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Insecure attachment orientation and well-being in emerging adults: The roles of perceived social

support and fatigue

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Abstract

Attachment theory posits that insecure attachment orientations reflect activation of the attachment behavioural system, and therefore deactivation of its complementary counterpart the exploration system, which is associated with feeling less energized. We hypothesized that less perceived social support and higher fatigue would prospectively explain the link between insecure attachment and well-being in emerging adulthood (ages 18–25), a period in which exploration and social relationships are critical. Participants aged 18-25 completed surveys initially and two weeks later ($N = 153$). Temporal multiple mediation revealed that, at T1, both forms of insecure attachment (anxious and avoidant) were associated with lower T2 well-being, with less perceived social support and higher levels of fatigue each uniquely explaining these associations, after controlling for the effects of each form of attachment on the other. Our findings suggest that deactivation of the exploration system and information processing biases regarding the availability and trustworthiness of others may compromise well-being for emerging adults with an insecure attachment orientation.

KEYWORDS: Attachment orientation; well-being; emerging adulthood; fatigue; social support

Introduction

Attachment orientations reflect views about the self and others that result from experiences of caregiving throughout life and can colour the ways in which adults view and respond to important emotional relationships. Commonly conceptualised in adulthood as comprising two orthogonal dimensions of anxiety about abandonment and avoidance of intimacy (Bowlby, 1969; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), attachment orientations are broadly construed as secure (low anxiety and avoidance) or insecure (high anxiety and/or avoidance). These views can play a pivotal role in the quality of adult relationships and therefore have implications for psychological well-being that may be particularly important in contexts where close relationships are integral to one's identity and functioning. Emerging adulthood is one such period. Defined as a distinct developmental period between the ages of 18 and 25, emerging adulthood is characterized by a common set of social, personal, and identity-related changes (Arnett, 2000). These changes arise in part from the identity exploration that occurs across important domains including relationships, in which the task is to identify potential life partners as well as forge more lasting and intimate relationships than those formed in adolescence. Despite the importance of relationship exploration during this period and its potential implications for well-being (Arnett, 2000; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2015), research into the consequences of attachment orientations for well-being in emerging adults has received little attention. This study aims to address this gap by prospectively examining how and why attachment orientations relate to well-being in emerging adults.

The attachment behavioural system is an innate behavioural system that drives the formation, maintenance, and internalisation of close relationships with others (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The goal of the attachment behavioural system is to restore felt

security by activating attachment behaviours in response to threat. Achieving felt security is crucial for the interplay of the attachment behavioral system and its complementary counterpart, the exploration system, which is deactivated when the attachment system is activated. When felt security is achieved and the attachment system is deactivated, effective exploration can take place (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The manner in which felt security is achieved varies as a function of 'attachment orientation', which reflects individual differences in chronically accessible and available working models of self, others, and relationships that result from repeated experiences of received care.

Because felt security is most easily and readily achieved by individuals with secure working models of attachment, dispositional attachment security has been linked with cognitive substrates of exploration, such as cognitive openness and curiosity (Mikulincer, 1997), and with mood state experiences related to exploration, including feelings of energy and vitality (Luke, Sedikides, & Carnelley, 2012). For example, across two studies, priming a sense of attachment security (as compared to attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance or a neutral, distant relationship prime) resulted in higher levels of both felt security and energy, with energy partially mediating between the secure prime (compared to neutral) and willingness to explore (Luke et al., 2012). In contrast, both primed and enduring attachment insecurity was associated with less desire for social, environmental, and intellectual exploration in comparison to secure attachment across two studies with undergraduate students (Green & Campbell, 2000). Given the theoretical linkages of the attachment and exploration systems, it follows that insecure attachment may be associated with *less* energy and vitality (e.g., fatigue), reflecting deactivation of the exploration system. This, in turn, could have particular consequences for emerging adults who may limit their relationship explorations. The result could be lost opportunities to explore and from one's

identity through the development of meaningful intimate relationships.

