



Brief Report

Asymmetry in self-other agreement on attachment style among romantic partners

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ABSTRACT

This research reports about asymmetrical relations in self-other ratings of attachment style. Specifically, results showed that romantic partners hold relatively accurate perceptions of each other's attachment styles with one exception: women's ability to judge their male partner's level of attachment-related anxiety was compromised compared with the other agreement indices measured. The effect was not moderated by acquaintanceship length or relationship satisfaction, but it was affected by men's interpersonally oriented self-control. The findings appear to reflect men's reluctance from appearing anxious to their female partners and from the nature of the anxiety dimension of attachment. Anxiety (as compared with avoidance) has a less consistent interpersonal behavioral manifestation and thus is more concealable among those motivated and capable of doing so.

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1. Introduction

In recent years much research effort has been directed at studying attachment in adulthood (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Along with the development of new adult-oriented self-report attachment scales, research has focused on the implications of attachment theory to romantic relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Individual differences in attachment patterns have been found to predict a wide range of relationship outcomes. Compared with securely-attached individuals, insecure individuals were found to be less attractive romantic partners, to form relationships that are based on relatively superficial mutual commitment and intimacy, to express less satisfaction in both dating and marital relationships, and to cope less effectively with difficulties and stressors in romantic relationships (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Williams & Riskind, 2004).

Contemporary social psychological approaches to adult attachment consider it a combination of two relatively independent dimensions – anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety dimension reflects individual's worries about partner's availability and about one's own value to the partner, and it is expressed in a strong desire for closeness and protection. Furthermore, anxiety is associated with inability to maintain a stable sense of self-esteem and with erratic (i.e., ambivalent and fluctuating) appraisals of relationship partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The avoidance dimension reflects preference for emotional distance and self-reliance and is manifested in discomfort with closeness and with

depending on relationship partners. In contrast with the hyperactivating tendencies among anxious individuals, the deactivating tendencies that characterize avoidant individuals are associated with an unreceptive, distant, and emotionally unexpressive self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

There are reasons to expect that romantic partners will be in a fairly good position to report accurately about each other's attachment style. Considering the central role that attachment plays in shaping romantic relationships, partners are likely to register (and even shape) each other's attachment style (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, because adults' attachment patterns demonstrate relative stability over extended periods of time, repeated exposure should also facilitate accurate perceptions. And yet, discrepancies could arise between judgments of the two dimensions because of differences in the level of behavioral consistency associated with each. Whereas attachment-related avoidance predisposes one to a generally consistent – although remote and hostile – interpersonal behavioral pattern, attachment-related anxiety often leads to fluctuated interpersonal behavior driven by a “here-and-now” focus (Campbell et al., 2005). That is, behavioral consistency (which is a major factor affecting self-other agreement; Funder, 1995) favors a more accurate perception of avoidance tendencies (high consistency) over anxiety tendencies (low consistency).

Notwithstanding, among relatively well acquainted romantic partners (the focus of the present investigation) general trait characteristics might prove less influential than deeper person-focused motivational and self-regulatory processes. With detail, overt expressions of anxiety and distress contradict gender-specific social expectations associated with masculinity (Ansfield, 2007). Whereas femininity is stereotypically associated with emotional expressivity, vulnerability, and interdependence; masculinity is

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associated with emotional stability, agency, and independence (Cross & Madson, 1997; Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998). Therefore, in order to maintain their traditional gender role, men are highly motivated to conceal attachment-related anxieties from their partners (Timmers et al., 1998). With regard to avoidance, although this dimension is more strongly associated with the masculine stereotype, cultural pressures on women to down-regulate avoidance tendencies are probably not as strong, because some of the dimension's correlates (e.g., self-reliance) are valued in Western societies (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997). This leads to the prediction that men's level of attachment-related anxiety will be judged least accurately.

