PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCHOLOGY, *12*(1), 115–126
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Adult Attachment Style and Narcissistic Vulnerability

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Although attachment theory has traditionally emphasized adaptive responses in the child–parent relationship, researchers have more recently applied attachment theory to adult love relationships. Both the child and adult literature have explored individual differences in attachment behavior and identified stylistic categories of secure and insecure attachments. Although the insecure categories are characterized by overt behavior which appears quite different (i.e., clinging vs. distance), in adult relationships where attachment is reciprocal, these stylistic patterns may achieve a similar function. In this article, I argue that, in adult relationships, insecure attachments reflect strategies for managing a greater level of narcissistic vulnerability than exists in secure attachment.

Attachment theory, which has a long-standing history and extensive literature in child development, has recently been extended to investigating adults' love relationships. Both the child and adult literature have addressed qualitative or stylistic differences in how relatively healthy persons function in attachment relationships. In the adult literature, researchers have focused on individual differences in secure and insecure categories and have not yet considered how insecure attachments, which seem different from one another, may serve a similar purpose. Such a distinction may be relevant only for adult attachment relationships, in which the partners serve as attachment figures for each other and in which the caregiving and sexual systems are also active in the relationship (Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). In this article, I link attachment and narcissism to illuminate how different insecure categories of adult attachment may be similar despite different overt characteristics.

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ADULT ATTACHMENT

Attachment (Bowlby, 1979, 1988) influences development, psychological organization, and adult love (Shaver & Hazan, 1988; Shaver et al., 1988). According to Bowlby, *attachment* is a behavioral system experienced as a bond with a particular other who is sensed as a source of security and safety. As a safe base, the attachment figure facilitates exploration and the quality of development throughout the lifespan. More successful exploration produces a stronger sense of capability, and this in turn contributes to appropriate self-reliance, autonomy, and success in relationships and work.

Behavior within attachment relationships is planned and guided by a cognitive–affective schema or "internal working model" that is originally constructed in infancy from interactions (Bowlby, 1979, 1988). This model, which also mediates the experiencing and meaning of the relationship, includes (a) expectations about the other's caring and responsiveness, (b) beliefs about the self's worthiness of care and attention, and (c) rules for affect regulation (e.g., in negative or distressing situations; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer, Florian, & Tolmacz, 1990). These working models are thought to underlie individual differences in adult attachment style.

Stimulated by an interest in love (Shaver & Hazan, 1988) and building on the work of Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) with infants, Hazan and Shaver (1987) identified three forms of adult attachment relationships: secure, insecure–anxious–ambivalent, and insecure–avoidant. More recent research (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which conceptualized styles logically by crossing positive and negative models of both self and other, suggests that a four-style model (secure, preoccupied, avoidant–fearful, and avoidant–dismissing) may more accurately describe adult attachment. In a comparison of the three and four-style models, Brennan, Shaver, and Tobey (1991) found systematic correspondence between the frameworks. The discussion in this article is organized along a three-style model because fearful and dismissing are both avoidant styles with much in common.[1]

Briefly, the research indicates that the securely attached are more confident and competent in their emotional interactions, more "happy, friendly and trusting" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 515). Preoccupied (or anxious–ambivalent) attachment is characterized by clinging and neediness and an intense focus on the partner (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Avoidant attachment is distinguished by emotional distance and a compulsive self-reliance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

NARCISSISM

As introduced by Freud (1914/1961), the term *narcissism* has been used to describe a variety of clinical phenomena, including the libidinal investment

[1]*Distinctions between fearful and dismissing avoidance are articulated when meaningful.*

of the self (Moore & Fine, 1990; Sandler, Person, & Fonagy, 1991). In current usage, the term *narcissism,* despite theoretical differences between authors, is often used in the context of self-esteem and refers to an aspect of personality, (i.e., of ego organization) that manifests in both healthy and pathological ways (Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Kernberg, 1985; Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Moore & Fine, 1990; Sandler et al., 1991).