Apart from lost relationship exploration opportunities, emerging adults with an insecure attachment style may experience distress from relationships due to their perception of inadequate support provided by those relationships. The information processing biases regarding the availability and trustworthiness of others associated with insecure attachment orientations (Rowe & Carnelley, 2003) can distort perceptions of social support, that is, the availability and quality of assistance provided by other people. Importantly, it is the subjective perception of social support rather than the objective receipt of such support that is associated with indices of well-being (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). Accordingly, researchers have found that individuals with insecure (as compared to secure) attachment styles tend to perceive less social support available to them (Meredith, Ownsworth, & Strong, 2008; Sirois & Gick, In press), and interpret social support provided to them in a more negative manner (Collins & Feeney, 2004). For individuals with insecure attachment styles, less perceived social support, in turn, is associated with lower levels of well-being (Sirois & Gick, In press; Vogel & Wei, 2005).

The Present Research

Given the key role of relationships and exploration during emerging adulthood for identity formation, we hypothesized that insecure attachment would have detrimental effects for well-being among emerging adults. Further, we expected that low levels of perceived social support and higher levels of fatigue (low energy) would explain the effects of attachment insecurity on well-being (see Figure 1). We tested these proposed relations in a sample of emerging adults selected from existing data collected over a 2-week period, and examined the effects of each form of attachment security (anxious and avoidant) at Time 1 on Time 2 well-being taking a temporal multiple mediation approach, and controlling for the effects of each

attachment insecurity on the other.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Following clearance from the University research ethics board, undergraduate students were recruited through announcements posted to the University first year student participant pool. A sample of 271 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25 (68.3 percent female; mean age = 20.04, SD = 1.70) were selected for the current study from a larger sample of 330 students recruited for a study on personality and well-being (Sirois & Hirsch, 2015). All participants completed the Time 1 (T1) survey for extra course credit points, and 153 participants (74.5 percent female, mean age = 19.97, SD = 1.71) completed the Time 2 (T2) survey two weeks later for additional course credit points. Participants read and signed a consent form upon arriving at the lab and then completed a survey which was decoupled from the consent form and course credit information. The T1and T2 surveys were linked via a unique identifier code.

Materials

In addition to basic demographics questions, the following measures were completed at T1 and T2. The means and internal reliability for each scale are presented in Table 1.

Attachment style. A 12-item measure of attachment style (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) assessed anxious (4 items) and avoidant (8 items) attachment. Higher scores on the avoidant subscale (e.g., "I'm somewhat uncomfortable being too close to others") reflect greater avoidant attachment, whereas lower scores on this scale reflect more secure attachment. Higher scores on the anxious subscale (e.g., "I often worry that my partner(s) don't really love me") reflect greater anxious attachment. Responses are scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Perceived social support. The Duke-UNC Functional Social Support questionnaire (Broadhead, Gehlbach, De Gruy, & Kaplan, 1988) is an 8-item scale with questions rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Responses range from 1 (much less than I would like) to 5 (as much as I would like). Items include both emotional (e.g., "I have people who care what happens to me") and practical (e.g., "I get chances to talk about money matters") aspects of social support with higher scores reflecting greater perceived social support.

Fatigue. Fatigue was assessed with 4 items; two from the SF-36v2 (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992), and two items from the Fatigue Severity Scale (Krupp et al. 1989). Items (e.g., "Fatigue has interfered with my work, family or social life.") were scored on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time), with higher scores reflecting higher levels of fatigue.

Well-being. The four item Positive Well-Being subscale from the Well-Being Questionnaire (W-BQ; Bradley, 1994) assessed general well-being over the past 2 weeks. Items (e.g., "I have been happy, satisfied or pleased with my personal life") were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (All of the time), with higher scores indicating higher levels of well-being, after reverse scoring 2 items.

Analyses

Correlational analyses were first conducted to test whether each form of insecure attachment was associated with the proposed mediators and outcome variable in the expected directions. A paired sample *t*-test was conducted on the outcome variable (well-being) measured at T1 and T2 to see whether there was change over time. If so T1 well-being would be included as a control variable. Multiple mediation analyses were conducted with the Hayes macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). We used 5,000 bootstrapping resamples and bias corrected 95 percent confidence intervals for each of the indirect effects calculated. Separate analyses were conducted

for anxious and avoidant attachment while controlling for the effects of the other to better understand the unique contributions of each form of insecure attachment to well-being. Contrast tests were also conducted for each analysis to examine the relative strength of each mediator.

