

Effects of Adult Attachment Style on the Perception and Search for Social Support

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ABSTRACT. Effects of adult attachment style on the perception of and search for social support were examined. One hundred and fifty undergraduate students completed self-report scales tapping their attachment styles, the extent to which they perceive the availability of emotional and instrumental support from significant figures (father, mother, same-sex friend, opposite-sex friend, romantic partner), and the extent to which they look for instrumental and emotional assistance in times of need. Findings showed that secure persons perceived higher levels of emotional and instrumental support from the assessed figures and reported seeking more emotional and instrumental support than avoidant and ambivalent persons did. Results are discussed in the context of an attachment perspective of social support.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL SUPPORT to well-being has been one of the major areas of psychological research during the last decade. Social support is a multidimensional construct that may be defined as the comfort, assistance, and/or information one receives through formal or informal social contacts (Wallston, Alagna, DeVellis, & DeVellis, 1983). Several authors have pointed out that the sense of social support—the generalized appraisal that one is cared for and valued—is related to particular personality traits (Lahey & Heller, 1988; Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987). The present study followed this idea and examined the relationship between one basic personality characteristic, attachment style, and a sense of social support.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) can serve as a theoretical framework for studying how the sense of social support originates. In our terms, a sense of social support can be related to the concept of secure attachment.

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Bowlby defined secure relationships in infancy as those interactions in which parents are responsive to infants' distress, assist infants in regulating tension, and bring relief and comfort. The responsiveness of parents to infants' distress signals and their availability in stressful situations provide infants with a "secure base" and foster the sense of a "good-supportive world." This relationship between attachment and social support has been also emphasized by Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce (1990).

Similarly, the formation of attachment styles may be related to the development of the sense of social support. Securely attached children, who experience supportive relationships with attachment figures and use these figures as a "secure base" (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), may develop a strong sense of social support. In contrast, insecurely attached children (either avoidant or ambivalent), who grow up with doubts about the extent to which attachment figures can comfort them in times of stress (Ainsworth et al., 1978), may develop a generalized belief in a "non-supportive world."

Early attachment experiences and the resulting sense of social support may have important implications for personality and social development. Bowlby (1973) claimed that the individual's attachment style is a stable personality pattern and that it organizes cognition, emotion, and behavior throughout life. Several studies have provided evidence on the stability of attachment style (Arend, Gove, & Sroufe, 1979; Sroufe, 1983) and its impact on the way people relate to others (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991) and cope with stress (Collins & Read, 1990; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer, Florian, & Tolmacz, 1990).

There is also evidence indicating an association between adult attachment style and social support. Kobak and Sceery (1988) found that secure persons reported having more available support from their families than avoidant persons did. Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan (1992) found that secure women were more likely than avoidant women to seek emotional support from their partners before undergoing an anxiety-provoking experience in the laboratory. Mikulincer, Florian, and Weller (1993) found that secure Israeli adults reported seeking more social support than either avoidant or ambivalent adults did as a way of coping with the Iraqi SCUD missile attacks on Israeli cities.

The problem with those studies is that they did not address the multifaceted nature of social support. Specifically, they did not differentiate between different components of social support (emotional, instrumental) and between different supportive figures (e.g., parents, friends, lovers).

The perception of and search for social support are far from being unitary concepts; rather, they appear to be differentiated along several dimensions. Cutrona (1990) differentiated between emotional support (expression of comfort and caring) and instrumental support (provision of services, resources, and problem-solving means). Although high correlations have been found between these two components (Brown, 1986; House, Kahn, McLeod, & Williams, 1985), some

recent studies have demonstrated their existence via confirmatory factor analysis (Brookings & Bolton, 1988; Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). In addition, another differentiation has been made according to the identity of the supportive figure—family members, friends, or romantic partners (Cohen, 1988; Sarason et al., 1987).

In the current study, we examined the association of attachment style and self-reports on the perception of and search for social support. Undergraduate students answered questions tapping their attachment styles and rated the extent to which they have and search for emotional and instrumental support from their mothers, fathers, same-sex friends, opposite-sex friends, and romantic partners.

