

Attachment Security, Compassion, and Altruism

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ABSTRACT—Theoretically, people who have the benefits of secure social attachments should find it easier to perceive and respond to other people's suffering, compared with those who have insecure attachments. This is because compassionate reactions are products of what has been called the caregiving behavioral system, the optimal functioning of which depends on its not being inhibited by attachment insecurity (the failure of the attachment behavioral system to attain its own goal, safety and security provided by a caring attachment figure). In a series of recent studies, we have found that compassionate feelings and values, as well as responsive, altruistic behaviors, are promoted by both dispositional and experimentally induced attachment security. These studies and the theoretical ideas that generated them provide guidelines for enhancing compassion and altruism in the real world.

KEYWORDS—attachment; caregiving; compassion; altruism

In a world burdened by international, interethnic, and interpersonal conflict, all people of goodwill wish it were possible to foster compassion and willingness to help others rather than ignore others' needs and exacerbate their suffering. Many have probably entertained the intuitive notion that if only people could feel safer and less threatened, they would have more psychological resources to devote to noticing and reacting favorably to other people's suffering. While conducting research guided by seminal ideas first articulated by John Bowlby (1969/1982) in his books on attachment theory, we have demonstrated the usefulness of enhancing attachment security as a method of fostering compassion and altruism. In this article, we briefly describe some of our recent studies after providing the theoretical essentials necessary to understand them.

ATTACHMENT THEORY: BASIC CONCEPTS

According to Bowlby (1969/1982), human beings are born with an innate psychobiological system (the *attachment behavioral system*) that motivates them to seek proximity to people who will protect them (*attachment figures*) in times of need. The operation of this system is affected by an individual's social experiences, especially with early caregivers, resulting in measurable individual differences in attachment security. Interactions with attachment figures who are available and responsive, especially in times of need, promote optimal functioning of the attachment system, create a core sense of attachment security (a sense based on expectations that key people will be available and supportive in times of need), and result in the formation of positive *working models* (mental representations of self and others). When attachment figures are not supportive, however, a sense of security is not attained, negative working models are formed, and other, secondary strategies for regulating distress are adopted.

These secondary strategies are of two major kinds: *hyperactivation* and *deactivation of the attachment system*. (We reviewed evidence for these strategies in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003.) Hyperactivation refers to intense efforts to attain proximity to attachment figures and ensure their attention and support. People who rely on hyperactivating strategies compulsively seek proximity and protection, are hypersensitive to signs of possible rejection or abandonment, and are prone to ruminating on personal deficiencies and threats to relationships. Deactivation refers to the inhibition of proximity-seeking inclinations and actions, and the suppression or discounting of any threat that might activate the attachment system. People who rely on these strategies tend to maximize distance from others, experience discomfort with closeness, strive for personal strength and self-reliance, and suppress distressing thoughts and memories.

In studies of adolescents and adults, tests of these theoretical ideas have focused on attachment style—the systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that results from a particular history of interactions with attachment figures (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment styles vary along two dimensions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). One dimension,

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attachment *avoidance*, reflects the extent to which a person relies on deactivating strategies. The other dimension, attachment *anxiety*, reflects the degree to which a person relies on hyperactivating strategies. People who score relatively low on both dimensions are said to be secure or to have a strong sense of security. Although attachment style is conceptualized as a global orientation toward close relationships, there are theoretical and empirical reasons for believing that an individual's global style is just the top node in a hierarchical network of attachment-related thoughts, some of which apply only to certain kinds of relationships and others of which apply only in certain relational contexts (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). These attachment-related thoughts, which can be activated by actual or imagined encounters with supportive or unsupportive people, can be incongruent with a person's global attachment style (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001).