Results

Correlation analysis revealed that anxious and avoidant attachment were each negatively associated with social support and well-being, and positively associated with fatigue, at both T1 and T2 (see Table 1). Both fatigue and social support were associated with well-being in the expected directions. As well, both forms of attachment insecurity were positively associated with each other, supporting the decision to control for the effects of each in the multiple regression analyses. Paired samples t-tests found no significant change in well-being from T1 to T2 (t (154) = -1.48, p = .14), and so T1 well-being was not included as a control variable in the main analyses, in favour of the most parsimonious model.

Multiple mediation analysis for T1 anxious attachment, controlling for the effects of T1 avoidant attachment, found significant indirect effects through both T1 fatigue and T1 social support on T2 well-being (Table 2). The contrast test of the indirect effects found that those for social support were not significantly different from those found for fatigue for either anxious, b = .02 (.02), 95% CI [-.02, .07], or avoidant, b = .01 (.02), 95% CI [-.03, .05], attachment. The direct effect of anxious attachment on well-being was also no longer significant after accounting for the variance explained by both mediators. The same pattern of results was found for avoidant attachment. Overall, each model explained 23 percent of the variance in T2 well-being (Table 2). In sum, attachment insecurity (on either dimension) had a detrimental effect on perceived social support and energy (increased fatigue), which in turn was associated with poor well-being 2 weeks later.

Discussion

Our study addresses an important gap within the research on attachment orientation, finding that insecure attachment was associated with lower levels of well-being over a two-week period, and that less perceived social support and greater feelings of fatigue explained this association. Our findings may have implications for attachment theory, and for our understanding of emerging adults' well-being. We discuss each in turn.

That attachment insecurity, both in terms of avoidance and anxiety, is predictive of fatigue, lower perceived social support and, in turn, to lower well-being, is congruent with previous theory and research. From the lens of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and research on attachment and vitality (Luke et al., 2012) and information processing biases (Rowe & Carnelley, 2003), insecure attachment is linked to the deactivation of the exploration system and perceptions of social support being less trustworthy and available. Although both of these factors explained why insecure attachment was associated with lower well-being at the follow-up, the reasons may differ for each form of insecure attachment, particularly in relation to perceived social support. Avoidant attachment is associated with a history of rejection of caregiving and views of others as unavailable or untrustworthy (Bowlby, 1969). In terms of social support, individuals with an avoidant attachment orientation may not view support as available from others because they view themselves as capable and independent and, therefore, may devalue any social support as not being available or needed (e.g., Simpson et al., 1992). In contrast, anxious attachment is associated with a history of inconsistent caregiving and, thus, anxiety about abandonment (Bowlby, 1969). Because individuals with an anxious attachment orientation view the self as unlovable and unworthy, they adopt excessive, and sometimes insatiable, support seeking strategies when under threat. Available social support is therefore perceived as

inadequate (e.g., Meredith et al., 2008), almost regardless of its amount or quality.

The current findings further suggest that the deactivation of the exploration system (as measured by higher levels of fatigue) may have important consequences for emerging adults who are engaged in a number of identity exploration activities. Primary among these is the exploration and formation of intimate social relationships (Arnett, 2000). That insecure attachment was associated with less perceived social support suggests that emerging adults with anxious or insecure attachment orientations may have difficulties forming such relationships or, at a minimum, may not be able to fully benefit from their relationships because of information processing biases which can distort perceptions of the availability and trustworthiness of social support (Rowe & Carnelley, 2003).

Our findings suggest that together, the lack of vitality/energy and lower perceptions of social support may take a toll on well-being, because they compromise opportunities for achieving the identity-related tasks associated with this developmental period (Arnett, 2000). This assertion is consistent with research which found that secure attachment had an energizing quality that promoted a willingness to explore (Luke et al., 2012), and with research noting that less perceived social support accounts for the link between insecure attachment and lower levels of well-being (Sirois & Gick, In press; Vogel & Wei, 2005). Future research could provide more insight into this by examining how attachment is associated with tasks pertinent to identity exploration, such as involvement in more serious romantic relationships and investigating career choices (Arnett, 2000), and the subsequent consequences for well-being.