We hypothesized that secure adults, who had experienced supportive relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1993), would be more likely to perceive available social support in times of need than avoidant and ambivalent adults, who had experienced rejecting or inconsistent relationships with attachment figures. In addition, both avoidant and ambivalent persons would be less prone to search for support than secure persons would, but their tendency would reflect different psychological reasons. On the one hand, avoidant persons would not search for support because they rely on themselves and maintain distance from others (Bowlby, 1982). On the other hand, ambivalent persons would not seek support because of their strong fear of rejection (Mikulincer et al., 1990).

We also hypothesized that the tendency of secure persons to perceive and seek more support than avoidant and ambivalent persons may be found mainly when assessing emotional components and parental support. The theoretical relationship between attachment and social support concerns experiences with parents who have been successful or unsuccessful in bringing emotional relief. However, if attachment style is generalized across interactions and domains (Bowlby, 1973), the effects of attachment styles may also be found with regard to instrumental support and extrafamilial interactions.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty undergraduate students (85 women and 65 men ranging in age from 21 to 28 years) from the social science faculty at Bar-Ilan University volunteered to participate in the study without monetary reward. Of these participants, 85% were single.

Materials and Procedure

The volunteers were asked to participate in a study on social relations, and they filled out the questionnaire during regular class time. They answered ques-

tions on scales tapping attachment and social support in random order. The procedure took approximately 30 min.

Attachment styles were assessed via two instruments previously used by Mikulincer et al. (1990). First, participants read the three Hazan and Shaver descriptions of feelings and cognitions regarding attachment styles and endorsed the description that best described their own feelings. Second, participants received 15 statements (five items per attachment style), constructed by decomposing Hazan and Shaver's descriptions (for more details, see Mikulincer et al., 1990). Cronbach alphas for the three attachment factors were acceptable (from .75 to .84). On that basis, we averaged items corresponding to each factor, compared those scores, and assigned each participant to the attachment style that had the maximal value of the three alternatives.

Only five mismatches resulted from comparing the results of the two techniques. No clear pattern was detected in these failures to coincide. To avoid classification ambiguities, we decided to drop those cases from the analyses. Frequencies of attachment styles in the current sample were similar to those in previous studies with American and Israeli samples (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer et al., 1990). Fifty-nine percent of the participants ($n = 86$) were classified as secure, 30% as avoidant ($n = 43$), and 11% as ambivalent ($n = 16$).

Social support was assessed via two instruments constructed for the current study. The Perceived Available Instrumental and Emotional Support Scale (PAIESS) tapped the extent to which five figures (mother, father, same-sex friend, opposite-sex friend, and romantic partner) were perceived as providing instrumental and emotional support. The Seeking of Instrumental and Emotional Support Scale (SIESS) tapped the extent to which the respondent looked for instrumental and emotional support from those figures during difficult times.

The PAIESS, a 14-item, self-report questionnaire, was constructed on the basis of items selected and translated into Hebrew (using a back-translation technique) from the Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983), the Social Support Perception Scale (Vaux, 1985), and the Social Support Behavior Scale (Vaux et al., 1987). The PAIESS included seven items tapping instrumental support (e.g., "My father is ready to assist me financially when I need it") and seven items tapping emotional support (e.g., "My father is ready to listen to my innermost feelings without criticism"). Participants rated the degree to which a particular person provided support on a 6-point scale ranging from 1, *not at all*, to 6, *very much*. They completed five versions of the PAIESS, each for a different figure. The order of the versions was randomized across participants.

Factor analyses with varimax rotation conducted separately for each PAIESS version yielded two main factors (eigenvalue > 1), which explained 65% to 73% of the variance. The first factor (between 42% and 51% of explained variance) included the seven instrumental support items (loading $> .40$). The second factor (between 13% and 22% of the variance) included the seven emotional support

items. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were appropriate (between .83 and .89 for instrumental support items and between .79 and .92 for emotional support items). On that basis, we computed two scores of perceived instrumental support and perceived emotional support for each figure by averaging the items loading high on each factor. Higher scores reflected more perceived support.

