Chapter 6

Taking Stock: Attachment and Prosocial Behaviors
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This thesis aimed to examine the relevance of attachment insecurities (avoidance, anxiety) in explaining prosocial behavior. Our opening studies revealed that across three different countries (Israel, the Netherlands, and the United States) the two dimensions of attachment insecurity – anxiety and avoidance – are related to prosocial behavior, as measured by real-world altruistic volunteering. Avoidant individuals engage in fewer volunteer activities and are less motivated by altruistic, other-focused reasons than secure individuals to care for others. Anxious individuals are not less likely to volunteer, but their reasons for volunteering are often tinged with self-centered motives (self-protection, self-enhancement, social and career motives). It appears that those self-centered motives play an important role in mediating the links between attachment anxiety and volunteering behavior, whereas attachment avoidance has a direct negative effect on participation in volunteer activities without the mediation of other-focused reasons for volunteering. Attachment security, as defined in terms of low scores on the attachment anxiety and avoidance dimensions, is generally associated with higher prosocial altruistic behavior and caring for people for other-focused reasons.

The importance of attachment security is enhanced by the findings of its unique contribution to prosocial behavior, beyond the explanatory power of high-order personality traits (e.g., extraversion, neuroticism). Although these traits were associated with both attachment orientations and volunteerism, they failed to explain the link between attachment and volunteerism.

Taking into consideration the issue of moral judgment, illuminates the importance of the egocentric motives for volunteering of avoidant
individuals; The findings show that while anxiously attached individuals show self centered reasons, regardless of their level of morality, avoidant individuals report more egocentric reasons for volunteering (i.e., self-protection and self-enhancement reasons) when their level of moral judgment is low.

Finally, our research has emphasized the importance of attachment theory for exploring individual differences, also in the context of group behavior. We showed that feelings of commitment as well as engagement in group serving efforts and donation to the group following signals of group respect and disrespect are highly dependent on a person's attachment insecurities along the attachment anxiety dimension; for highly attachment-anxious participants, high group respect heightened group commitment and effort expenditure on behalf of the group, whereas group disrespect led to lower group commitment but to more money donation to the group and higher effort expenditure. Less attachment-anxious participants were not significantly affected by group respect or disrespect. Attachment avoidance seemed to counteract the activation of group-related worries produced by group disrespect. The findings stress the importance of individual self representation from which a person perceives others and reacts to them.

**Attachment, caring and prosocial behavior**


Recent studies have mainly focused on the possibility that there are certain measurable motives or reasons for benefiting the other person (e.g., Penner, 2002). But to date, there have been relatively few attempts to link
caring behavior to broad psychological theories of personality, motivation, and social behavior. And even fewer experimental studies have been conducted to test those links (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, Nitzberg, 2005).

From the viewpoint of attachment theory, the “caregiving behavioral system” was described by Bowlby (1969/1982) as an innate system that acts in response to the needs of dependent others and serves as a complementary system to the “attachment behavioral system”, which governs people’s, especially young children’s, emotional attachments to their caregivers. The aim of the caregiving system is more likely to become notable when a person is secure enough to allow for an empathic focus on someone else’s needs.

Mikulincer and others (e.g., Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath & Nitzberg, 2005; Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005; Feeney & Collins, 2001) have argued that only a relatively secure person can easily perceive others not only as sources of security and support, but also as suffering human beings who have important needs and therefore deserve support. This capacity to help others is a result of having witnessed and benefited from good care provided by one’s own attachment figures, which both increases one’s sense of security and provides models of good caregiving (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Furthermore, the sense of attachment security reduces needs for self-protection and self-enhancement (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005) and allows a person to shift resources to other behavioral systems, including caregiving, and to take the other’s perspective, which is the core mechanism underlying altruistic helping (Batson, 1991, 2002). In other words, attachment security facilitates helping behavior that is truly aimed at benefiting another person even when there is no egoistic reason for helping.

Theoretically, we expected attachment related insecurities to interfere with altruistic helping. We assumed that the altruistic, innate tendency to
attend empathically to others and provide care when needed can be interfered with, suppressed, or overridden by attachment insecurity (attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance). However, this does not mean, that anxious and avoidant people will react in the same way to another person’s distress. Attachment anxious individuals tend to be concerned more with their own distress and need for greater attachment security (Collins & Read, 1994), which may focus their mental resources away from taking the perspective of another person, and perhaps show more egoistic motives for helping and engaging in altruistic behavior. People who score high on attachment avoidance tend to be uncomfortable with closeness and interdependence, tend to distance themselves from others, and be more cynical and disapproving in response to other people’s signals of vulnerability, weakness, and need (Collins & Read, 1994). This disposition might well interfere with empathy and even decrease altruistic helping.