Narcissism is related to the cognitive–affective patterning or structuring of the intrapsychic self (Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Kernberg, 1985; Kohut & Wolf, 1978). With a well-patterned or solid intrapsychic structure, the person is able to (a) soothe and comfort self (i.e., regulate esteem internally; Baker & Baker, 1987), (b) sustain goals and relationships (Patton & Robbins, 1982), and (c) value both self and significant others (i.e., there is an even distribution of self-esteem and other-esteem; Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Moore & Fine, 1990). If, however, the self-structure is less patterned or more nondifferentiated, positive valuing of the self and management of esteem functions depend more on others' behaving in ways that support the self—that is, provide valuing, confirming, or comforting functions (Baker & Baker, 1987; Patton & Robbins, 1982). With a more fragile self-structure, the person has more difficulty maintaining an inner sense of comfort and esteem and so is more easily wounded or hurt (i.e., more narcissistically vulnerable).

ATTACHMENT AND NARCISSISM

Although attachment and narcissism share some theoretical components, they target separate phenomena. Both theories involve cognitive–affective patterning, address affect regulation, and can accommodate healthy as well as pathological development and functioning (see Armstrong & Roth, 1989; Belsky & Nezworski, 1988; Bowlby, 1988; West & Sheldon, 1988). Attachment, however, addresses the person's "need for proximity, care, and security from another who can be experienced as separate from the self" (Silverman, 1991, p. 183). Although Bowlby (1988) proposed that the attachment system becomes integrated as an aspect of personality, the emphasis of the theory is on interpersonal behavior and its representation. In contrast, narcissism encompasses more general self-regard and undifferentiated or merged aspects of ego organization. When pathological, narcissism addresses a "sense of self lacking sufficient inner resources to give meaning to life simply by living it fully" (Bromberg, 1986, p. 441). Nevertheless, looking at adult attachment relationships without reference to narcissism may obscure how attachment patterns are related to esteem and self-protection. In this article, I argue that insecure attachment is characterized by a greater degree of narcissistic vulnerability than secure attachment. Concomitantly, preoccupied and avoidant attachment reflect different strategies for managing vulnerability and self-esteem.

ATTACHMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM MANAGEMENT

All persons experience fluctuations in self-esteem (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), but persons with less narcissistic vulnerability are more able "to manage feelings like inadequacy, weakness, incompetence, or guilt" (Kinston, 1987, p. 220). Being appropriately self-reliant, experiencing competence and mastery in relation to internal standards and goals, is also a way of managing esteem (see Elson, 1987; Kernberg, 1985). In addition, self-esteem is related to feelings about one's worth and value (Solomon, 1989). Although the previous components have not been examined directly in adult attachment, research can be construed as supporting the notion that the securely attached are more capable at managing esteem. In secure attachment, more competent affect regulation is suggested by a more frequent occurrence of positive emotion (Simpson, 1990), fewer symptoms of distress (e.g., anxiety, hostility, loneliness; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Kobak & Sceery, 1988), and greater ego resilience (Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Secure attachment is also associated with lower levels of self-conscious anxiety (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Other research indicates that the securely attached have more competency or mastery experiences with which to regulate esteem by living up to internal standards. Securely attached adults have a less emotionally permeated approach to goals evidenced by greater satisfaction with work, less difficulty completing tasks, and less fear of failure or rejection from co-workers (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). In addition, attachment influences college students' adjustment and career maturity (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991; Kenny, 1987a, 1987b; Lapsley, Rice, & Fitzgerald, 1990). Secure attachment is also associated with more successful relationship functioning as demonstrated through longer relationship life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); use of an integrating style of conflict resolution (Pistole, 1989); and higher levels of passion, commitment, and satisfaction (Levy & Davis, 1988). Furthermore, measured in various ways in several studies, self-worth is consistently higher among the securely attached (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Research suggests, therefore, that secure attachment is distinguished by more effective self-esteem management and, by implication, with a more solid self-structure and less narcissistic vulnerability.