The SIESS, a 10-item, self-report questionnaire, was constructed on the basis of items selected from the Hebrew version of the Ways of Coping Checklist (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The SIESS included five items tapping instrumental support (e.g., "I ask for advice from my father about solving the problem") and 5 items tapping emotional support (e.g., "I seek sympathy and understanding from my father"). Participants rated the degree to which they seek support in difficult times from a particular person, on a 6-point scale ranging from 1, *not at all*, to 6, *very much*. They completed five versions of the SIESS, each for a different figure, as mentioned earlier. The order of the versions was randomized across participants.

Factor analyses with varimax rotation conducted separately for each SIESS version yielded two main factors that explained 68% to 78% of the variance. The first factor explained 57% and 71% of the variance, and it was composed of the five instrumental support items. The second factor explained between 7% and 11% of the variance, and it was composed of the 5 emotional support items. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were appropriate (between .76 and .85 for instrumental support items and between .84 and .90 for emotional support items). On this basis, we computed two scores for the search for instrumental and emotional support for each figure by averaging the items loading high on each factor. Higher scores reflected a higher tendency to seek support.

Results

We analyzed the data by three-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) for attachment style (secure, avoidant, ambivalent), component of support (instrumental, emotional), and identity of the figure (father, mother, same-sex friend, opposite sex-friend, and partner). The two last factors were treated as within-subject repeated measures.¹

The three-way ANOVA on the perception of available support yielded a significant main effect for attachment style, $F(2, 142) = 9.27, p < .01$. Duncan post hoc tests ($\alpha = .05$) indicated that secure persons perceived more available

¹ Additional ANOVAs were conducted with gender as another independent variable. No significant association was found between the distribution of attachment style and gender, and no significant interaction was found between them in their effects on the perception and seeking of support. However, the analyses revealed the frequently found main effect of gender on social support (Vaux, 1985): Women perceived and searched for more emotional and instrumental support than men did.

support ($M = 5.01$) than avoidant ($M = 4.57$) and ambivalent persons ($M = 4.40$) did. No significant difference was found between the results for avoidant and ambivalent persons. The interactions of attachment style with the two other factors were not significant, implying that attachment groups differed in their perception of support availability regardless of the component of support endorsed and the identity of the support provider. Secure persons reported having more available support in all the categories assessed than insecure persons did (see Table 1 for means and univariate F ratios).

The three-way ANOVA also yielded significant main effects for component of support, $F(1, 142) = 8.18, p < .01$, and identity of the figure, $F(4, 559) = 13.82, p < .01$. Participants perceived more emotional support ($M = 4.87$) than instrumental support ($M = 4.76$). In addition, Duncan post hoc tests indicated that they reported that romantic partners provided more support ($M = 5.08$) than did mothers ($M = 4.88$) and same-sex friends ($M = 4.87$), who, in turn, were perceived as providing more support than opposite-sex friends ($M = 4.66$) and fathers ($M = 4.56$).

Those two main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction for component of support and identity of the figure, $F(4, 559) = 52.05, p < .01$. Tests for simple main effects (Winer, 1971) indicated that participants perceived their romantic partners and friends to provide more emotional than instrumental support. In contrast, they perceived their fathers to provide more instrumental

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Available Social Support According to Attachment Style

Relationship	Secure		Avoidant		Ambivalent		$F(2, 141)$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Father							
Instrumental	5.06	0.94	4.69	0.91	4.21	1.06	5.86**
Emotional	4.51	1.32	3.89	1.24	3.85	1.60	3.72*
Mother							
Instrumental	5.02	0.93	4.70	0.95	4.20	0.90	5.28**
Emotional	5.08	1.02	4.61	1.10	4.61	1.09	3.35*
Same-sex friend							
Instrumental	4.81	0.79	4.46	0.91	4.20	0.90	4.13*
Emotional	5.26	0.72	4.92	0.95	4.95	0.46	3.15*
Opposite-sex friend							
Instrumental	4.74	0.95	4.14	1.26	4.01	0.66	6.31**
Emotional	5.07	0.82	4.63	1.24	4.13	0.80	7.29**
Romantic partner							
Instrumental	5.22	0.74	4.57	0.94	4.62	1.16	9.43**
Emotional	5.47	0.68	5.00	1.03	4.67	1.03	7.94**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

than emotional support. Mothers were perceived as providing equal amounts of emotional and instrumental support (see Table 1).