**Attachment insecurity, real-world caring & altruistic volunteering**

In the second chapter, we report on two studies conducted in three different countries (Israel, the Netherlands, and the United States) to determine whether the two dimensions of attachment insecurity – anxiety and avoidance – are related to real-world caring and altruistic volunteering.

As expected, the findings reveal that avoidant individuals engage in fewer volunteer activities and are less motivated by altruistic, other-focused reasons than secure individuals to care for others. Anxious individuals are not less likely to volunteer, but their reasons for volunteering are often tinged with self-centered motives (self-protection, self-enhancement, social and career). These self-comforting or security-enhancing motives for volunteering might serve the need to feel included in a group, have higher self-esteem, and feel less troubled by interpersonal problems. These motives
may sometimes be gratified in that volunteering seemed to be associated with less loneliness and fewer interpersonal problems among participants who scored higher on attachment anxiety.

Secure individuals are defined in terms of low scores on the attachment anxiety and avoidance dimensions and the findings suggest that attachment security is generally associated with higher volunteerism to care for and help people for other-focused reasons. Mikulincer and Shaver (2005, in press) concluded that possessing greater attachment security may allow people to provide effective care for others. This sense of security is closely related to optimistic beliefs about distress management and feelings of self-efficacy when coping with one’s own or a relationship partner’s distress. As a result, securely attached people are more likely than relatively insecure people to empathize with and provide care for others.

Finally as there are only a few published studies suggesting cross-cultural differences in either caregiving behavior or links between caregiver sensitivity and attachment style (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000), it seems important to highlight the fact that the findings appeared to generalize across differences in societal and cultural norms (supporting the viewpoint of Van IJzendoorn and Sagi, 1999; 2001).

**Attachment, Personality, and Volunteering**

The third chapter deals with the explanatory power of attachment style beyond the contribution of high-order personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness) to volunteerism.

Previous studies have shown that attachment insecurities are associated with high order personality traits (lower levels of extraversion and agreeableness and higher levels of neuroticism, e.g., Shaver and Brennan, 1992) and high-order personality traits have been found to contribute to
volunteerism (e.g., Bekkers & De Graaf 2002). Our findings reveal that attachment dimensions make a unique contribution to volunteerism, beyond the explanatory power of high-order personality traits.

The results show that although these traits were associated with both attachment orientations and volunteerism, they failed to explain the link between attachment and volunteerism. After statistically controlling for high-order personality traits attachment avoidance still had a significant negative effect on participation in volunteer activities and on endorsement of altruistic, other-focused reasons for volunteering.

Similarly, attachment anxiety also made a significant unique contribution to self-focused reasons for volunteering, indicating that high-order personality traits did not explain the contribution of attachment anxiety.

Beyond the unique contribution of attachment orientations, high-order traits made significant unique contributions to reasons for volunteerism. Whereas neuroticism was associated with higher endorsement of understanding, self-protection, self-enhancement, social-approval, and career-promotion reasons for volunteering, higher scores on extraversion were associated with more endorsement of social-approval and career-promotion reasons for volunteering. That is, extraversion contributed to more interpersonal motives for volunteering, perhaps due to the need of highly extraverted people for interpersonal interactions (McCrae & Costa, 1997). However, high-order personality traits did not make any significant contribution to engagement in volunteering activities and to the endorsement of other-focused, altruistic reasons for volunteering.

We also examined the role that motives for volunteering play in mediating or moderating the links between attachment insecurities and volunteering behavior. That is, we examined the interplay between
attachment dimensions, motives for volunteering, and volunteering behaviors. Theoretically, lack of altruistic motives for volunteering should mediate the observed link between attachment avoidance and relatively low engagement in volunteering activities. Highly avoidant people hold negative models of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and therefore may not give any priority to the improvement of others’ welfare among their values and goals, which, in turn, would directly inhibit any engagement in volunteering behavior. In addition, motives for volunteering can moderate the possible effects of attachment anxiety on volunteering behavior. Although attachment anxiety was not significantly associated with this kind of behavior, it is still possible that attachment-anxious people, who constantly seek other’s approval and love, would be particularly prone to engage in volunteering activities where these activities offer some kind of self-focused benefits (e.g., social admiration).

