likewise, Eastwick and Finkel (2008) found that in fledgling relationships, experiencing attachment anxiety toward a potential partner was found to have a facilitative effect. Specifically, partner-specific attachment anxiety was found to motivate individuals

to engage in greater proximity seeking, supportive behavior, and to experience passionate love.

The behaviors of individuals high on attachment avoidance can appear rejecting and emotionally detached from one's partner during the initial stages of a relationship, minimizing the chances for a fledging romance to evolve into a more committed relationship. Thought to be underpinned by deactivating behavioral strategies, avoidant individuals tend also to overexaggerate their strengths. Some contend that this is an attempt by avoidant individuals to inflate their self-image in the eyes of their partner, even at the risk of diminishing a partner's own worth, value, or contributions to the relationship (eg, Gabriel, Carvallo, Dean, Tippin, & Renaud, 2005; Lopez, 2001). Such self-presentation early in a relationship is thought to help avoidant individuals maintain a sense of self-reliance while keeping emotional distance from one's partner (eg, Mikulincer et al., 1998; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997). As a case in point, Fraley, Davis, and Shaver (1998) found that attachment avoidance was negatively associated with behaviors signaling intimacy and closeness such as holding hands, mutual gazing, and cuddling. Given their approach to romantic relationships, avoidant individuals appear to engage in little if any self-disclosure in the early stages of a relationship (eg, Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). Furthermore, avoidant individuals often place a premium on keeping the relationship purely sexual (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Specifically, individuals high in attachment avoidance endorse engaging in casual sexual relationships and seek out short-term sexual encounters to avoid the emotional involvement associated with long-term relationships (eg, Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993; Schachner & Shaver, 2004).

Despite the negative portrayal of avoidant individuals with respect to their attitudes and behaviors during relationship formation, Brumbaugh and Fraley (2010) found that avoidant individuals tend to use humor and physical touch as two dating strategies during relationship initiation. According to Fraley and Brumbaugh, the use of humor to build rapport enhances a partner's positive mood, and thereby, promotes a partner's positive evaluation of the avoidantly attached individual. The use of touch on the other hand is surprising given that numerous studies have found that attachment avoidance is associated with a discomfort with emotional closeness (eg, Collins & Read, 1990; Karantzas et al., 2010). Fraley and Brumbaugh suggest that while this may be the case in established relationships, avoidant individuals may not have an aversion to getting close to a new relationship partner or, physical touch is used as a way to circumvent emotional closeness but to establish a relationship nonetheless.

Research has also examined whether adult attachment is associated with mate selection and the qualities desired in a romantic partner (eg, Chappell & Davis, 1998; Mikulincer & Arad, 1999; Surra, Gray, Boettcher, Cottle, & West, 2006). Research has examined three tenable hypotheses regarding the association between attachment style and partner selection.

The first hypothesis, termed the attachment-security hypothesis (eg, Chappell & Davis, 1998; Kholnen & Luo, 2003), suggests that irrespective of

a person's attachment style, all individuals are drawn to securely attached partners. Implicit in this hypothesis is that despite a person's attachment style, all individuals will value partners who are characterized as caring and trustworthy.

The second hypothesis is termed the similarity hypothesis (eg, Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, & DeBord, 1996) and is drawn from the broader literature on attraction (eg, Byrne, 1971). This hypothesis suggests that individuals are likely to prefer romantic partners that exhibit similar characteristics to themselves, and thus will be attracted to a person with an attachment style similar to their own.

The third hypothesis, again drawn from the literature on attraction, is the complementarity hypothesis (eg, Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Surra et al., 2006). This hypothesis suggests that people value and prefer partners that exhibit characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes which complement those of their own. According to Holmes and Johnson (2009) the implication of this hypothesis is that individuals high in attachment anxiety would prefer partners who are high on attachment avoidance and vice-versa. While the complementary hypothesis seems paradoxical, self-consistency theory (Snyder & Swann, 1978; Swann, 1983; Swann & Read, 1981) suggests that the desire to maintain a predictable social reality motivates individuals to interact with others who fit with their existing knowledge structures and facilitates the maintenance of a stable self-image. Holmes and Johnson (2009) contend that in relation to anxious individuals, partnering with an avoidant person would substantiate anxious individuals' negative expectation of others as distant in relationships. Holmes and Johnson also suggest that in contrast, an avoidant individual who partners with an anxious person would confirm the avoidant individual's negative expectations of romantic partners as excessively dependent and clingy (Holmes & Johnson, 2009).