INTERPERSONAL EFFECTS OF NARCISSISTIC VULNERABILITY

Narcissistic vulnerability affects the management of adults' love relationships (Elson, 1987; Solomon, 1989), because the person needs to obtain self-functions from the environment. Relationships that are not driven by narcissistic vulnerability involve "a mutuality in which the focus on the self

is balanced by recognition of another as a separate, autonomous self" (Solomon, 1989, p. 47). The self is solid enough that the partner is intellectually and emotionally experienced as different and separate from self (i.e., with separate interests and desires). Although involvement with the partner does heighten self-esteem, esteem enhancement is provided through a sense of mastery or competence including success in the relationship and appreciation of the partner as a way of fulfilling internal values and standards.

Research indicates that secure attachment relationships demonstrate a sense of self and the partner as separate. For example, secure attachment has been associated with more positive views of others (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), interdependence (Simpson, 1990), intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Levy & Davis, 1988), trust (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and mutuality (Feeney & Noller, 1991). Securely attached adults have reported "being able to accept and support the partner despite the partner's faults" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 515); and in describing their relationships, they "emphasize the importance of openness and closeness . . . while at the same time seeking to retain their individual identity" (Feeney & Noller, 1991, p. 208). The picture that emerges of secure attachment includes an appreciation of both self and other as well as a capacity for openness and cooperativeness. This description is consistent with others being perceived as separate people and with esteem being distributed between self and other.

Narcissistic Use of the Partner

More narcissistically based relationships are characterized by the needs of the self assuming a primary importance. The self is more fragile, and esteem is more difficult to manage internally—that is, there exists a greater degree of narcissistic vulnerability (Solomon, 1989). The person is more sensitive to emotional injury, focuses attention more on personal needs than on the partner, and expects partner to behave in affirming and self-enhancing ways. Interactions with the partner are often dictated by the need to stabilize a sense of worth and to regulate feelings, especially negative feelings about self (see Kinston, 1987).

More narcissistically vulnerable persons, in adapting, organize defensive structures (i.e., patterns "of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors"; Patton & Robbins, 1982, p. 880) that attempt to cover over or compensate for the vulnerability and thereby protect the self. Rather than regulating esteem needs through an internal self-confirming process, self-regard is accomplished through a pattern of approaching (e.g., merging; Kohut & Wolf, 1978) or distancing from (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982) significant others. The other person's importance stems more from bolstering or maintaining the self and less from an appreciation of the other in his or her separateness (i.e., likeness and "differentness") from self. For example, the person phenomeno-

logically enhances self-esteem through fusion with a partner who is perceived as possessing "all greatness, all power, all esteem, all worth and value" (Elson, 1987, p. 40). With the partner serving as a selfobject (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), the power and worth are experienced as belonging to self. The partner is valued as *part of the self* (Elson, 1987, p. 40) and "for the internal functions and the emotional stability" (Baker & Baker, 1987, p. 2) he or she augments. Moreover, as a part of the self, the partner is expected to interact in a way that is congruent with the self's defensive strategies.

If the partner does not meet the self's narcissistic needs (e.g., for closeness or distance), then the person is subject to an awareness of differentness between self and partner. This incongruence would be experienced as a separation threat and trigger intense separation anxiety, which would arouse the attachment system (Bowlby, 1988). The ensuing attachment behavior might also be contaminated by defensive behavior designed to regulate and protect self (rather than regain security). That is, the needs of the attachment system would be to experience the partner as either symbolically or physically available. Defensive needs would be to protect the self "from experiencing needs for love, understanding, and validation" (Basch, 1987, p. 378).