THE CAREGIVING SYSTEM AND ITS INTERPLAY WITH THE ATTACHMENT SYSTEM

According to Bowlby (1969/1982), the caregiving behavioral system was crafted by evolution because it provided protection and support to individuals who were either chronically dependent or temporarily in need. "Caregiving" refers to a broad array of behaviors that complement a relationship partner's attachment behaviors or signals of need. In the parent-child relationship—the prototypical relationship in which the caregiving behavioral system is manifested—the goal of the child's attachment system (proximity that fosters protection and provides security) is also the aim of the parent's caregiving system, and signals of increased security on the child's part can reduce the parent's caregiving behaviors. If one extends this conceptualization to the broader realm of compassion and altruism, the aim of the caregiving system is to alter a needy person's situation or condition in order to foster his or her safety, well-being, and security.

Beyond explaining this complementarity between a support seeker's attachment system and a support provider's caregiving system, Bowlby (1969/1982) also discussed the interplay between these two systems within a person as he or she alternates between needing and providing support. According to Bowlby, because of the urgent need to protect oneself from imminent threats, activation of the attachment system inhibits activation of other behavioral systems and thereby interferes with many nonattachment activities, including caregiving. Under conditions of threat, adults generally turn to others for support, rather than thinking first about providing support to others. Only when they feel reasonably secure themselves can people easily direct attention to others' needs and provide support, even in a general context of danger. In threatening situations, possessing greater attachment security may allow people to provide more effective care for others, because the sense of security is closely related to optimistic beliefs and feelings of self-efficacy when coping

with one's own or a relationship partner's distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). This inner sense of security helps to explain why in many emergencies some parents focus first on their children's safety even if it means putting themselves in harm's way.

With this theoretical analysis in mind, we began a program of research on attachment, compassion, and altruism. Our main hypothesis was that people who are dispositionally secure, or whose level of security has been contextually enhanced (e.g., by experimental manipulations, such as reading a story about a supportive person), would be more likely than relatively insecure people to empathize with and provide care for others. We also hypothesized that although both anxious and avoidant people are conceptualized in attachment theory as insecure, different psychological mechanisms would underlie their responses to other people's suffering. In a number of studies, Batson (1991) has shown that lack of empathy or compassion can be due either to lack of prosocial motivation toward other people or to the arousal of what he calls "personal distress," a form of self-focused agitation and discomfort that is not translated into effective helping. We expected that people who scored high on attachment avoidance and pursued deactivating strategies would distance themselves from others' suffering, so that they would have sharply decreased empathy and compassion. In contrast, we expected that people who scored high on attachment anxiety, and were therefore easily distressed in a self-focused way, would react to others' suffering with personal distress.

RECENT STUDIES OF ATTACHMENT, COMPASSION, AND ALTRUISM

Even before we undertook our studies, there were hints in the literature that attachment security would be associated with compassion and altruistic caregiving. Kunce and Shaver (1994), for example, found that secure individuals (as compared with their insecure counterparts) described themselves as more sensitive to their romantic partners' needs and more likely to provide emotional support. In a recent study, Westmaas and Silver (2001) found that higher scores on avoidance and anxiety were associated with less inclination to care for a confederate of the experimenter who had been diagnosed with cancer.

Although such studies consistently revealed an association between attachment security and compassionate behavior, they were correlational in nature and did not necessarily indicate that a sense of attachment security was active while study participants were responding to other people's needs. We therefore adopted an experimental strategy more appropriate for testing causal predictions about the effects of attachment security on compassion and altruism. Using well-validated cognitive techniques—for example, subliminally exposing study participants to security-related words (*love, hug*) or instructing them to imagine a scenario in which they felt safe and secure—we momentarily activated representations of attachment security and then assessed their psychological and behavioral effects.

Overall, these studies demonstrated convincingly that contextual activation of the sense of attachment security leads people to respond more like people who are dispositionally secure. For example, we found that contextual activation of attachment security reduced negative reactions to out-group members (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). Compared with a control group, people whose momentary sense of security was heightened were more willing to interact with a member of a potentially threatening out-group (e.g., an Israeli Arab who had written a derogatory essay about the study participants' Israeli Jewish in-group), were less threatened by the social and economic threats aroused by recent Russian Jewish immigrants to Israel, and were less discriminatory toward homosexuals. In these studies, security enhancement strikingly reduced in-group/out-group differences that were evident in control groups and groups of participants who received experimental inductions of positive affect unrelated to attachment (such as through reading a comic story or imagining winning a lottery).