Before discussing the evidence regarding these alternative hypotheses, we believe it is important to highlight some theoretical inconsistencies that relate to Holmes and Johnson's (2009) description of the complementarity hypothesis as it relates to adult attachment. When discussing the primary dimensions underlying attachment styles (ie, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance), the "complement" to high attachment anxiety or avoidance is low attachment anxiety or avoidance and not the high end of the alternative dimension. Put another way, the complement of high attachment anxiety is low attachment anxiety and not high attachment avoidance. Likewise, the complement of high attachment avoidance is low attachment avoidance and not high attachment anxiety. Thus, we consider the description of the complementarity hypothesis provided by Holmes and Johnson as one that does not reflect an accurate interpretation of this hypothesis according to the dimensional conceptualization of adult attachment.

Studies examining these competing hypotheses have found considerable support for the security hypothesis (eg, Chappell & Davis, 1998; Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994). A series of correlational and experimental studies on attraction and mate selection suggest that individuals who encompass the qualities of a securely attached individual are generally

favored as partners irrespective of participants' own attachment style (eg, Chappell & Davis, 1998; Klohnen & Luo, 2003; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994). According to Latty-Mann and Davis (1996), the tendency to be attracted to and aspire for a securely attached individual reflects the fact that secure partners offer the best chance for developing positive and enduring couple relationships. This is largely because secure partners are skilled at responding to a partner's needs and engage in pro-relationship behaviors that include the fostering of intimacy, effective communication, and commitment (see section on relationship maintenance). Moreover, given that the attachment needs of individuals are to feel loved, comforted, and secure, it stands to reason that secure individuals are preferred as ideal partners by many individuals irrespective of their own attachment style.

While people generally prefer secure romantic partners, there is some support for the similarity hypothesis (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996; Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, & DeBord, 1996; Le Poire, Shepard, & Duggan, 1999). For example, in a study of couples Frazier and colleagues (1996, Study 1) found that individuals were attracted to and more likely to be dating a romantic partner that had a similar attachment style. In an experimental study, Baldwin et al. (1996, Study 3) found that individuals that were primed with either a secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment relationship reported increased attraction to a potential partner with a similar attachment style.

According to Holmes and Johnson (2009) support also exists for the complementarity hypothesis. Support for this hypothesis has been purportedly found in a series of correlational and prospective studies involving romantic couples (eg, Collins et al., 2002; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990). For example, in a longitudinal study of couples, Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) found no evidence of romantic relationships comprising anxious–anxious or avoidant–avoidant pairings of men and women; rather, anxious–avoidant pairings were found amongst a large proportion of couples. More recently, Strauss et al. (2012) found that individuals high on attachment anxiety reported perceiving their partner as having characteristics representative of attachment avoidance, while individuals high on attachment avoidance reported partners as exhibiting features akin to attachment anxiety. We again stress that we do not regard these studies as providing evidence for the complementarity hypothesis. For the complementarity hypothesis to be supported, the findings would need to reflect that individuals high on attachment anxiety would prefer a partner low on attachment anxiety; likewise an individual high on attachment avoidance would prefer a partner low on this dimension.

Summary

The findings provide solid support for the security hypothesis. Irrespective of a person's attachment style, a secure relationship partner is deemed an attractive mate with whom one can develop a relationship. Support also exists for the similarity hypothesis, and that similarity may play a role when seeking out a potential partner or in the very early stages of relationship formation. It may also

be that one seeks out a partner who is similar in the absence of having access to a potential mate who exhibits attachment security. That is, in the absence of security, familiarity may be the next best option. Finally support for the complementarity hypothesis is somewhat mixed, if not because of the findings, then because some researchers have inappropriately assumed that the complement of attachment anxiety is attachment avoidance. All that we can say is that in some instances, people do partner with individuals that have a different attachment style to their own. However, the reasons for this are largely unknown.