The three-way ANOVA on the search for social support yielded a significant main effect for attachment style, $F(9, 142) = 8.57, p < .01$. Duncan tests indicated that secure persons reported seeking more social support in dealing with life problems ($M = 4.15$) than avoidant ($M = 3.66$) and ambivalent persons ($M = 3.42$) did. No significant difference was found between avoidant and ambivalent persons. Secure persons reported seeking more social support in most of the categories assessed than insecure persons (see Table 2, means and F ratios).

The ANOVA also yielded significant main effects for component of support, $F(1, 142) = 13.46, p < .01$, and identity of the supportive figure, $F(4, 559) = 45.96, p < .01$. Participants reported seeking more instrumental ($M = 4.01$) than emotional support ($M = 3.85$). Duncan tests indicated that romantic partners were preferred as supportive figures ($M = 4.67$) over same-sex friends ($M = 4.19$), who, in turn, were preferred over mothers and opposite-sex friends ($M = 3.75, M = 3.71$, respectively). Fathers were the least preferred supportive figures ($M = 3.36$).

Those two main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction for component of support and identity of supportive figure, $F(4, 559) = 23.18, p < .01$. Tests for simple main effects indicated that fathers were sought out for more instrumental than emotional support. Romantic partners, mothers, and

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Search for Social Support According to Attachment Style

Relationship	Secure		Avoidant		Ambivalent		$F(2, 141)$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Father							
Instrumental	4.02	1.28	3.34	1.43	2.91	1.07	6.78**
Emotional	3.35	1.15	2.77	1.12	2.87	1.32	3.77*
Mother							
Instrumental	4.02	1.27	3.34	1.41	3.35	1.05	4.45*
Emotional	3.96	1.29	3.53	1.32	3.87	1.23	1.45
Same-sex friend							
Instrumental	4.49	0.88	4.12	1.31	3.88	1.11	3.12*
Emotional	4.24	0.96	3.78	1.03	4.01	1.08	3.03*
Opposite-sex friend							
Instrumental	4.02	1.18	3.40	1.42	3.22	0.92	4.99**
Emotional	3.85	1.12	3.51	1.31	3.20	0.93	2.55
Romantic partner							
Instrumental	4.96	1.03	4.40	1.16	4.04	1.23	6.69**
Emotional	4.90	0.96	4.48	0.98	3.97	1.33	6.30**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

friends were equally sought out for emotional and instrumental support (see Table 2).

To examine the association between the perception and seeking of social support, we computed Pearson correlations for each of the components and figures. Most of the correlations between the perception and seeking of support were relatively high—between .50 and .69—in the total sample (see Table 3). A similar pattern was identified among both secure and avoidant persons. With regard to ambivalent persons, however, the pattern of correlations differed. We found significant associations between the perception and seeking of social support only for the emotional component of support. This pattern may imply that ambivalent persons did not perceive the availability of instrumental support as related to the extent to which they search for it.

Discussion

In the present study we examined the association between adult attachment styles and sense of social support. In general, the findings support the hypothesis that attachment groups differ in the extent to which they perceive available emotional and instrumental support from significant others. In addition, attachment groups were found to differ in their tendency to seek support in times of need.

The pattern of social support shown by secure persons was in line with the

TABLE 3
Pearson Correlations Between the Perception of and Seeking of Support

Relationship	Total	Secure	Avoidant	Ambivalent
Father				
Emotional	.69**	.71**	.63**	.60**
Instrumental	.52**	.57**	.44**	.19
Mother				
Emotional	.59**	.56**	.72**	.44**
Instrumental	.48**	.55**	.40**	.09
Same-sex friend				
Emotional	.39**	.33**	.45**	.50**
Instrumental	.51**	.41**	.67**	.17
Opposite-sex friend				
Emotional	.50**	.43**	.48**	.73**
Instrumental	.49**	.44**	.50**	.24
Romantic partner				
Emotional	.57**	.56**	.49**	.53**
Instrumental	.63**	.58**	.63**	.06

** $p < .01$.

predictions. Those persons have a history of relationships with significant others who were available in times of need and were responsive to signals of distress (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This attachment history creates expectations that significant others will be available when needed and will be able to bring comfort and relief (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In the present study, these expectations are reflected in secure persons' tendency to see significant others as providing relatively high levels of support. This trust in significant others may also underlie secure persons' tendency to seek support. Because secure persons perceive others as efficient means for affect regulation, they would be prone to seek their company in times of need.

