

## Attachment Styles and Relationship Satisfaction in the Development of Close Relationships\*

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This study tested an attachment approach to close relationships by examining the relations among the three attachment styles (Avoidance, Anxious/ambivalence and Security), relationship satisfaction and the kind of relationship accounts 51 couples generated. In addition, the relations between the attachment styles and relationship satisfaction were examined across a four month period. The cross-sectional correlations generally supported the validity of the attachment approach, e.g., partners who were less Avoidant, less Anxious/ambivalent and more Secure reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction and wrote more positive relationship descriptions. However, the longitudinal results suggested that relationship satisfaction tends to influence the attachment styles rather than vice-versa. We conclude that the attachment styles may be malleable and influenced by experiences in adult close relationships, and discuss the implications of the findings for an attachment theory of close relationships.

A pervasive and commonplace proposition in psychology, and folk wisdom alike, is that the relations people have with their parents or caregivers in childhood continue to exert profound influences in adult life. Yet, close relationship scholars have only recently paid much attention to this thesis. In particular, a theory recently proposed by Hazan and Shaver (1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988), that encapsulates such a developmental perspective, has excited considerable interest and already motivated a good deal of research.

There are three central postulates or themes in Hazan and Shaver's theory that were inspired by Bowlby's (1973) theory of parent/child interaction and attachment and the subsequent infancy research of Ainsworth (1973). First, it is argued that early parent/child interactions produce sets of expectations, beliefs, and attitudes (termed *mental models*) about oneself in relation to others that continue to exert a powerful directive in adult life. Second, consistent with Bowlby's approach, the central

constituents and processes of romantic love are considered to be based on innate biological mechanisms concerned with reproduction and survival. Third, following Ainsworth's work, bonding and love in close relationships are thought to be rooted in three fundamental attachment styles: *Avoidance*, *Anxious/ambivalence*, and *Security*. As the terms imply, Avoidant adults' intimate relationships are marked by fear of closeness and lack of trust, Anxious/ambivalent people have intimate relationships that are painfully intense, and Secure individuals' relationships are characterized by trust, friendship, and positive emotions.

Clearly, such an attachment approach to love and intimate relationships has considerable sweep and power, containing predictions and hypotheses related to many areas including, biology, cognition, developmental psychology, and social psychology. However, in spite of the breadth of Hazan and Shaver's approach an impressive body of supportive research evidence has already been accumulated. Several studies have reported that the relative prevalence of the three attachment styles in adults is similar to that found in infancy (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer, Florian, & Tolmacz, 1990). Attachment parent/child relationships, and to various general relationship attitudes and

\*This article was derived from a Master's thesis completed by the first author. We thank Julie Fitness and Janette Rosanowski for their comments on a draft of this report, and William Hayward for his assistance with coding. Requests for reprints should be sent to Garth J. O. Fletcher, Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury, Christchurch 1, New Zealand. E-Mail: PSYC212@CSC.CANTERBURY.AC.NZ

beliefs (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). And, finally, several studies using continuous measures of attachment styles have reported that, as expected, subjects who were more satisfied with their close relationships were more Secure in their attachment dimension, but less Avoidant and less Anxious/ambivalent (Collins & Read, 1990; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989; Levy & Davis, 1988; Simpson, 1990).

In this study we further examined the relations between the attachment styles and relationship satisfaction in several ways that go beyond most previous investigations. First, we examined the cross-sectional relations between the attachment styles and the kind of romantic relationship accounts people generate. Second, we recruited a sample of heterosexual couples so that we could compare the attachment dimension ratings of partners from the same relationships. Third, we tested the relations between the attachment styles and relationship satisfaction over time.

#### *Attachment Styles, Relationship Satisfaction, and Relationship Accounts*

The connection between the attachment styles and the way people think about their close relationships is an important element in Hazan and Shaver's general thesis (see Feeney & Noller, 1991). Previous research has found that partners who think of their romantic relationships in interpersonal, dyadic terms (e.g., saying "we" rather than "I" or "he/she") also report higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987). In the present study we hypothesized that the way in which partners' relationship accounts are formulated might be similarly related to the attachment styles; to wit, partners who generated more positive and interpersonally focused relationship accounts would also be less Avoidant, less Anxious/ambivalent, and more Secure.