Relationship Maintenance

One of the most widely studied associations in romantic relationships is the link between adult attachment style and relationship satisfaction. However, over the last two decades, researchers have attempted to understand aspects of relationship functioning that help to explain why securely attached individuals maintain loving and satisfying relationships, while insecurely attached individuals maintain relationships that are largely turbulent and unsatisfying. In the sections that follow, we review research on the direct association between adult attachment and relationship satisfaction. We then turn our focus to discuss some of the most widely investigated mechanisms that can help us understand how individual differences in adult attachment lead to successful—and unsuccessful—relationship functioning.

Attachment Style and Relationship Satisfaction

When it comes to relationship satisfaction, studies consistently find that securely attached individuals report romantic relationships as satisfying (eg, Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, 1990). In particular, secure individuals report their relationships as loving, as involving passion, commitment, and intimacy, as well as selfless acts to meet the needs of a romantic partner (eg, Heaven, Da Silva, Carey, & Holen, 2004; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989; Levy & Davis, 1988). Secure individuals also demonstrate the capacity to balance being emotionally close to a romantic partner with being independent. Conversely, insecurely attached individuals tend to report significantly less satisfaction with their romantic relationships compared to securely attached individuals (eg, Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990). Specifically, individuals high in attachment avoidance describe their romantic relationships as encompassing more game playing, lacking intimacy, and low on passion and commitment (eg, Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Levy & Davis, 1988). Anxiously attached individuals report their romantic relationships as encompassing possessiveness, a sense of neediness, and frequent jealousy (eg, Feeney & Noller, 1990; Fricker & Moore, 2002). Individuals high in attachment anxiety also desire passion, commitment, and intimacy, but report their relationships as falling short of these desires, which can lead to heightened dissatisfaction and conflict (eg, Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Having established the direct associations between attachment style, relationship satisfaction, and people's experiences of romantic relationships, attachment researchers have attempted to understand these associations further by investigating whether various relationship processes act as explanatory mechanisms (or mediators). Specifically, we focus on three broad mechanisms: (1) cognitive mechanisms such as goals and beliefs, (2) behavioral responses (specifically conflict patterns, responding positively toward one's partner, reactions to a partner's negative behavior, and partner support), and (3) relationship trust. Although researchers have focused on many more mechanisms, we highlight these three broad mechanisms in particular because they: (1) have strong theoretical connections with attachment, (2) represent many of the mechanisms that have generated attention in relationships research, and (3) have been studied the most by attachment researchers.

Relationship Maintenance Mechanisms

Goals and Beliefs

Securely attached individuals endorse goals of intimacy and closeness and maintain optimistic beliefs about relationship partners (eg, Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, 1990). As outlined in chapter: What Are Attachment Working Models?, these relationship-promotion goals and optimistic beliefs about partners are based on secure individuals' positive attachment working models (Mikulincer & Arad, 1999; Rowe & Carnelley, 2005; You & Malley-Morrison, 2000; Whiffen, 2005). Furthermore, these positive goals and beliefs have been found to enhance securely attached individuals' commitment toward long-term relationships (eg, Dandurand, Bouaziz, & Lafontaine, 2013).

Avoidantly attached individuals tend to harbor goals that emphasize emotional distance and hold relationship beliefs that place little value or priority on relationship maintenance (Gillath et al., 2006; Locke, 2008). These goals and beliefs inhibit avoidantly attached individuals from committing, or attending, to their relationships (eg, Feeney, 2008). Rather their goals and beliefs help to maintain their avoidant ways in romantic relationships. Anxiously attached individuals, on the other hand, tend to maintain negative beliefs about relationship partners and their relationship goals reflect an ambivalent approach-avoidance orientation. Specifically, anxiously attached individuals have been found to subscribe to relationship goals with an emphasis on minimizing distance from one's partner as well as avoiding emotional closeness (eg, Dandurand et al., 2013; Gillath et al., 2006; Locke, 2008).