The pattern of social support shown by insecure persons, either avoidant or ambivalent, is also in line with our predictions. Insecure persons have a history of relationships with figures who were not responsive and available in times of need (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). They grow up with worries about the intentions and responses of significant others. They may perceive the surrounding social world as a threatening place and may be afraid and/or unwilling to rely on social interactions for help coping with life's adversities (see, e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This basic mistrust is reflected in insecure persons' tendency to perceive a relatively low level of available instrumental and emotional support from others and their relatively low tendency to seek social support in times of need.

Ambivalent persons differed from secure persons not only in the degree of their perception and seeking of social support but also in the association between those two support-related constructs. Whereas secure persons showed a positive correlation between the perception and seeking of support, ambivalent persons showed low correlations for instrumental support. Possibly the search for instrumental support among ambivalent persons is guided more by their own basic anxieties than by a rational decision based on the availability of support. This interpretation is consistent with previous findings that ambivalent persons are not highly attuned to relevant information available in their social surroundings (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991).

With regard to support seeking, our findings are in line with an earlier study (Mikulincer et al., 1993) of the way attachment groups have coped with the Iraqi missile attacks on Israeli cities. Our findings also provide partial support for the findings of Simpson et al. (1992) on support seeking within couples in an anxiety-provoking situation. Although both of those studies indicated that avoidant persons seek less support in times of need than secure persons do, only in the present study were significant differences found between ambivalent and secure attachment groups. A clear interpretation of this empirical discrepancy is problematic, because the two studies used entirely different methodologies.

The present findings were in line with the suggestion by Sarason et al. (1990) that the sense of social support has a personality substrata. Even though the objective presence or absence of supportive relationships may contribute to a sense of social support, the way a person appraises and reacts to them may also

be determined by his or her personality. In this theoretical context, attachment style may be an important personality contributor to the sense of social support, but it cannot be considered the exclusive or most important one. Other personality dimensions, which may be related to attachment style (e.g., hardiness, social orientation), may also shape a person's appraisal of, attitudes toward, and reactions to social support.

Our findings also show that attachment styles were similarly and significantly related to the emotional and instrumental components of social support that were provided by intra- and extrafamilial figures. These findings can be explained on the basis of the self-confirming property of cognitive schemata such as attachment styles, which generalize expectations beyond the original intrafamilial interaction. Through such a generalization, secure persons come to expect the receipt of support from the social world, whereas insecure persons have doubts about the responsiveness of that world. This reasoning suggests that differences in attachment style reflect general positive or negative orientations toward the social world.

The present study also delineates the particular structure of the sense of social support among young adults. It seems that the support provided by romantic partners and friends may be more appropriate to the needs of young adults than that provided by parents. Moreover, our sample of young adults clearly differentiated between supportive figures according to the kind of support they could provide: Romantic partners and friends were perceived mainly as sources of emotional support, fathers were perceived as potential sources of instrumental support, and mothers were perceived as the providers of both instrumental and emotional types of support.

Our findings and their interpretation should be viewed as an initial step in the exploration of the complex association between personality and social support. Several possible limitations of the present study may reduce the theoretical generalizability of the findings. First, we did not examine differences among attachment groups in actual behaviors of seeking support in real-life situations. We also have no information about whether the relatively low perception of available social support among insecure persons reflects their subjective experiences or the presence of objective, problematic social interactions. We also did not examine what it is that the three attachment types seek from supportive figures and how they feel about the types of support they receive. However, the data provided here may further contribute to the integration of two theoretical frameworks that emphasize the importance of social relationships to well-being.

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Received November 22, 1994