Most previous research has used individuals, rather than couples, from close relationships. In the present research we recruited couples, a procedure which allowed us to compare the responses of partners across couples. Previous findings are mixed with Collins and Read (1990) reporting that partners do tend to be similar in their attachment styles, whereas Simpson (1990) found they were not. We were interested in this study in relating both the

perceived and actual similarity across couples to their levels of relationship satisfaction. We expected to find that actual similarity across couples, especially Security, would be associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction.

#### *The Longitudinal Relations Between Attachment Styles and Relationship Satisfaction*

An important step in evaluating an attachment approach to intimate relationships, is to examine the links between the attachment styles and constructs such as relationship satisfaction across time. By measuring both constructs at two points in time one can tease apart the possible causal relations between each attachment dimension and relationship satisfaction. If the attachment styles are as fundamental as has been proposed, then the link between the attachment styles at time 1 and relationship satisfaction at time 2 should be stronger than, or as strong as, the link between relationship satisfaction at time 1 and the attachment styles at time 2.

#### *Summary*

In summary, we predicted that partners who were less Avoidant, less Anxious/ambivalent, and more Secure would report higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and generate more positive and interpersonally oriented relationship descriptions. In addition, we examined the relations between the attachment styles and relationship satisfaction over time.

#### *Method*

##### *Subjects*

Fifty-one couples (51 men and 51 women) attending the University of Canterbury were recruited for this study. The study and follow-up took five months and was within the nine months university calendar. The sample consisted of students involved in long-term unmarried heterosexual relationships. The mean age of the sample was 20.0 years ( $SD = 3.2$ ), and the mean time reported dating was 13.2 months ( $SD = 11.5$  mths.). Couples were selected if they reported dating at least two months, and did not describe their relationship as casual. Of the total sample, 36% described their relationship as steady, 58% as serious, and 6% as engaged. A few significant gender differences were found, but these did not appear to be theoretically meaningful. Hence, gender differences will not be discussed further.

##### *Procedure*

Subjects were first given 30 minutes to complete a free-response description of their relationship with

the partners of each couple in separate rooms. Subjects were assured their data would be anonymous and confidential, and that they would not have access to what their partners had written and vice-versa. A series of questionnaires was then administered including scales measuring the attachment styles, attachment histories, relationship happiness, love attitudes, and a short demographic questionnaire. For the follow-up, all subjects were contacted separately by phone four months after they had completed the study. They were initially asked "Are you still in your relationship?" If the answer was "Yes", the attachment scales, and the Relationship Satisfaction scale were administered over the phone.

### Measures

**Attachment styles.** The attachment and attachment history items used were derived from those initially developed by Hazan and Shaver (1987), and modified by Shaver and Hazan (1988). Hazan and Shaver (1987) used a forced-choice technique for these items, but in the present study six-point Likert scales were used ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Subjects rated each of the following three statements, taken from Shaver and Hazan's (1988) recommended versions, on the degree to which they fitted their feelings and experiences in love relationships. After completing these ratings for themselves, subjects were required to estimate how their partners would have answered these items for him or herself:

**Avoidant:** I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others. I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel at all comfortable being.

**Anxious/ambivalent:** I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me. I want to get very close to my partner, and this sometimes scares people away.

**Secure:** I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.

**Attachment history.** Nineteen statements concerning subjects' principal caregivers were derived from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) results, accompanied by six-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", e.g., "My mother was respectful to me", and "I thought my father was a sympathetic person". An internal reliability analysis on the twelve statements regarding the subject's mother yielded an alpha of .81, and the seven statements regarding the father yielded an internal reliability coefficient of .87: Hence, two summed variables were created representing the

positivity of attachment histories of the mother and father.

**Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire.** This six-item questionnaire measures perceptions of love, happiness, relationship stability, seriousness of problems, general satisfaction, and level of commitment (on 7 pt. scales). It is specifically designed for both unmarried and married samples, and has been found to have good internal reliability, convergent validity, and predictive validity in previous studies (Fletcher, Fitness, & Blampied, 1990; Grigg, Fletcher, & Fitness, 1989).