Conflict Patterns

The strategies that people use to handle conflict have received much attention in relationship research, especially in reference to adult attachment (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994; Keelan et al., 1998; Noller, 2012). Securely attached people demonstrate highly constructive ways of dealing with conflict involving

attempts to compromise, openly listen to their partner's perspective, and endeavor to deal with problems in a solution-focused manner (Feeney et al., 1994; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992, 2002). Conversely, attachment anxiety has been found to be positively associated with having more dominating and manipulating partners who demonstrate an inability to compromise during conflicts. Attachment avoidance has been found to be associated with less negotiation and increased conflict withdrawal (eg, Feeney, 1994, 1998). The different use of conflict patterns by individuals with different attachment styles has been found to differentially influence the maintenance of romantic relationships. Specifically, in a series of longitudinal studies, patterns associated with insecure attachment such as manipulation, demand, and withdrawal have been found to reduce relationship quality and operate as a risk factor for relationship breakdown (eg, Feeney et al., 1994). The constructive conflict patterns associated with attachment security have on the other hand been found to buffer against such breakdown and facilitate the effective problem-solving of relationship issues (eg, Feeney et al., 1994; Simpson et al., 1992, 2002).

Reactions to Negative Partner Behavior

Aside from focusing on conflict patterns, research has also investigated the extent to which adult attachment style is associated with people's general reactions to a partner's negative behavior. Research has generally found that securely attached individuals respond with anger and frustration to a partner's negative behavior; however, this response is often controlled and the affective tone does not reflect hostility, vengeance, or hatred toward the partner (eg, Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004; Mikulincer, 1998a; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Moreover, secure individuals demonstrate the capacity to forgive a relationship partner and help to facilitate apology by openly accepting and acknowledging a partner's remorse, which can increase relationship stability and maintenance (eg, Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2011).

In contrast, attachment anxiety is associated with an uncontrolled negative emotional response often characterized by hostility and anger (Jang, Smith, & Levine, 2002; Mikulincer, 1998). Of note, this angry and hostile response can be directed either at the relationship partner or toward oneself (chastising the self for having put their faith in the partner only to experience being let down, eg, Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, 1998a; Rholes et al., 1995). These hostile and negative responses have been found to hamper relationship repair and heighten the experience of adjustment problems (eg, Feeney, 2004, 2005).

Attachment avoidance is associated with a negative emotional response to a partner's negative behavior. However, the response tends to be a dissociative hostile response. That is, the partner acts in a hostile manner, but the hostility is not always directed at the partner during the negative episode, rather the hostility may manifest sometime after the interaction (Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, 1998b; Rholes et al., 1995). This dissociative response is thought to occur as a function of avoidant individuals' use of deactivating strategies in which

attempts are made to suppress negative affect. Furthermore, individuals high on attachment avoidance perceive partners as lacking remorse for their negative behavior and that the relationship has deteriorated; these perceptions only increase conflict and hamper relationship repair (eg, Feeney, 2004; Kachadourian et al., 2004; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006).

Expression of Positivity Toward a Romantic Partner

Securely attached individuals demonstrate greater respect, admiration, and gratitude toward their relationship partners than insecure individuals (eg, Frei & Shaver, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Individuals high in attachment anxiety tend to respond to their partner with a mixture of gratitude and love; however, this response is often accompanied by expressions of inferiority about themselves or concerns about their partner or relationship generally (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Individuals high in attachment avoidance on the other hand tend to express little gratitude or appreciation toward their partner, even in instances when the romantic partner has behaved in a positive and thoughtful manner (eg, Mikulincer et al., 2006).

Social Support

The support that is provided and received between relationship partners has been widely studied as an important dyadic process for the maintenance of a romantic relationship (eg, Cutrona, 2012). Individual differences in attachment have been studied at length in relation to the provision and the seeking of social support. When it comes to providing support to one's partner, attachment insecurity is generally negatively associated whereas attachment security is positively associated with the provision of sensitive and responsive partner support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Hohaus, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996, 2002). More specifically, avoidantly attached individuals appear to be less empathic and provide partner support in a manner that is both distant and controlling (eg, Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson et al., 2011). In contrast, anxiously attached individuals provide support to one's partner in a very smothering and interfering manner (eg, Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Feeney & Collins, 2001). Securely attached individuals demonstrate empathy and care for their partner and respond in a manner that makes the partner feel supported, while maintaining his or her autonomy (eg, Feeney & Hohaus, 2001; Simpson et al., 2002).