Furthermore, maintaining favorable self-presentation involves exertion of self-regulatory efforts (e.g., Uziel & Baumeister, in press). Therefore, individuals characterized by high (vs. low) level of self-control should be in a better position to achieve their self-presentational goals. Self-regulatory ability was not expected to affect self-other agreement directly, but to represent a resource among those motivated in adjusting their public image. Thus, to the extent that men seek to publicly manage their attachment-related anxieties, differences in self-regulatory capacity may render this effort successful or not.

Less than a handful of studies reported about self-other agreement in attachment (e.g., Banai, Weller, & Mikulincer, 1998; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These studies focused mainly on agreement among peers and concluded that relatively high levels of agreement can be reached, much like agreement on the Big Five traits ($r_s \sim .40$; Connelly & Ones, 2010). However, beyond this general conclusion, little or nothing is known about agreement among romantic partners, about the differences between anxiety and avoidance dimensions, and about the issues at the focus of the present study, which is the role of gender in moderating agreement. In exploring these questions the present study also measured and controlled for two potentially important relationship factors: length of acquaintanceship and relationship satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

To take part in the study participants had to be in a romantic relationship with a partner for a minimal period of 6 months. Ninety-five heterosexual participants and their partners responded (61% of the targets were female; target's $M_{\text{age}} = 24.80$, $SD = 3.50$; partner's $M_{\text{age}} = 25.39$, $SD = 3.67$; 33% of the couples were married; $M_{\text{acquaintanceship length}} = 38.52$; range = 6–163). Each target-partner dyad received a packet of self-report (target person) and other-report (partner) questionnaires (i.e., a nonreciprocal design; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) sealed in individual envelopes.¹ The participants were asked not to discuss the content of the questionnaires until after they completed them. In exchange for their participation, dyads were offered the opportunity to win a substantial sum of money in a raffle.

2.2. Tools

The following measures were applied in the present study.

2.2.1. Attachment style

Attachment was measured with the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). This scale

includes 18 items tapping the avoidance dimension (e.g., "I try to avoid getting too close to others") and 18 items tapping the anxiety dimension (e.g., "I worry a lot about my relationships"). Participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings in close relationships on 7-point scales ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (7). Each target person completed the original version of the scale and each partner completed a modified version whereby the reference person was the romantic partner (e.g., "my romantic partner tries to avoid getting too close to others"). Reliabilities were high for the self-report version ($\alpha_s = .89$ and $.91$ for the avoidance and anxiety scales, respectively) and for the partner-report ($\alpha_s = .88$ and $.92$ for the avoidance and anxiety scales, respectively). There was no correlation between avoidance and anxiety in either self-report ($r = .02$, *ns*) or partner-report ($r = .08$, *ns*).

2.2.2. Self-regulation

Participants completed two measures of self-regulation: First, *interpersonally oriented self-control* (IOSC) was measured with the short EPQ-R L-scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985; e.g., "do you always practice what you preach?"; $\alpha = .74$). Recent evidence has indicated that a core characteristic among high scorers is not deceptiveness but rather an ability to demonstrate high levels of self-control in interpersonal contexts (Uziel, 2010a, 2010b; Uziel & Baumeister, in press). The second measure was the short version of the *self-control scale* (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; e.g., "I am good at resisting temptation"; $\alpha = .83$), which measures general self-control ability. The two scales were positively correlated ($r = .37$, $p < .001$).

2.2.3. Relationship satisfaction

Satisfaction in the relationship was measured with two questions ("how satisfied are you with your romantic relationship" and "how warm and intimate is your romantic relationship"). Participants marked their answers on an 11-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much". Target and partner's ratings were significantly correlated ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) and were pooled together to form a combined satisfaction measure.²

3. Results

Self-other agreement was calculated by correlating the target's self-report about attachment with the partner-report across dyads (cf. Connelly & Ones, 2010). Consistent with past studies, agreement was overall positive and significant for both the avoidance dimension ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and the anxiety dimension ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), indicating that romantic partners are generally accurate in gauging each other's close relationship oriented attachment style. Notably, the magnitude of these correlations is in the range of agreement achieved for the Big Five traits (cf. Connelly & Ones, 2010). Although agreement was stronger for the avoidance dimension than for the anxiety dimension, the difference was trivial and not significant ($z < 1$, *ns*).

