



FlashReport

Attachment avoidance and feelings of connection in social interaction[☆]Geoff MacDonald^{*}, Terry K. Borsook

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ABSTRACT

Individuals high in attachment avoidance claim to be indifferent to the opinions of others. Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) showed that dismissive avoidants who received positive social feedback reported higher levels of positive affect and state self-esteem than dismissives in control conditions. Their data suggest that avoidant individuals are sensitive to acceptance cues, despite avoidants' claims to the contrary. However, the affect and self-esteem effects could represent feelings of hubristic pride (and thus superiority) rather than connection (and thus belongingness). In the current study, participants were randomly assigned to interact with either a highly positive or mildly negative research confederate. Low avoidant individuals felt more connected with the positive than negative confederate, but this effect of experimental condition was even stronger for those high in avoidance. These findings affirm that avoidantly attached individuals' feelings of belonging are sensitive to the positivity of social conditions, supporting the universality of the need to belong.

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Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that all humans strive to satisfy a need to belong. Whereas the excessively vigilant relationship focus of *anxiously attached* individuals (e.g., Spielmann, MacDonald, & Wilson, 2009) is highly consistent with theoretical conceptions of a need to belong, *avoidantly attached* individuals' reports of comfort with independence and self-reliance (e.g., Fraley & Davis, 1997) appear to contradict the notion of universal belongingness needs (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). Such purported indifference to relational concerns on the part of avoidants appears to result from a perception that the pursuit of proximity is dangerous or forbidden (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). The primary mechanisms by which avoidantly attached individuals minimize motivation to seek proximity described in the attachment literature are the dismissal of threats and the denial of need for attachment figures (through defenses such as cognitive suppression; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002).

In a clever and insightful paper, Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) provided evidence that avoidant individuals' claim of disregard for relationships does not, in fact, represent counter-evidence to a universal need to belong. These authors reasoned that although a tendency to dismiss negative feelings may lead avoidants to present a non-reactive front in the face of rejection, positive social feedback should bypass these defenses and stimulate positive reactions. The authors further reasoned that dismissives' history of inattention to

their belongingness needs might create a belongingness deficit that promotes higher levels of sensitivity to positive social feedback than those who are less dismissive (e.g., Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000). Participants in Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) research were randomly assigned to receive feedback indicating positive evaluation by others who had seen participants' personality profiles (versus a no feedback control; Study 1) and personal possession of traits predictive of interpersonal success (versus individual success and no feedback controls; Study 2). In both studies, individuals high in dismissive attachment (characterized by high avoidance and low anxiety) reported significantly higher levels of positive affect and state self-esteem in the positive social feedback condition than the control conditions. Low dismissive individuals did not differ across conditions. The sensitivity of highly dismissive individuals to positive social feedback appears to contradict their claims of indifference to the opinions of others, and supports the universality of belongingness needs.

However, there are important limitations to these studies. First, the evidence that avoidant individuals experienced feelings of belonging, per se, is somewhat indirect. Although positive social feedback was related to higher levels of positive affect and self-esteem among dismissives, the studies did not directly measure feelings of social connection. Conceivably, rather than representing feelings of belonging and connection, the demonstrated higher levels of affect and self-worth could reflect feelings of hubristic pride (and thus superiority and separateness; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Demonstrating that positive social experiences engender feelings of connection would provide stronger evidence for the presence of genuine belongingness needs in highly avoidant individuals. Second, participants received abstract social feedback but did not actually engage in

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social interaction. Given avoidantly attached individuals' preference for emotional distance, positive social feedback from a non-social entity may allow them to enjoy the *idea* of social connection from a safe distance not afforded in face-to-face social interaction. If direct, positive social engagement is too overwhelming for individuals high in attachment avoidance to experience positive outcomes, then Carvallo and Gabriel's results may not replicate in a social interaction context. Third, the failure to find an effect of positive social feedback on low dismissive individuals' affect and self-esteem could itself be construed as a challenge to the universality of belongingness needs. However, if those low in avoidance generally construe themselves as likable, feelings of connection may provide a more sensitive measure of feelings of belonging than self-esteem or affect for this group. To address these issues, the current research extended the work of Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) by examining the hypothesis that positive social interaction would increase feelings of connection for all participants, but particularly for individuals high in attachment avoidance.

Method

Participants

30 participants (18 females, 11 males) were drawn from the University of Toronto introductory psychology participant pool and received one course credit in exchange for participation.