Anxiously attached individuals tend to demonstrate an ambivalent pattern of support seeking. On some occasions they engage in excessive reassurance seeking, a pattern of support elicitation that can be viewed as demanding and intrusive by relationship partners (eg, Feeney, 2008; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005). Yet, on other occasions, when they expect their neediness to be met with rejection, they are less likely to openly express their needs for support (eg, Feeney, 2008). Avoidantly attached individuals are generally reluctant to seek support as partners are perceived as rejecting and incapable of providing a

safe haven and secure base (eg, Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, 2004; Simpson et al., 1992, 2002). On the rare occasions when support is elicited, it is generally instrumental support that is sought rather than emotional support (eg, Karantzas & Cole, 2011; Simpson et al., 1992, 2002). Securely attached individuals feel comfortable depending on relationship partners and perceive them as sensitive and responsive to one's needs (eg, Ognibene & Collins, 1998; Simpson et al., 2002; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). As a result, securely attached individuals seek support from romantic partners and generally report being satisfied with the support received. These positive support-seeking interactions have been found to predict relationship maintenance behaviors (eg, Feeney & Hohaus, 2001; Reiter & Gee, 2008).

Relationship Trust

Another important aspect of relationship maintenance processes is that of relationship trust. Trust is also fundamentally tied to issues pertaining to adult attachment. Some argue that issues of trust underpin attachment insecurity, with individuals high in attachment anxiety and avoidance having experienced relationships with romantic partners who are unreliable or inconsistent in responding to an individual's needs (eg, Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson et al., 2003). It is important to note that according to Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) prototypic model of attachment (reviewed in chapter: How Are Individual Differences in Attachment Measured?), while individuals high on attachment avoidance (referred to as dismissing within their framework) are assumed to hold negative views of others, thus it is implied that relationship partners may be viewed as distrusting. However, individuals high in attachment anxiety (termed preoccupied within the prototypic model) are thought to have positive views of others. Thus one could assume that anxiously attached individuals may have few, if any, concerns regarding relationship trust. However, as we outline in chapter: How Are Individual Differences in Attachment Measured?, research finds to the contrary when it comes to attachment anxiety, with anxious individuals holding quite negative perceptions of partners (eg, Collins, 1996; Simpson et al., 1996). Similarly, research on trust demonstrates that when it comes to attachment both anxious and avoidant individuals perceive relationship partners as untrusting (eg, Karantzas et al., 2014). This distrust of others is thought to be rooted in insecure individuals' concerns regarding the reliability and responsiveness of close others, which includes their relationship partners (Feeney, 2008; Karantzas et al., 2014; Mikulincer, 1998a). However, avoidant and anxious individuals differ in their reactions to trust violations by romantic partners.

In particular, the response of avoidantly attached individuals to trust violations is to dismiss the importance of relationship trust and to increase emotional distance from one's partner (Mikulincer, 1998a). This response is regarded as a self-protective response to minimize or short-circuit the experience of emotional hurt, a strategy underpinned by attachment deactivation strategies (Feeney, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). In contrast, the response of anxiously

attached individuals to trust violations is one of strong negative affect coupled with rumination over the violation(s) (Mikulincer, 1998a). This response is thought to reflect attachment hyperactivation strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As such, not only do anxiously attached individuals respond with negative affect and rumination, but they maintain a hypervigilance for trust violations by one's partner (Mikulincer, 1998). Securely attached individuals tend to trust relationship partners and are quick to remember instances that provide evidence for trusting one's partner (Mikulincer, 1998a). The trusting nature of securely attached individuals is thought to be underpinned by their positive working model of others and a bank of positive past relationship experiences (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000).