**Free-response relationship description.** The instructions for the free-response relationship description were: "We want you to describe your relationship in your own words. Include whatever you think is important, but make the description as full as you are able to. This information will be strictly confidential and your partner will not see it or know of it, so please feel free to be completely honest and candid." The free-responses were divided into units which comprised a sentence or phrase. These were then coded as positive, negative or neutral and then coded into one of the following four target categories as used by Fletcher et al. (1987): Actor descriptions, partner descriptions, and interpersonal descriptions which include items concerning the relationship itself (e.g. We try to spend time together) or expressing some interaction process (e.g. I am aware of her problems so she confides a lot in me). (See Fletcher et al., 1987, for further details). All disagreements between two coders were discussed and resolved.

Inter-rater reliability by the two coders (the first author and a research assistant), prior to discussion, produced excellent agreement rates for all categories from 87% to 97%. The positive, negative, and neutral items were converted to an overall percentage of positive units, and the target description items (actor, partner, etc.) were converted to an overall percentage of interpersonal units.

### Results

Prior to further analysis we wanted to establish that our sample of New Zealand subjects was similar to those used in prior research. The mean scores obtained for the Secure, Anxious/ambivalent and Avoidant styles were 3.97 ( $SD = 1.53$ ), 2.34 ( $SD = 2.34$ ), and 2.29 ( $SD = 1.32$ ) respectively. These results were very similar to those reported by Levy and Davis (1988) from a North American sample. However, as noted previously, much of the published work dealing with Hazan and Shaver's theory requires subjects to choose which individual attachment category they belong to. To estimate how subjects in this

study would have responded to such a categorical measure, we placed subjects into groups according to the attachment style accorded the highest rating. The remaining 14% of the sample who gave 2 or 3 styles the same score, were equally divided among the relevant styles. This analysis revealed the following estimates: 64% Security, 21% Anxious/ambivalent, and 16% Avoidant. These results are similar to those reported in samples in intimate relationships from North America (Shaver & Hazan, 1988), Israel (Mikulincer et al., 1990) and Australia (Feeney & Noller, 1990).

The results concerning the relations between the attachment styles and subjects' recall of their attachment histories broadly replicated previous research findings. We will not report these results here, but concentrate instead on the results which break new ground or are relevant to our major predictions or questions.

One of the problems with analyzing data from couples is that the variables may not be independent across couples. In accordance with Kenny's (1988) recommendations, non-independence was tested by computing correlations across partners. Only one variable was non-independent, that of relationship satisfaction ( $r = .35, p < .05$ ). Hence, it was decided to treat each subject, rather than each dyad, as the unit of analysis.

#### *Correlations Among The Major Variables*

The correlations among the major variables can be seen in Table 1. As predicted, and broadly replicating previous research findings, the attachment styles attained significant

correlations with one another. Subjects who were more Secure were less Avoidant and less Anxious/ambivalent, while those who were more Avoidant were also more Anxious/ambivalent. Subjects who were more Avoidant, more Anxious/ambivalent, and less Secure reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction. In addition, as expected, subjects with more Avoidant attachment styles wrote less positive and less interpersonally focused free-response descriptions of their relationships, while those who were more Avoidant, more Anxious/ambivalent, and less Secure wrote less positive descriptions.

#### *Judged and Actual Similarity of Attachment Styles Across Couples as a Function of Relationship Satisfaction*

There was no tendency for couple partners to have similar self ratings on any of the attachment styles (Avoidant  $r = .02$ , Anxious/ambivalent  $r = -.09$ , Secure  $r = .04$ ). To examine both the judged and actual similarity of attachment styles in relation to relationship satisfaction, men and women were divided into high and low relationship satisfaction groups, using median splits on the Relationship Satisfaction Scale. To assess judged similarity, within subject correlations were computed between self and partner ratings, while the actual similarity correlations were computed across partner's self ratings. The resultant correlations can be seen in Table 2.