Our findings, though novel, should be considered in light of certain limitations and strengths. The response rate at T2 was less than ideal as only 56 percent of those from T1 participated in the follow-up study. This lowered the overall sample size for the temporal

multiple mediation and may have compromised the power to detect significant direct effects (c`

path) from attachment insecurity to well-being in the full model that included the indirect effects

through fatigue and social support. Accordingly, the extent to which the effects of attachment

insecurity on well-being are fully explained by fatigue and social support should be interpreted

with caution. The lower response rate may have been due in part to the restrictions imposed for

awarding course credits for participation which only permitted that course credits be allotted for

each individual survey, rather than when both parts of the study were completed. Using a

relatively brief time frame of two weeks likely influenced our ability to detect any possible

changes in well-being. This short time frame was necessary given the restrictions in awarding

participation credits. Future research over a longer period time is thus needed to confirm our

findings. The measures used to operationalize the key variables of fatigue/energy and well-being

in the current study were limited by those available in the data set. Future research is therefore

needed to examine if using more direct measures of energy, vitality and exploration, and

alternative measures of well-being that encompass eudemonic perspectives, will yield the same

results. Despite these limitations, examining how insecure attachment relates to well-being over

time is a strength of the current research that helps support the temporal precedence of

attachment insecurity in relation to fatigue, social support, and well-being.

Conclusions

The current findings provide preliminary evidence that fatigue reflecting deactivation of

the exploration system and less trust in personal relationships may compromise well-being for

emerging adults with an insecure attachment orientation. Future research is needed to better

understand whether shifting perceptions of available social support and increasing vitality,

perhaps by priming secure attachment, could be effective for addressing the well-being issues

associated with insecure attachment in this population.

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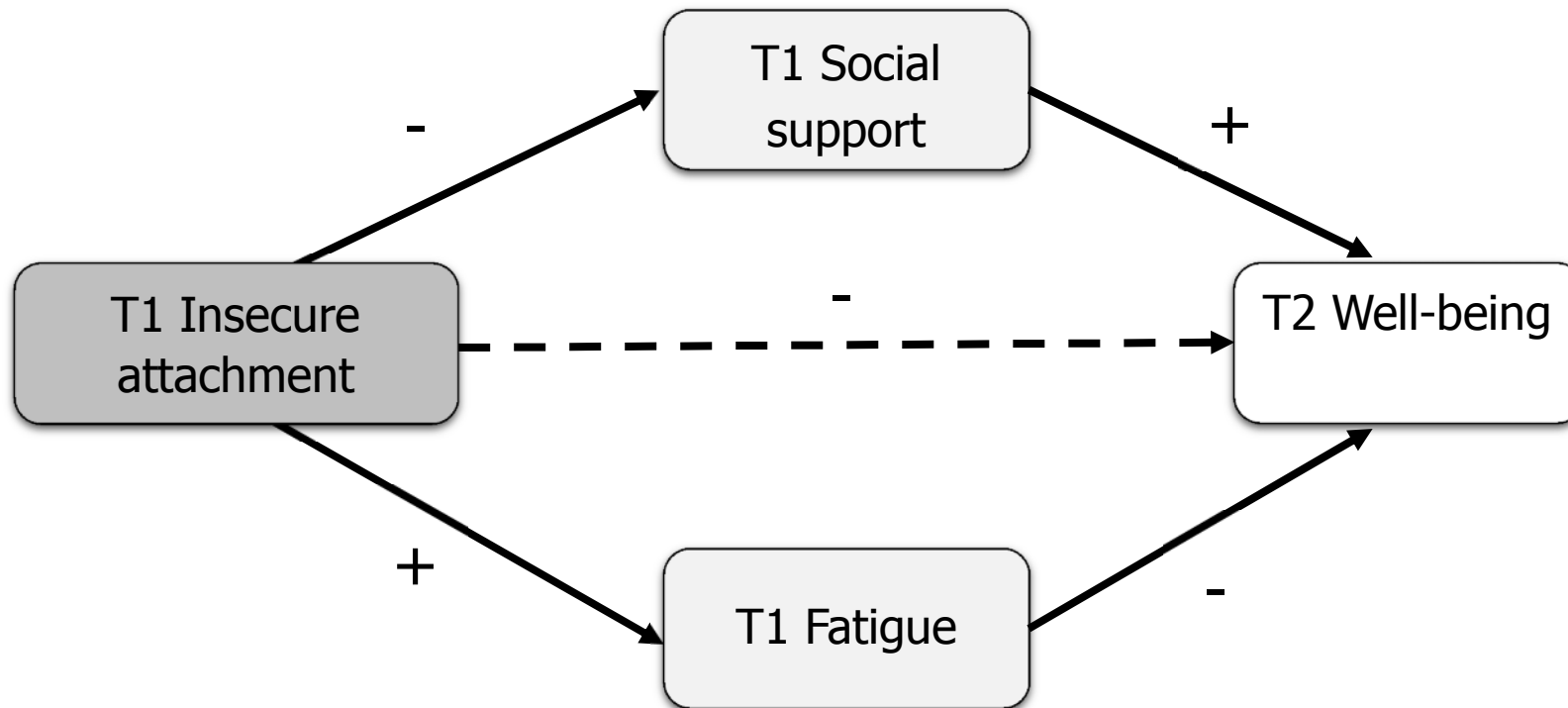I. Conceptual framework and item selection. *Medical Care, 30*(6), 473-483.