Preoccupied attachment. Preoccupied attachment can be construed as a defensive strategy in which narcissistic vulnerability is managed through merger with the partner. In research, preoccupied romantic relationships were characterized by high levels of idealizing the partner and an extreme approach to love which includes obsessive preoccupation (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), hypervigilance to separation, greater distress over separation (Mikulincer et al., 1990), and attending to distress (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). These characteristics indicate more intensity in attention to partner than is required for interdependency and intimacy (see Elson, 1987), which indeed are not so well accomplished in preoccupied attachment. In addition, the strong clinging and idealized focus on partner is consistent with gaining affirmation through merger—that is, experiencing the idealized other, who contains worth and value, as if he or she were a part of self, were a selfobject.

Moreover, although subtle, language also indicates fusion with the partner. In one study, persons with a preoccupied attachment exhibited a higher level of couple references ("we" vs. "I") associated with the perception of problems in the relationship (Feeney & Noller, 1991). Only when there are problems (i.e., incongruence between self and partner) is a "we" (two people) versus an "I" (fusion) recognized.

Other relationship characteristics also suggest that a component of neediness directs the relationship behaviors. Studies have found that preoccupied attachment is characterized by more emotional dependence, a desire for more commitment (Feeney & Noller, 1990), greater reliance on the partner, more use of others as a safe base (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and

inappropriately high levels of self-disclosure (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). Further, persons with a preoccupied attachment experience more emotional ups and downs within the relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In sum, they seem to "depend on others to maintain positive self regard" (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 234).

The interpretation of clinging preoccupation as a defensive strategy is supported by other research. Preoccupied attachment has been associated with lower levels of esteem (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990), and research indicates that low self-esteem persons use interpersonal behavior "to enhance their self-affect" (Baumgardner, Kaufman, & Levy, 1989, p. 919). Consistent with this view, Mikulincer et al. (1990) concluded that persons with preoccupied attachments "do not emphasize the caring component in close relationships and their behavior is not motivated by consideration of others' interests" (p. 278). Other research finding lower levels of friendship in their love relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1991) and a control component in their pattern of interpersonal difficulties (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) also supports the view that preoccupied relationship behavior is motivated by self-sustaining needs. There appears to be an "overwhelming need . . . to simply be in a relationship, no matter what or with whom—the primary goal is emotional security" (Newcomb, 1981, p. 134).

Avoidant attachment. In avoidant attachment, narcissistic vulnerability is managed through distancing from the partner, thereby, avoiding closeness and intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These relationships are associated with low levels of relying on others, using others as a safe base, romantic involvement (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), self-disclosure (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991), intensity (Bartholomew, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990), and higher separation distress than the securely attached (Mikulincer et al., 1990). Further, affect is regulated through dismissing the importance of attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), dismissing distress (Kobak & Sceery, 1988), directing attention toward nonemotional domains (e.g., work; Hazan & Shaver, 1990), and idealizing self or other (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The need to wall off or reject a portion of experience (e.g., intense feelings) is indicative of narcissistic vulnerability and a need for partner's cooperation in managing self. Because self-regard is based "on the ability to temporarily tolerate negative affects in order to achieve mastery over threatening or frustrating situations" (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988, p. 304), the defensive function of avoidant strategies leaves the self-structure still vulnerable.

An additional indication of narcissistic vulnerability in avoidant attachment comes from the functioning of anger in relationships. "Anger and hostility are often instigated by threats to self-esteem of an interpersonal

nature" (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989, p. 1013). Perhaps the hostility associated with avoidant attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Kobak & Sceery, 1988) is triggered as a self-protective mechanism that (a) defends against anxiety and negative feelings about self or (b) functions to repair damaged self-esteem and preserve a feeling of well-being (Kernis et al., 1989; Solomon, 1989).

Self-defense in the relationship is also suggested by the avoidantly attached person's endorsement of love as friendship in the absence of a corresponding endorsement of romantic love, passion, commitment, or satisfaction (see Feeney & Noller, 1990, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Levy & Davis, 1988). The endorsement of friendship can be interpreted as a means of maintaining safer levels of emotional intensity, which is consistent with a more fragile self-structure and with using a defensive style rather than internal resources to regulate esteem.