Another experiment examined the effects of attachment security on compassionate responses toward other people's suffering (Mikulincer et al., 2001, Study 1). In this study, dispositional attachment anxiety and avoidance were assessed with the Experience in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), and the sense of attachment security was activated (primed) by having participants read a story about a student who was in trouble, sought help from his or her parents, and received support, comfort, and reassurance from them. In comparison conditions, participants read a comic story (positive-affect priming) or a neutral story (neutral priming). Following the priming procedure, participants rated their current mood, read a brief story about a student whose parents had been killed in an automobile accident, and then rated how much they experienced compassion-related feelings (e.g., compassion, sympathy, tenderness) and feelings of personal distress (e.g., tension, worry, distress).

As predicted, participants primed with an attachment-security story reported higher levels of compassionate feelings than participants in the positive-affect and neutral conditions, and lower levels of personal distress than participants in the neutral condition (see means in Fig. 1). In addition, dispositional attachment anxiety and avoidance were inversely related to compassion, and attachment anxiety, but not avoidance, was positively related to personal distress. This latter finding supported our idea that personal distress interferes with anxious individuals' compassionate reactions to others' needs. Attachment anxiety seems to encourage self-preoccupation and heighten a form of distress that, even if initially triggered in part by empathy, fails to facilitate compassionate responses. The findings were conceptually replicated in four additional studies (Mikulincer et al., 2001, Studies 2–5), using different techniques for heightening security (e.g., asking participants to recall personal memories of supportive care, subliminally exposing them to proximity-related words such as *love* and *hug*)

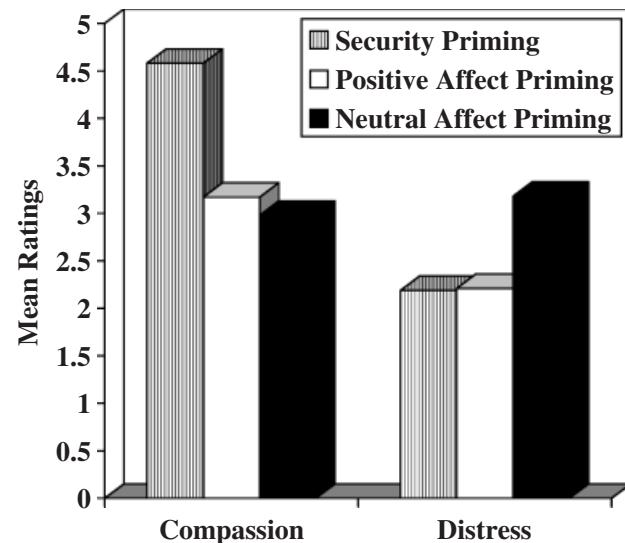


Fig. 1. Means of compassion and personal-distress ratings after reading about a student whose parents had been killed in an automobile accident. Results are shown separately for participants who had previously read an attachment-security story (security priming), a comic story (positive-affect priming), or a neutral story (neutral priming; Mikulincer et al., 2001, Study 1). Ratings were made on a 7-point scale, with higher ratings indicating higher levels of compassion and personal distress.

and measuring different dependent variables (e.g., participants' spontaneous descriptions of feelings elicited by others' suffering, accessibility of memories in which participants felt compassion or distress).

These findings also indicated that the effects of security-related priming and attachment-style differences could not be explained in terms of conscious mood. Although the priming of positive affect reduced personal distress, it did not significantly affect compassion, nor did changes in mood mediate the effects of security priming and dispositional attachment security on compassion and personal distress. The effects of attachment security were not the same as the effects of the positive-affect induction and were not explicable in terms of simple mood changes.