The patterns were similar for both men and women. Subjects high in relationship satisfaction perceived their partners as similar to themselves on both the Avoidant and Secure

Table 1: *Correlations Among Attachment Styles, Relationship Satisfaction, and Relationship Description Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Attachment Styles						
1. Avoidant	—	.27**	-.35***	-.29***	-.25**	-.24*
2. Anxious/ambivalent		—	-.57***	-.20**	-.36***	-.13
3. Secure			—	.19*	.25**	.07
4. Relationship Satisfaction				—	.47***	.22*
Relationship Description						
5. % Positive					—	.45***
6. % Interpersonal						—

Note: All correlations are 2-tailed and based on an  $n$  of 102.

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

\*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 2: *Judged Similarity and Actual Similarity Correlations of Subjects' Attachment Styles with Partner as a Function of Gender and Relationship Satisfaction.*

Variables	Relationship Satisfaction			
	High		Low	
	Judged Similarity	Actual Similarity	Judged Similarity	Actual Similarity
<b>Women's Attachment Styles</b>				
Avoidant	.39*	.04	.17	-.13
Anxious/ambivalent	.28	.05	.11	-.24
Secure	.51**	-.05	-.09 <sub>a</sub>	.10
<b>Men's Attachment Styles</b>				
Avoidant	.44 <sub>a</sub> *	.25	-.13 <sub>a</sub>	-.13
Anxious/ambivalent	.15	-.22	-.29	-.12
Secure	.60 <sub>a</sub> **	.23	.09 <sub>a</sub>	-.14

Note: Pairs of correlations across high and low relationship satisfaction groups with the letter "a" as a subscript were significantly different at the  $p < .05$  level according to a 2-tailed test (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

attachment styles, but not on the Anxious/ambivalent dimension. In contrast, those who were low in relationship satisfaction did not perceive themselves as similar. Moreover, against predictions, the actual similarity correlations between the self-reports of attachment styles across partners showed there was little actual similarity between partners regardless of whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied. In general it would seem that subjects in happy relationships produced more inaccurate judgements than unhappy subjects.

#### *Analyzing Change in Relationships Over Time*

The zero-order correlations across the two time periods showed that both the attachment styles and relationship satisfaction were moderately stable over the 4 months (.56, .37, and .47 for Avoidant, Secure, and Anxious/ambivalent respectively, and .76 for relationship satisfaction). The cross-lagged zero-order correlations (equivalent to the diagonals shown in Figure 1) showed the same overall pattern as the regression coefficients in Figure 1. However, use of a standard cross-legged panel design which uses zero-order correlations has been discredited, particularly in circumstances where the two variables have rather different stability correlations across time, as is the case with our results (see Rogosa, 1980).

Hence, in line with the advice of Rogosa (1980) and others we adopted a path analysis design which uses multiple regression. Such an

analysis allows one to determine to what extent a variable at time 1 (e.g., relationship satisfaction) is associated with a change in another variable over the four month period (e.g., level of Avoidance) (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Two sets of regression analyses were performed with each attachment dimension to produce the relevant regression coefficients which are shown in figure 1. The independent variables for each regression were relationship satisfaction and an attachment dimension as measured at time 1. All analyses were based on an  $n$  of 84 (9 couples' relationships had broken up at time 2).

The crucial regression coefficients are those shown in the diagonal arrows in Figure 1. These show that higher relationship satisfaction (at time 1) is associated with a decrease in Avoidance and an increase in Security (at time 2). However, there was no evidence that either Security or Avoidance at time 1 was associated with changes in relationship satisfaction over the four month period. Neither relationship nor the Anxious/ambivalent attachment dimension were significantly related to change in either variable at time 2. In short, relationship satisfaction appears to be more likely to cause shifts in the attachment styles than vice-versa.