In a seeming contradiction to this argument, like the securely attached and unlike fearful avoidants, dismissing avoidants have reported high self-esteem and self-acceptance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The uniquely high, positive evaluation of self was coupled with a uniquely low level of subjective distress and with interpersonal problems characterized by hostility and coldness (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This constellation of findings, interpreted in conjunction with directing attention away from distress (Kobak & Sceery, 1988) and dismissing attachment needs (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), can be construed as indicating a defensively bolstered self. Meaningful self-worth would be accompanied by competence in relationship and affect management (Basch, 1988), which is associated with secure but not dismissing attachment.

In sum, the primary characteristic of avoidant attachment is avoidance of closeness and ensuing intimacy. The defensive strategy creates a sort of safety in the perceived "detachment" from the partner. Distance facilitates cutting off or never being "touched" by perceived criticism or the experience of intense emotions and, thereby, protects a fragile self from being emotionally overwhelmed with unmanageable emotion. Similarly, the stance of detachment functions to keep away from the self-structure "anything that would diminish it" (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982, p. 13). For instance, by distancing, fearful avoidant people hold at bay their fear of intimacy, probable rejection, and the self's being overwhelmed with unmanageable emotion (see Bartholomew, 1990). Similarly, the high self-concept of dismissing avoidance can be construed as an idealization of self. Distancing from emotional closeness with partner helps ensure that the façade is not punctured, self-esteem is not injured, and unmanageable emotion is not experienced. In avoidant attachment, the person protects self against the dangerousness of others (Kinston, 1987). It is as if the persons' "fragile sense of self will disintegrate" (Modell, 1986, p. 299) or be emotionally overwhelmed or swallowed up (see Kohut & Wolf, 1978) if the partners get close or if feelings are intense.

CONCLUSION

Looking at attachment through the lens of narcissism stimulates making a distinction between appropriate security needs and narcissistic use of the partner to manage self and avoid being hurt. In preoccupied attachment, the defensive strategy is to merge with an idealized other who bolsters feelings of worth. In avoidant attachment, the partner is distanced to maintain self through a behavioral or phenomenological response that strictly avoids closeness and any ensuing intense or negative feelings. One avoidant strategy keeps the self contained, closed, passive, and nonassertive; the other strategy protects through idealizing the self and discounting the importance of the attachment system.

Although I explored how healthy personalities navigate narcissistic issues, attachment style may also be relevant to psychopathology. Fearful avoidance corresponds closely to avoidant personality disorder (Bartholomew, 1990), and dismissing avoidance is reminiscent of narcissistic personality disorder. The high, defensive self-concept of dismissing attachment is similar to the idealized, narcissistic grandiose self; both patterns involve latent vulnerability, coldness, hostility, and using others (American Psychiatric Association, 1987; Kernberg, 1984).

Finally, the distinction between attachment and narcissistic needs can be useful to both clinicians and researchers. With relationship issues, therapists can facilitate clients' progress by defining and validating attachment needs and also clarifying how narcissistic needs related to self-regard, self-esteem management, and ego organization are compromising autonomy and intimacy. Further, because avoidant attachment is associated with hostility, which is in turn associated with pathological aspects of narcissism (see Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991) and with shame (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), research investigating associations between attachment style, narcissism, and shame might be productive. Last, research designed to separate aspects of personality organized around specific attachment needs from more global aspects of personality organized around needs to manage esteem and defensively protect self would be useful. Investigating adults' attachment behavior under conditions of unexpected separation—that is, when proximity seeking and security needs are active and strongest (Bowlby, 1979, 1988)—may lead to distinctions between attachment and narcissistic vulnerability and thereby enrich the science and practice of psychology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A portion of this article was presented at the 1993 Convention of the American Psychological Association.

I appreciate the helpful comments of Richard De Lisi and the anonymous reviewers.

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