As a way of developing a more integrative account of how relationship maintenance processes are associated with adult attachment Karantzas et al. (2014) recently developed an attachment theory-based model of relationship functioning. As part of this model Karantzas and colleagues targeted relationship maintenance factors that had been examined separately as mediators of the association between attachment style and relationship quality. Based on previous research, Karantzas et al. hypothesized that trust, partner support, communication, and intimacy would mediate the association between attachment anxiety and avoidance and relationship satisfaction in romantic couples. Of note, evidence was found to support a series of hypothesized mediation paths such that trust and intimacy were found to mediate the associations between attachment anxiety and avoidance and relationship satisfaction. Likewise, partner support was also found to mediate the association between attachment and relationship satisfaction through intimacy. Finally, communication also figured as a mediator such that women's attachment anxiety and avoidance were negatively associated with trust, and in turn communication, which was further associated with their partner's relationship satisfaction. In particular, the results suggest that attachment style is indirectly, rather than directly, associated with relationship satisfaction through a series of proximal relationship maintenance factors, that is, factors that reflect dyadic processes that signal the ebb and flow of couple interactions.

Summary

Securely attached individuals tend to report romantic relationships as satisfying and this is likely due to their optimistic goals and beliefs in which intimacy and closeness are valued. Furthermore, secure individuals deal with conflict in highly constructive ways as well as having ability to inhibit destructive responses to a partner's negative behavior. Not only do they inhibit destructive tendencies, but secure individuals demonstrate positivity toward their partners by exhibiting admiration and respect. They also are skilled at providing support to a relationship partner that meets their needs in a way that doesn't compromise the partner's sense of autonomy. On the flip-side, secure individuals are comfortable with seeking support from romantic partners and are highly trusting of relationship partners.

Insecurely attached individuals report relationships as lacking satisfaction, but the pathways linking attachment insecurity to relationship dissatisfaction seem to differ in part for individuals high on either attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety. In relation to goals and beliefs, individuals high in attachment avoidance place a premium on emotional distance and have little by way of goals regarding relationship maintenance. Their conflict patterns reflect withdrawal from one's partner with little by way of negotiation. This distant pattern of responding is also reflected in avoidant individuals' reactions to negative behavior by one's partner. In these instances, individuals high in attachment avoidance demonstrate a displaced hostility, but also demonstrated little gratitude and appreciation in situations where a romantic partner behaves in a considerate or caring way. In terms of the provision of support, avoidant individuals respond in a distant and controlling manner, while seeking little support from a romantic partner, even in times of need. Individuals high on attachment avoidance are largely untrusting of relationship partners and when trust violations occur within a romantic relationship, these individuals dismiss the importance of trust and seek distance from relationship partners.

In contrast, individuals high in attachment anxiety demonstrate a different profile across these various relationship process variables. In relation to goals and beliefs, they desire reducing the distance between themselves and one's partner but at the same time have worries and concerns about emotional closeness. Anxious individuals also demonstrate conflict patterns that reflect criticism and the expression of a high degree of negative affect; a response that is not dissimilar to their reactions to a partner's negative behavior, a reaction that is often hostile and angry. Individuals high on attachment anxiety also demonstrate ambivalence in their attempts to respond to a partner in a positive way, a response that conflates gratitude and love with inferiority issues and worries about the relationship. With regards to social support, they exhibit a highly compulsive and smothering approach to providing support while demonstrating ambivalence in seeking support. Finally, anxious individuals are sensitive to trust violations, and thus, respond with strong negative affect to relationship transgressions.

Relationship Dissolution

In his trilogy on attachment theory, Bowlby (1980) devoted the final volume to the topic of loss and reactions to bereavement. While this volume placed emphasis on loss from the perspective of the child (and especially the loss of one's mother), Bowlby devoted a sizable part of the book to discussing relationship loss in adulthood, namely the loss of one's spouse. Since then, research on loss in romantic relationships has broadened to not only include loss in the form of the death of one's romantic partner, but also people's reactions to the dissolution of a romantic relationship.