Regression analyses (in which the target person's attachment dimension was regressed on the partner's rating, the focal variable, and their interaction term³) showed that neither acquaintanceship length nor relationship satisfaction had a significant effect in moderating agreement on either avoidance or anxiety ratings (all interaction-term-related $p_s > .14$).⁴

² Because the correlation was not very strong I had also explored satisfaction ratings at the individual level. These analyses yielded the same result as the combined rating.

³ In all analyses continuous variables were first standardized.

⁴ Inclusion of acquaintanceship length and relationship satisfaction as covariates in subsequent analyses had negligible impact on the results.

¹ Participants completed the questionnaire packet as part of a broader project on self-other agreement on personality. The packet included additional measures not mentioned here that served other studies.

The next set of analyses focused on the focal question of the present investigation, namely the role of gender in moderating self-other agreement. The first analysis focused on attachment-related avoidance. Regressing the target person's avoidance rating on the partner's rating of avoidance, target's gender (dummy coded; men = 0, women = 1), and their interaction yielded two simple effects, for gender ($\beta = -.34$, $t = -3.94$, $p < .001$), indicating that men scored higher than women on the avoidance dimension, and for partner's rating ($\beta = .43$, $t = 4.88$, $p < .001$), indicating that partners were overall accurate in perceiving the target's level of avoidance-related attachment. The interaction term was not significant ($\beta = .03$, $t < 1$, ns). Additional analyses exploring the role of self-regulatory ability (in terms of IOSC and trait self-control) in moderating these effects (i.e. three-way interactions) yielded non-significant results ($ts < 1.40$, $ps > .15$).

To explore the main hypothesis pertaining to anxiety-related attachment, the target person's anxiety rating was regressed on the partner's rating of anxiety, target's gender, and their interaction. The results revealed a significant effect for gender ($\beta = .22$, $t = 2.21$, $p < .05$), indicating that women scored higher on anxiety than men did, which was qualified by a gender-by-partner-rating interaction ($\beta = .33$, $t = 2.07$, $p < .05$). As seen in Table 1, whereas female targets' anxiety-related attachment was judged relatively accurately by their male partners ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), male targets' anxiety-related attachment was not judged accurately by their female partners ($r = .03$, ns).

Lastly, the role of target's self-regulatory ability was explored as a moderator of agreement on attachment-related anxiety. A regression analysis exploring the three-way interaction between partner's anxiety rating, target's gender, and target's IOSC score was significant ($\beta = .30$, $t = 2.01$, $p < .05$). Breaking the interaction indicated that among female targets, agreement was strong for low ($r = .52$; $p < .01$) and high ($r = .51$; $p < .01$) IOSC scorers. In contrast, among male targets, agreement was relatively strong for low IOSC targets ($r = .46$; $p = .08$) but was weak for high IOSC targets ($r = -.10$; ns).⁵ Equivalent analysis focusing on the role of trait self-control yielded a similar pattern of results, but the correlations were not as strong and the interaction term was not significant ($t < 1$). Taken together, interpersonally oriented self-regulatory ability was a resource men appear to have utilized in managing the expression of their attachment-related anxiety.

4. Discussion

The results of the present study show that romantic partners are relatively accurate in perceiving each other's attachment style. Notwithstanding, there was one clear exception to this general conclusion; women were not accurate in perceiving their male partner's level of attachment-related anxiety. The analyses revealed that this process characterized well-acquainted partners as well as relatively newly-acquainted partners, and that it did not depend on partners' level of relationship satisfaction. Men's self-regulatory ability had contributed to deepening the difference between self and other agreement, and the end result was that men's anxiety-related attachment was ill-evaluated by their female partners.