Procedure

This research was conducted as part of a larger study on the influence of social experiences on pain perception (the pain results are reported in Borsook, & MacDonald, *in press*). Participants were told the study was designed to investigate the effects of various medicinal creams on pain. After completing an initial set of questionnaires (including a measure of attachment) and a baseline pain measurement task, participants were informed that there would be a rest period before a second pain trial. Participants were told that the researchers had been asked by the University of Toronto Frosh Week Committee to help pilot a new means for students to get to know one another, and that the researchers had agreed to include the introductory exercise in the study as a way to take participants' minds off the pain task and allow pain sensitivity to return to baseline before the second set of pain trials. All participants agreed to take part in this ostensibly separate research. The task involved engaging in a structured interaction with another participant (i.e., the relationship closeness induction task; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999). Each participant interacted with a female confederate (a trained actress with professional acting experience who played the role of a fellow student). The confederate had been trained to engage with the participant in either a mildly negative or highly positive manner, with random assignment to role for each study session. In the negative interaction condition, the confederate behaved indifferently; although she was not overtly rude or hostile, she kept her answers brief and minimized nonverbal involvement behaviors such as eye contact. In the positive interaction condition, the confederate displayed high levels of verbal and nonverbal involvement, such as leaning towards the participant and providing warm validation of participants' responses to questions. Following the interaction, both the participant and the confederate evaluated the degree to which they felt interpersonally connected during the interaction. Although the confederate could not be blind to condition, she was blind to participants' attachment scores. Participants then returned to the pain study, completing a second set of pain measurements and receiving a full debriefing.

Measures

Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994)

The ASQ is a forty item fixed-choice questionnaire that measures the two attachment dimensions. Answers to ASQ items were given on a 6-point scale (1 = *totally disagree* to 6 = *totally agree*). The scale measures anxious attachment ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .64$) with 13 items (e.g., "I often feel left out or alone"), Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$, whereas avoidant attachment ($M = 3.35$, $SD = .60$) is measured with 16 items (e.g., "I prefer to depend on myself rather than other people"), Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$.

Connection Scale

A scale to measure feelings of connection following the interaction was developed for the present study. Participants responded to 8 items on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*), including, "How close do you feel to your partner?" and "How much do you feel like you clicked with your partner?" The scale was completed both by the participant (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$) and the confederate (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Results

Examination of the relation of feelings of connection to experimental condition, avoidant attachment, and their interaction was conducted using hierarchical multiple regression (Aiken & West, 1991). Anxious attachment and its interactions with the other predictors were included in the analysis to ensure effects were unique to attachment avoidance. The main effects of the social interaction manipulation (dummy coded with 0 = negative and 1 = positive), avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment (both centered) were entered in Step 1. In Step 2, all 2-variable interactions were entered (there was insufficient power to reliably test the 3-variable interaction). Data from 4 participants were removed due to suspicion of the experimental task. For the measure of participant's feelings of connection, the only significant main effect was an effect of experimental condition, $\beta = .79$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .58$. This main effect was qualified by a significant condition by avoidant attachment interaction, $\beta = .40$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .08$. To examine the pattern of the interaction, regression lines were plotted at +1 and -1 standard deviations for avoidant attachment (Fig. 1). Participants low in avoidant attachment reported significantly higher levels of connection in the positive than the negative interaction condition, $\beta = .41$, $p = .01$. The effect of condition was in the same direction, but stronger, for those high in avoidant attachment, $\beta = 1.234$, $p < .001$. Framing the findings differently, in the negative interaction condition, avoidant attachment was a significant, negative predictor of feelings of connection, $\beta = -.38$, $p = .04$. In the positive interaction condition,

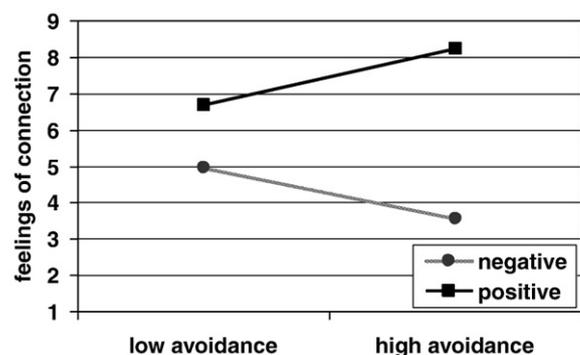


Fig. 1. Participant feelings of connection as a function of avoidant attachment and experimental condition.

avoidant attachment was a significant, positive predictor of feelings of connection, $\beta = .41$, $p = .05$. No other interactions were significant.

Administrative error led to the loss of data from 3 participants for the confederate's ratings of connection with the participant. Analyses of this variable revealed a significant main effect only for condition, $\beta = .40$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .15$. This main effect was qualified by a significant condition by avoidant attachment interaction, $\beta = .61$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .14$ (Fig. 2). There was no difference across condition in the confederate's reports of connection with low avoidant participants, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .96$. However, the confederate reported significantly higher levels of connection with high avoidant participants in the positive versus the negative interaction condition, $\beta = .85$, $p = .02$. Framed differently, in the negative interaction condition, participant avoidant attachment was not significantly related to the confederate's feelings of connection, $\beta = -.17$, $p = .62$. In the positive interaction condition, participant avoidant attachment was a significant, positive predictor of the confederate's feelings of connection, $\beta = .85$, $p = .02$. No other significant interaction effects were found.

