Personality Traits of Individuals with Different Adult Attachment Styles and its Implications

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Abstract

The present study focused on examining the personality traits associated with different attachment styles based on the key components of the attachment theory developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth. Two-hundred sixteen participants were given a self-report questionnaire consisting of a demographic section, Hazan and Shaver (1987) Adult Attachment Questionnaire, and the Basic Personality Inventory by Jackson (1984). Twenty-two participants were eliminated from the study because of improperly filling out of the questionnaire. One-hundred and three of the participants were female, and ninety-one were male. One-hundred and six reported as being secure, forty-seven reported as being anxious-ambivalent, and forty-one reported as avoidant. As expected, avoidant individuals reported more suspiciousness than securely attached individuals. However, contrary to our expectations, the $t$-test reviewed that securely attached individuals did not report more extrovertism than anxious-ambivalent individuals.
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Bowlby (1969) developed attachment theory suggesting that the attachments formed during the early stages of childhood between an infant and a primary caregiver have a great impact on personality and development of intimate social relationships in adulthood, and Ainsworth (1978) based on his theory introduced three distinct attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant. They believed that the consistency of care from a reliable and accessible caregiver with warmth provides a child with confidence and security when exposing to the world in the future; thus, leading to the development of the similar positive expectations in others in the future and the formation of the working model of self. Hazan and Shaver (1990) applied Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978) work to adult romantic relationship. Securely attached adults are comfortable with interdependency with another person, and have no unreasonable fear of abandonment. Anxious-ambivalently attached individuals are preoccupied, experience premature intimacy, and often fear of ending the relationship. Individuals of avoidant attachment often express suspiciousness and jealousy, have difficulty maintaining intimate relationships because they are uncomfortable with interdependency.

Mikulincer (1998) found out that secure subjects scored higher in dependability and faith subscales than avoidant subjects. Hazan and Shaver (1990) found that avoidantly attached individuals scored higher on Work Harms Health/ Relationships scale than secure individuals. Believing that work interferes negatively with relationships indicates being suspicious and have difficulty in trusting the other person in a close relationship or the relationship itself. Mikulincer and Nachshon (1991) found that secure people revealed more disclosure than avoidant people. Self-disclosure is very important in determining how trustful an individual is in interpersonal relationships because it shows how comfortable and trusting an individual is when he is able to
open up and disclose to the other person in a relationship. In Hazan and Shaver’s (1990) study of the work behavior of individuals of different attachment styles, avoidant individuals scored higher on their fear of failure/disapproval scale than securely attached individuals.

Shaver and Brennan (1992) found that secure subjects scored higher in extraversion on Major NEO-PI scales than anxious-ambivalent subjects. Hazan and Shaver (1990) found that anxious-ambivalent subjects had a stronger needs to keep busy than securely attached subjects. They prefer to have more work load and get nervous when not given work; thus, they are less likely to attend social activities and engage in relationships with others when they tend to make themselves busy most of the time. Anxious-ambivalent subjects reported having more sexual partners in the past year than securely attached subjects in Bogaert and Sadava’s (2002) study. Having more sexual partners in the past year indicates a relatively more outgoing lifestyle in which the individuals are more likely to meet more people and socialize with them and then lead to possible sexual encounters. Collins and Read’s (1990) study found that securely attached individuals reported higher levels of self-esteem than anxious-ambivalently attached individuals. People with a relatively higher self-esteem feel more confident about themselves and are more likely to be outgoing. Mickelson, Kessler, and Shaver’s (1997) study found that more anxious-ambivalently attached subjects reported to be social phobic than securely attached individuals. Experiencing social phobia makes it hard to have normal social interaction with others and thus makes them less outgoing than people without social phobia.

The study expects to find that securely attached individuals report less suspiciousness than avoidantly attached individuals, and securely attached individuals are more extraverted than anxious-ambivalent individuals.

Method
Participants

Two-hundred sixteen students from Northeastern University participated in the study. Twenty-two of them did not fill out the questionnaire properly and were eliminated. Out of the 197 remaining subjects, 103 were female and 91 were male, with 95% of them ranging in age from 18 to 50 years (median age was 28). Each of the participants was asked to rank order descriptions of Hazan and Shaver’s Adult Attachment Questionnaire (1987) based on which paragraph best describes their attachment style in romantic relationships. One-hundred and six of the participants reported as secure, 47 as anxious-ambivalent, and 41 as avoidant.