Research has generally found that insecure individuals (especially those high on attachment avoidance) are more likely to experience relationship dissolution compared to securely attached individuals. This finding has been replicated across correlational and longitudinal studies (eg, Davis et al., 2004; Feeney & Noller, 1992; Pistole, 1995). Research suggests that securely attached people (compared to people who are insecurely attached) have a less negative emotional response to relationship dissolution (Pistole, 1995), assign less blame to the expartner for the breakup, are more likely to turn to friends and family for support in coping with the breakup, and report a greater willingness to recommence dating post breakup (eg, Davis et al., 2004; Madey & Jilek, 2012).

As part of a daily diary study designed to understand the processes that explain the differential outcomes of relationship dissolution for securely and insecurely attached individuals, Sbarra (2006) found that acceptance of relationship termination mediated the association between attachment security and recovery from negative affect post breakup (sadness and anger). In contrast, attachment anxiety was inversely associated with recovery from negative affect after relationship dissolution.

Other studies also find that anxiously attached individuals experience heightened affect following breakup and obsess more over one's expartner. For example, a number of studies report that anxiously attached individuals report greater surprise and upset as a result of relationship dissolution, greater preoccupation with the loss, and heightened attempts to reestablish the relationship compared to securely attached individuals (eg, Barbara & Dion, 2000; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Feeney & Noller, 1992). Furthermore, anxious individuals have been found to direct angry and vengeful behavior toward an expartner, as well as engage in unwanted pursuit of one's expartner (eg, Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Dutton & Winstead, 2006). Post breakup responses of anxiously attached individuals are thought to reflect their heightened rejection sensitivity and separation anxiety (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In relation to attachment avoidance, findings suggest that avoidant individuals report little by way of distress postseparation, nor do they engage in proximity-seeking attempts to reconnect with one's expartner (eg, Davis et al., 2004). Collins and Gillath (2012) suggest that the findings pertaining to attachment avoidance and relationship dissolution align with avoidant individuals' tendencies to avoid situations that may involve confrontations with one's partner and the experience of emotional discomfort.

In the only study to investigate the association between attachment style and strategies used when ending a relationship, Collins and Gillath (2012) found that attachment avoidance was associated with the use of less direct breakup strategies. In contrast, attachment anxiety was associated with the use of strategies designed to facilitate getting back together with one's expartner. Indirect strategies were associated with the experience of greater distress post breakup. Furthermore, Collins and Gillath found that security priming attenuated the associations between attachment insecurity and breakup strategies.

Summary

Research suggests that individuals who are securely attached are generally more accepting of relationship dissolution and deal with dissolution in a constructive way by turning to others for support. They also do not place emphasis on assigning blame and are willing to recommence dating post breakup. On the other hand, attachment insecurity is associated with negative behavioral and affective reactions to breakup. Attachment anxiety is often associated with partner obsession and pursuit-like behavior post dissolution, and heightened negative affect. Attachment avoidance has been found to be consistently associated with relationship dissolution. Individuals high on attachment avoidance seem to engage in indirect strategies for ending relationships and do not make attempts to reconnect with expartners. While some studies suggest that attachment avoidance is not associated with postdissolution distress (eg, Davis et al., 2004), other studies find avoidance to be indirectly associated with distress as a function of the use of indirect breakup strategies (Collins & Gillath, 2012). Thus, the approach to relationship dissolution may be particularly important as to whether avoidant individuals experience negative affect post relationship dissolution.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we reviewed research on a discrete but important set of contextual factors pertaining to adult attachment. We specifically focused on the contexts of gender, culture, age, relationship status and length. We also reviewed literature examining the associations between adult attachment and various relationship processes tied to the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic relationships. We centered on relationship processes because relationship functioning reflects a within-couple context in which to consider adult attachment. Our review of the literature suggests that not all contexts affect adult attachment in the same way. However, research into the associations between relationship processes and adult attachment has provided important and largely consistent insights into how individual differences in adult attachment influence people's navigation of their romantic relationships through three broad mechanisms, namely: (1) cognitive mechanisms (goals and beliefs), (2) behavioral responses (conflict patterns, responding positively toward one's partner, reactions to a partner's negative behavior, and partner support), and (3) relationship trust.