Discussion

The data support the universality of belongingness needs by demonstrating feelings of connection in response to positive social interaction even among individuals high in attachment avoidance. Participants both low and high in attachment avoidance reported stronger feelings of connection in the positive versus negative interaction condition. However, the effect of interaction condition on feelings of connection was stronger for those higher in attachment avoidance. In contrast to the picture avoidant individuals paint of themselves as unresponsive and indifferent, these findings show clear evidence of sensitivity to social conditions. The current findings replicate and extend the work of Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) by providing direct evidence that avoidant individuals are capable of feelings of closeness (rather than superiority) in response to positive social interactions (rather than abstract social feedback).

The relatively strong feelings of connection reported by our confederate to avoidant individuals in the positive interaction condition suggest that the benefits of a positive interaction partner for those high in avoidance were not simply intrapsychic. Instead, this aspect of the data suggests that a strongly positive social atmosphere may encourage avoidant individuals to engage in more prosocial behavior. Perhaps when paired with a relational partner who clearly and consistently signals that proximity seeking is not forbidden and dangerous, but rather welcomed and rewarded, avoidant individuals may exhibit particularly eager pursuit of connection. Of course, it is an open question whether avoidant individuals would be able to maintain this positive stance across a longer-term relationship. Because our measure of connection immediately followed the social

interaction, our data cannot speak to the sustainability of avoidant individuals' feelings of connection. It is possible that avoidants are comfortable opening up in the rush of the moment, but may revert to suspicion and hostility as they realize the extent to which they have allowed themselves to become emotionally vulnerable.

Although the finding of stronger reactions to positive social experiences among individuals higher in avoidant attachment is consistent with the belongingness deficit hypothesis forwarded by Carvallo and Gabriel (2006), both their research and ours do not provide direct evidence for this proposed mechanism. For example, it is possible that it is the novelty of such an open interaction for those who normally eschew self-disclosure rather than a belongingness deficit that leads to such strong reactions for those high in avoidance. Future research more directly targeting the mechanism of the effect will be necessary to support or refute the belongingness deficit hypothesis.

More generally, our interpretations of the results are tempered by limitations of the study design. First, the social interaction occurred in the context of a larger study on physical pain. Given that stressful experiences such as pain can lead to attachment system activation (e.g., Bowlby, 1973), the present results may not replicate outside of a pain context. It is possible that the added pressure of the impending pain trial may have rendered avoidant individuals particularly needy and open to positive social interaction. However, it is also arguable that avoidants' tendency to deactivate attachment needs particularly under conditions of threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) makes the pursuit of connection demonstrated in the current results especially striking. Further research including threat as an additional independent variable could reveal whether the current results are likely to apply only under stressful conditions. Second, the relatively small sample size in the current study necessitates caution when considering the reliability of the study's findings. Although the striking similarity of the current results to those of Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) provides increased confidence that the findings are reliable, the size of our sample limited our ability to test the 3-variable interaction (and thus provide a direct test of the specific influence of the combination of high avoidance and low anxiety, or dismissive attachment). Thus, we are unable to comment on the relevance of our findings for dismissive attachment per se, and can only point to an effect of avoidant attachment more generally.

Despite the limitations, a key strength of the current research is an experimental manipulation that involved live social interaction. Relative to abstract feedback, such interaction appears to more accurately mimic the sorts of social situations individuals are likely to encounter in their daily lives. As such, the combination of ecological validity and experimental control possible with this methodology creates a powerful experimental tool.

In sum, the data suggest that avoidant individuals are indeed responsive to rewarding social experiences, a positive effect that was seen in both their own feelings of connection and those of their interaction partner. Although it is not yet completely clear why avoidants experience such positive reactions to warm social encounters, it is an unfortunate irony that those who appear to most enjoy these connections are those who most deny a desire for them.

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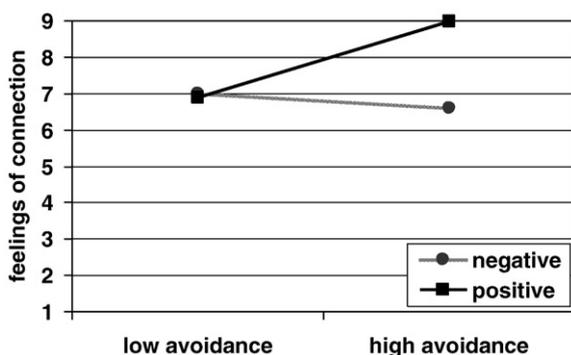


Fig. 2. Confederates feelings of connection as a function of participant avoidant attachment and experimental condition.

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