The low self-other agreement over attachment-related anxiety is thought-provoking in more than one respect. First, it demonstrates the ubiquitous impact of gender-specific social expectations and their omnipresence among intimate partners (Cross & Madson, 1997). Second, it demonstrates that self-presentational

Table 1

Self-other agreement among romantic partners on attachment dimensions.

Target person	Attachment dimension	
	Anxiety	Avoidance
Male	.03	.41*
Female	.46**	.48**

Notes: $n_{\text{male}} = 37$, $n_{\text{female}} = 58$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

concerns regulate behavior even in a relatively secure atmosphere and not only when interacting with strangers (cf. Uziel, 2010a). Third, it uncovers a notable difference between the dual expressions of attachment insecurity. As compared with attachment-related avoidance, the anxiety dimension appears to be the more heavily regulated. Considering that the anxiety dimension is associated with failed self-regulation (e.g., Tangney et al., 2004) there might be a stronger (personal and interpersonal) need to regulate this dimension. Furthermore, others' ability to gauge anxiety (which refers to one's "self-model"; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is probably more restricted than others' ability to gauge avoidance (which refers to one's "other-model"), because others experience more directly the impact of a partner's avoidance than that of his/hers anxiety.

The present study also adds a meta-perspective on the contribution of attachment to relationship success. It has been documented repeatedly that attachment plays a prominent role in affecting interpersonal relationships in general and romantic relationships in particular (e.g., Campbell et al., 2005). The present findings imply that in addition to the direct adverse impact of insecure attachment on relationship success, there could be a second layer of negative effects. These effects result from efforts to mask and suppress insecurity by the partners. These efforts lay the ground for unrealistic expectations, communication problems, and misunderstandings that in themselves could nourish vicious cycles that further harm relationships.

Research on person perception has identified a large number of variables that affect self-other agreement on personality traits (Funder, 1995). The present results stress the importance of a less-researched factor in this literature, which is the motivational dynamics and the self-regulatory efforts by the target person aimed at shaping a desired public image. Moreover, in a research field (i.e., attachment) that relies heavily on self-reports, the present findings highlight the potential value of considering informant reports as a valid addition to the field's assessment repertoire (cf. Vazire, 2010). Future studies should aim at exploring the differential validity of self and other reports on attachment in predicting myriad life outcomes in order to advance the utility of this approach (cf. Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Several limitations and alternative explanations should be acknowledged. First, range restriction could have contributed to the null effects associated with acquaintanceship length and relationship satisfaction. The predictive power of these factors might diminish once a certain acquaintanceship threshold has been reached (the present research focused on relatively well-acquainted dyads). Second, the present (nonreciprocal) research design does not allow exploring the role of dyadic effects in affecting accuracy (such as the effect of self-other similarity). Exploring these effects is a worthy goal for future research, because of the possibility that similar people are attracted to each other (but the picture for attachment is more complex; see Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Notwithstanding, assuming that the study's dyads were similar to each other and that similarity had affected their reports (i.e., inflated their agreement), the intrigue over the disagreement on men's anxiety only deepens. Finally, although a self-regulatory explanation for

⁵ It should be noted that for this group (i.e., high IOSC men targets), as for the entire sample, self-reported anxiety was higher than attributed anxiety. If IOSC was simply reflecting a favorably biased self-report tendency, the opposite pattern was expected among high scorers.

men's behavior is a viable explanation for the results, other explanations cannot be completely ruled-out. For example, female partners of anxious men might be reluctant to acknowledge their partner's anxieties. The present study examined the role of several central parameters in affecting agreement (attachment dimension, gender, acquaintanceship length, relationship satisfaction, self-regulation), yet clearly more research is needed to consider other processes and to reaffirm the proposed mechanisms.

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