Materials

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section 1 was four demographical questions. Section 2 was the three descriptive paragraphs of different attachment styles from the Hazan and Shaver’s Adult Attachment Questionnaire (1987). Participants were asked to rank the order of paragraph that best describes their style of intimacy. Section 3 was based on Jackson (1984) Basic Personality Inventory in which impulsivity, suspiciousness and extraversion were measured. Participants were asked to respond the 54 true-false items which were reversely coded.

Procedure

The research was conducted in 2002 at a highly populated area of the Hunter College campus. Researchers asked participants to answer the self-reported questionnaire. The researches approached possible participants in a systematic matter by picking people on their right side. This was random but controlled method that allowed them to access an equal number of male and female participants.
Result

As expected, avoidant individuals reported more suspiciousness than securely attached individuals. However, contrary to our expectations, the \( t \)-test reviewed that securely attached individuals did not report more extrovertism than anxious-ambivalent individuals, \( t(47) = 7.1, P < .01 \).

Discussion

As expected, avoidant individuals reported more suspiciousness than securely attached individuals. However, contrary to our expectations, the \( t \)-test reviewed that securely attached individuals did not reported more extrovertism than anxious-ambivalent individuals. Our finding is in disaccord with Shaver and Brennan’s (1992) study, but in accord with Moreira et al.’s (1998) study. There is a significant difference between the average age of the participants in the two studies being 20 and 27 respectively contributing to the different outcomes of them. The 27 year olds are more likely to have more obligations in their family and work and thus being less sociable and outgoing; on the contrary, the 20 year olds are free from obligations in life and are more likely to be outgoing and engage in social activities. There is no difference between anxious-ambivalent subjects and secure subjects in extrovertism when we expected the difference. One possible factor is that anxious-ambivalent individuals have a very strong interpersonal need to interact with other people even they usually lack social competence. Having a powerful interpersonal need push them to be outgoing, socialize with others, and disclose to others more than what they are expected to.

As expected, secure individuals reported less suspiciousness than avoidant individuals. This finding is congruent with Mikulincer’s (1998) study that found secure participants scored
higher in dependability and faith subscales that measured individual trust level. One of the personality traits that might be associated with being less suspicious is extroversion. Mikulincer and Nachshon’s (1991) study revealed that people who are extraverted are often warm, outgoing, and are comfortable with intimate relationship, which makes them more likely to disclose to others in the relationship and thus have more faith and develop trust in the relationship. Moreover, in Hazan and Shaver’s (1990) study of the work behavior of individuals of different attachment styles, avoidant individuals scored higher on their fear of failure/disapproval scale than securely attached individuals. Since avoidant individuals are more suspicious, they tend to think that people criticize them and they are not being treated fairly; therefore, they fears rejection from poor work and worries about their performance at work. Avoidantly attached individuals are usually more resistant to intimacy. A suspicious person is more likely to hide his/her feelings from people and be less likely to disclose to others in a relationship; thus, this makes them harder to believe in others and less likely to form an intimate relationship. An avoidant caregiver might influence the infant and make a more suspicious adult. When a caregiver is hostile and distanced towards the infant, it is more likely that the infant becomes more cautious not to get hurt or unwanted feelings from the caregiver. As he/she grows up, being cautious and suspicious will be the model for social interaction with others in a relationship.

One of the possible flaws of the study is the ambiguous sources of differences from the self-report of attachment styles in the questionnaire. Participants are less likely to be willing to admit negative feelings about themselves because it is socially desirable to admit to be secure than to be anxious-ambivalent or avoidant. Also, the selection of the participants of the study was selected from densely populated areas on the campus making it more likely to get subjects who are more extraverted and outgoing. The sample might have been biased because of the
higher percentage of extraverts in the sample. Moreover, 10% of the original participants were eliminated from the study, which disallowed the researchers to collect data and analyze them. For future research, one possible option could be to evaluate the quality and status of marriages of people with the same attachment style but different personality traits and the length of their marriages in relationship to their personality traits.
References


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