Contextual activation of attachment security affects not only compassion toward people in distress, but also broader value orientations. In three experiments (Mikulincer et al., 2003), enhancing attachment security (asking participants to recall personal memories of supportive care or exposing them unobtrusively to a picture of a supportive interaction), as compared with enhancing positive affect or exposing participants to a neutral control condition, strengthened endorsement of two self-transcendent values, benevolence (concern for people who are close to oneself) and universalism (concern for all humanity). Moreover, avoidant attachment, assessed with the ECR, was inversely associated with endorsement of these two prosocial values, supporting our notion that deactivating strategies foster lack of concern for other people's needs.

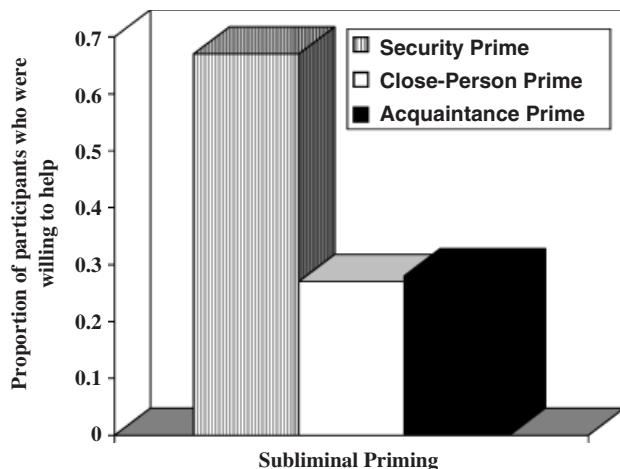


Fig. 2. Proportion of participants who were willing to help a distressed person as a function of priming condition (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2004, Study 1). Participants were primed subliminally with the name of an attachment figure (security prime), the name of a close person who was not an attachment figure, or the name of an acquaintance.

We (Gillath et al., 2004) have also examined the effects of attachment security on altruistic behavior outside the laboratory. In particular, we assessed engagement in various altruistic activities, such as caring for the elderly or donating blood. We found that avoidant attachment was negatively associated with engaging in such activities. Anxious attachment was not directly related to overall involvement in volunteer activities, but it was associated with egoistic motives for volunteering (e.g., to make oneself feel better, to enjoy a sense of belonging), another indication of anxious individuals' self-focus.

To examine the actual decision to help or not to help a person in distress, we (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2004, Study 1) created a laboratory situation in which participants could watch a confederate while she performed a series of increasingly aversive tasks. As the study progressed, the confederate became very distressed by the aversive tasks, and the actual participants were given an opportunity to take her place, in effect sacrificing themselves for the welfare of another. Shortly before making the choice, participants were subliminally primed with either representations of attachment security (the name of a security-providing attachment figure) or attachment-unrelated representations (the name of a close person who did not function as an attachment figure or the name of a mere acquaintance). We found that momentary, subliminal activation of the sense of attachment security increased participants' willingness to take the distressed person's place (see Fig. 2). In a second study (Mikulincer et al., 2004, Study 2), conscious enhancement of attachment security (asking people to remember experiences of being cared for and supported by others) had the same effect. In both experiments, high avoidance scores were associated with less willingness to help a distressed person, corroborating our study of real-world volunteering.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our research suggests that attachment security provides a foundation for compassion and caregiving, whereas two major forms of attachment insecurity interfere with compassionate caregiving. The findings are compatible with our theoretical reasoning that the state of the attachment system affects the operation of the caregiving system. Attachment theory therefore provides a well-validated conceptual framework for further exploration of the developmental and social-relational roots of compassion and altruism, as well as further examination of the processes and mechanisms that underlie compassionate behavior. More research is needed to create better measures of compassion and to determine how the attachment dimensions relate to other measures of prosocial personality and moral development. It would also be interesting to see whether participation in compassionate activities can alleviate attachment insecurity, by bolstering a person's sense of being loved and needed, and by bolstering prosocial working models of self. It will also be important to explore how various experiences and techniques, including psychotherapy, family therapy, skilled meditation, and participation in religious or charitable organizations, might enhance a person's sense of security and thereby foster compassion and altruism. Such procedures, when combined effectively and continued over an extended period of time, might allow human beings to achieve a noble goal: to free all sentient beings from their suffering (Dalai Lama, 2001).

Recommended Reading

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