#### Discussion

The results from this study replicate and extend previous research findings. As

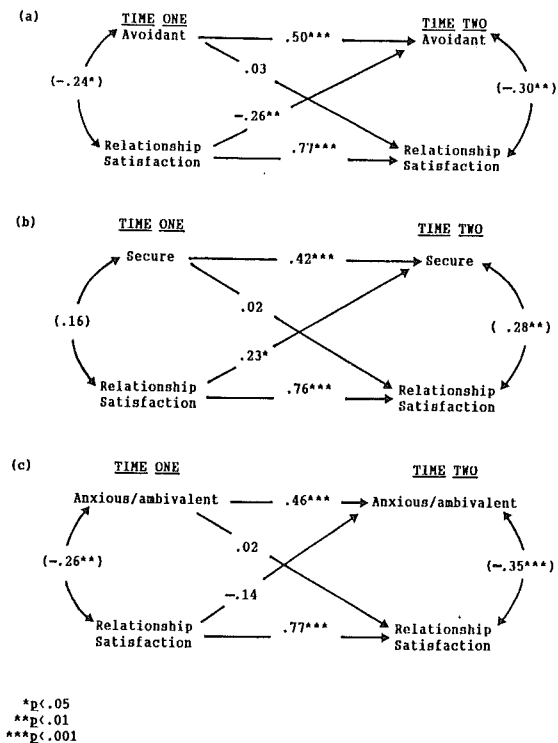


Fig. 1. Standardized regression coefficients from multiple regressions with three attachment styles and relationship satisfaction at time 2 as dependent variables (single-headed arrows show standardized regression coefficients and double-headed arrows show correlations in brackets).

expected, the cross-sectional results showed that partners who were less Avoidant, less Anxious/ambivalent, and more Secure reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and also generated more positive relationship descriptions. The way in which subjects described their relationships was less strongly related to the attachment styles, although, as predicted, more Avoidant subjects wrote less impersonally focused relationship accounts.

Partners of couples were not at all similar in their self-assessments on any of the attachment styles, and this was true regardless of their level of relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, however, partners of couples who were high in relationship satisfaction *perceived* themselves as similar on the Avoidant and Secure styles, while those low in relationship satisfaction did not rate themselves as similar to their partners. This finding suggests that

partners who are happy in their relationships tend to project their own attitudes and beliefs onto their partners to a greater extent than those who are unhappy (see Sternberg and Barnes, 1985).

In general, the cross-sectional correlational findings provide further evidence for Hazan and Shaver's attachment theory. The longitudinal results, however, are less supportive of the notion that attachment styles are fundamental causal structures in close relationships. Higher relationship satisfaction at time 1 was related to lower levels of Avoidance and higher levels of Security four months later, while none of the three attachment styles at time 1 was related to levels of relationship satisfaction four months on. These findings suggest that if the correlation between relationship satisfaction and the attachment styles represents a causal relation, it is more likely to flow from relationship satisfaction to the attachment styles than vice-versa. People's self-assessments on the attachment styles appear to resonate quite readily to shifts in relationship satisfaction.

These longitudinal findings need to be treated with caution for two reasons. The four month period is relatively short, and the paragraph format, adopted from Hazan and Shaver, is perhaps problematic in that subjects are giving one rating for up to four different statements. Successful attempts have been made to develop multi-item self report measures of the attachment constructs (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer et al., 1990). Such methods are probably preferable to the technique used in this study, although it should be noted that both Collins and Read (1990) and Mikulincer et al. (1990) found that there was substantial convergence between their continuous multi-item measures of each attachment dimension and the original method adopted by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in which subjects chose one dimension as self-descriptive.

Nonetheless, even taking these caveats into account, our results do suggest that attachment styles are more malleable than suggested in the original theory. We think it is perfectly reasonable to postulate that an individual's attachment styles were forged in early parent/child interactions. However, we believe it is equally plausible that experiences in adult relationships will often substantially alter and

even reverse these early patterns. We did find in this research, replicating what others have found, that subjects' memories of relationships with their parents were related in predictable ways to their attachment styles. However, the veridicality of reports from childhood are clearly suspect. Moreover, even in the absence of links between childhood experiences and current adult attachment styles, it seems likely that people will construct consistent threads between the past and the present derived from self concepts and personal theories of how attitudes and behaviour in adult close relationships might be related to parent-child relations (Sternberg & Beall, in press).

The published research testing an attachment approach to love and bonding has, to date, relied on cross-sectional correlations of self-report measures. Such evidence is perfectly appropriate and respectable. However, it is open to the interpretation that subjects are merely providing self reports on the basis of their own implicit psychological theories linking the different constructs. Hence, it could be argued, the research to date tells us more about the structure of people's naive theories concerning close relationships than about the causal relations among psychologically distinct constructs. To avoid this problem, and provide more rigorous tests of attachment theory, future research will need to examine the attachment styles in relation to close relationship behaviour and also investigate relationships longitudinally.

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