

The Mediating Role of Anxiety on the Relationship between Attachment Styles and Lifespan

Development

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### Introduction

Bowlby (1958) analysed the emotional bond that develops between mother and child and coined the term attachment. Ainsworth (1969) initially identified three styles of attachment (secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant), that were later extended by disorganized-disoriented. Hazan and Shaver's (1987, 1990) statistical correlation between relationships and attachment styles factored attachment styles into secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent later in life. The model of attachment styles was further expanded by Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991), who transcended the categorical model and placed adult attachment styles along two orthogonal, linear axes of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. The four corner extremes are termed secure, dismissing-avoidant, fearful-avoidant and preoccupied.

### Characterization of Attachment Styles

To expand on the influence of attachment styles on lifespan development, Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) give the following adult characterizations: *Secure* attachment implies a positive self-sense (self-worth and lovability) together with the expectation of being generally accepted and that other people are responsive. This style matches the secure style found by Hazan & Shaver. *Dismissing-Avoidant* individuals implies a positive self-worth and expectance to be loved, together with negative attitudes towards others. To the extreme, dismissing-avoidant people show narcissist behaviour. Their main motive is the avoidance of disappointment by others by the way of evading close relationships. This style was not present in Ainsworth's work, but has been described as dismissing by Main et al. (1985). *Fearful-Avoidant* are driven by a sense of self-unworthiness (not being lovable) and expect that people will generally be rejecting and mistrust other

people. Their primary motive seeks to evade rejection by avoiding relationships. This style corresponds to Hazan & Shaver's (1987) avoidant attachment style. *Preoccupied* people don't value themselves, but generally trust in other people. In the sense of Jungian extraverted feeling, they generate their self-worth by positive evaluation and praise by others.

### **Anxiety and Attachment Styles in Lifespan Development**

The work of Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) have both shown that attachment styles generally influence adult relationships. The mediating role of anxiety between attachment styles and adult paranoid beliefs was highlighted by Sitko et al. (2014). Avoidant and anxious attachment styles were all predictors of paranoia, hallucinations and depression, with the strongest effect on depression, that in turn serves as a mediator for psychotic symptoms. The following paragraphs try to exploit the mediating influence of anxiety on relationships between attachment styles and identity building, social-emotional and moral development.

#### **Childhood.**

In middle childhood, Booth et al. (1994) identified mother-child relationship predictors and their influence on emotional adjustment of 8-year-old children. Influences have been found on social engagement, internalizing, and externalizing problems. Internalizing problems and engagement correlated with children's attachment styles four years earlier. Externalizing difficulties, however, most strongly correlated with the maternal style. Retention was not related. Secure children were found to approach other children with positive expectations and experience beneficial social play. Insecure children were lacking the confidence or thought negatively of others, and thus had fewer interactions with peers they were not familiar with. Insecure attachment styles may thus negatively influence identity development in middle childhood due to reduced social, identity-building interactions.

Externalizing problems may influence moral development and appears to relate more closely to the examples and maternal warmth experienced.

### **Adolescence.**

Anxious-ambivalent attachment styles were found to be precursors of anxiety disorders in adolescents and young adults. Schimmenti & Bifulco (2015) examined the relationship between antipathy and anxiety disorders, with anxious-ambivalent attachment mediating the correlation. It is particularly recommended to practitioners working with children to assess and combat parental emotional neglect in emerging anxiety disorders in children or adolescents. Furthermore, “children living with parents who are abusing, neglectful, or emotionally unavailable are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles later in life” (ibid., p. 46).

### **Adulthood.**

In young adulthood, Lutwak & Ferrari (1997) found a significant correlation of social avoidance, negative evaluation anxiety, protectiveness of mothers and paternal care with shame. Particularly, negative evaluation and social avoidance were predictors of the moral affect of shame. These findings confirm earlier studies by Kohut (1978), who linked adult shame with childhood experience of insufficient parent responses. In prior studies, Lutwak & Ferrari's (1996) suggested gender-dependency: Men's shame correlated with self-criticism, their guilt with perfectionism. For women, however, shame and guilt were both related to self-criticism in women, and to perfectionism when that perfectionism was prescribed by their social environment. This finding matches Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory, based on Festinger's (1957) theory of social dissonance, that differs between failure to match own ideals and social oughts. Self-criticism, as a failure to achieve own ideals, is internally placed on the positive emotional spectrum when goals are achieved, and neutral when no progress is

made. Socially, failure to achieve own ideals translates to shame when those ideals have been communicated and the failure is public. Perfectionism, however, may be explained as a failure to meet socially expected oughts. Resulting guilt emerges from underlying social anxiety of being excluded. Apparently, in Lutwak & Ferrari's (1996) study, perfectionism in men and women fulfilled different, social roles.

### **Old Age.**

Whereas older people tend to reduce their social networks to eliminate dissonances, they also face the impact on their attachment networks by dying members. As a coping strategy, there appears to be a shift towards dismissive attachment styles in old age, which indicates a preference of self-reliance over interdependence. However, secure attachment also increases with age. As a common explanation for both phenomena, Shaver & Mikulincer (2004) suggest an "age-related decline in attachment anxiety" (p. 455). The development of a dismissive attitude and shifting towards identity formation based on introspection and internal values is generally considered a beneficial coping strategy for older people.

### **Conclusion**

In adult relationships, unreliable childhood attachment styles generally relate to emotional detachment (fearful-avoidant) or clinging (preoccupied; Arnett, 2012). Both styles hinder the development of positive, social-emotional adult relationships. Fearful-avoidant and dismissive styles are expected to form identities based on exaggerated reliance on own, internal beliefs. Preoccupied people, on the other hand, are expected to subject their identity building on an exaggerated amount of external, social factors. With anxiety as a strong, mediating factor between childhood attachment styles and adult problems, interventions should focus on the underlying anxiety: exposition to positive emotional experiences, either brought by relationships, open awareness meditation, or cognitive behavioural therapy may be

the best therapy for people that grow up on insecure childhood attachment.

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