Figure 1: *Proposed Model of the Roles of Social Support and Fatigue in Explaining the Associations of Insecure Attachment Orientations (Anxious and Avoidant) to Well-Being in Emerging Adults.*

Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations and Bivariate Correlations Among the Study Variables at Time 1 and Time 2.*

	M	*SD*	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Time 1												
1. Avoidant	3.50	1.03	.76	---								
2. Anxious	3.09	1.10	.59	.25**	---							
3. Social support	4.32	0.67	.87	-.36**	-.32**	---						
4. Fatigue	2.86	0.91	.76	.34**	.30**	-.28**	---					
5. Well-being	2.57	0.60	.75	-.24**	-.34**	.32**	-.57**	---				
Time 2												
6. Avoidant	3.55	0.99	.77	.75**	.17*	-.27**	.24**	-.14*	---			
7. Anxious	3.01	1.06	.60	.16*	.64**	-.34**	.29**	-.35**	.21**	---		
8. Social support	4.38	0.67	.89	-.36**	-.34**	.71**	-.22**	.20*	-.27**	-.42**	---	
9. Fatigue	2.67	0.94	.81	.28**	.27**	.28**	.62**	-.42**	.30**	.33**	-.27**	---
10. Well-being	2.70	0.53	.75	-.25**	-.34**	-.25**	-.41**	.57**	-.22**	-.44**	.41**	-.57**

Note. **$p <$. 01. T1 *N* = 271; T2 *N* = 153.

Table 2.

Indirect Effects of Anxious Attachment (ANX) and Avoidant Attachment (AV) on Time 2 Well-Being (WB) Through Social Support (SS) and Fatigue (FT) Controlling for Insecure Attachment.

Path	B (SE)	t	Indirect effect (SE)	BCA CIs	Model R^2	F (df)
ANX – SS	-.14 (.05)	-2.85**				
ANX - FT	.25 (.07)	3.57**				
SS– WB	.19 (.05)	2.72**			.23	11.43** (4, 149)
FT – WB	-.19 (.05)	-3.87**				
ANX– WB	-.05 (.04)	-1.19				
SS			-.03 (.01)	[-.07, -.01]		
FT			-.05 (.01)	[-.02, -.09]		
AV – SS	-.14 (.05)	-2.91**				
AV - FT	.27 (.07)	3.07**				
SS– WB	.19 (.05)	2.72**			.23	11.43** (4, 149)
FT – WB	-.19 (.05)	-3.87**				
AV – WB	-.03 (.04)	-0.79				
SS			-.03 (.02)	[-.07, -.01]		
FT			-.04 (.02)	[-.08, -.01]		

Note: BCA CI = Bias corrected and accelerated 95 percent confidence intervals; Boot strapping analyses was conducted with 5,000 resamples; all effects are unstandardized; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.