We found that highly attachment-anxious people actually did volunteer when egoistic motivations for volunteerism were involved (that is, highly anxiously attached participants are more likely to engage in volunteer activities than their less anxious counterparts mainly when they endorse self-centered reasons for doing so), whereas attachment avoidance had a direct negative effect on participation in volunteer activities without the mediation of other-focused reasons for volunteering.

**Attachment, morality and voluteerism**

Our goal was to examine the possibility that the influence of attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) on volunteerism (Gillath et. al, 2005) might be moderated by moral judgment. The findings reveal that for participants who scored relatively low on moral judgment, attachment avoidance was associated with the endorsement of more self- enhancement
reasons for volunteering. However, for participants who scored relatively high on moral judgment, attachment avoidance was associated with the endorsement of less self-enhancement reasons.

The relation between attachment anxiety and motivation for volunteerism was not affected by the level of morality. That is, morality influences the correlation between motivation for volunteerism and attachment avoidance but not with attachment anxiety.

The findings imply that egoistic motives can actually encourage anxious attached individuals as well as avoidant attached people with low morality level to volunteer. It also supports previous findings that emphasize the personal inadequacy and needs for social validation and acceptance of anxious attached individuals (Gillath et. al., 2005; Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, in press). In case of avoidant individuals functioning on a high level of moral reasoning their moral judgment seems to overrule the influence of an otherwise somewhat egocentric attitude.

Attachment perspective on individual differences within group context

The fifth chapter deals with the importance of attachment theory in exploring individual differences in the context of group behavior. Previous studies have found that attachment theory is a relevant framework for exploring individual differences in the context of group interactions (e.g., Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). We focused on the ways people react to inductions of group respect and disrespect, with the assumption that, specifically, variations along the attachment anxiety dimension would determine the extent to which these inductions would affect commitment to this group, actual effort expenditure on behalf of the group, and money donation to the group.
Overall, we showed that feelings of belongingness to the group and engagement in group serving efforts following signals of group respect and disrespect are highly dependent on a person's attachment insecurities along the attachment anxiety dimension. This indicates that variations along the attachment anxiety dimension are extremely relevant for explaining individual differences in feelings of group commitment and expenditure of actual effort on behalf of the group following inductions of group respect and disrespect.

It seems that attachment-anxious group members who perceive themselves as disrespected react with strong worries about being accepted and approved by other group members and serious doubts about their commitment to the group. However, because they chronically seek others' love and approval and their sense of self-worth is based on others' positive feedback, they cannot cognitively or emotionally distance themselves from the rejecting group avoiding further damage to their self-worth. Rather, their strong need for others' love and acceptance might impel them to increase their contribution to the group and to spend more effort on behalf of the group as a means of getting some sign of group approval and respect thereby repairing their damaged sense of self-worth. It appears that attachment-anxious people might attempt to satisfy and help the rejecting group, in the hope that they will be reevaluated and accepted by it.

As expected, our findings indicated that highly attachment-anxious participants were more strongly affected by both poles of respect (i.e., high respect and disrespect) than less anxious participants. That is, highly attachment-anxious participants, as compared to less anxious participants, reacted to the induction of high group respect with higher reports of group commitment and more effort expenditure in the first group task (faster completion of the task). However, they did not show such a pro-group
response in the second group task. These findings emphasize attachment-anxious individuals’ hyper-sensitivity to signs of social approval and their over-dependence on external sources of self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). When feeling accepted and loved by their group, attachment-anxious participants strengthened their commitment to the group and actually displayed more pro-group behavior. That is, they may feel so grateful to the group for its approval and acceptance that they spend a lot of effort on behalf of the group. However, although such inductions of high group respect can increase highly attachment-anxious people's group commitment and pro-group behavior, one should note that these pro-group responses are driven by strong motives of social approval and strong self-relevant doubts. Thus pro-group behavior can decrease as time elapses from the high group respect feedback and no further positive feedback is given. In this case, anxious people's chronic self-related doubts may return and interfere with pro-group responses. Such absence of continual positive group feedback can thus explain why highly anxious participants reacted to high group respect with heightened expenditure of effort in the first group task but not in the second.

The reactions of attachment-anxious participants to the induction of group disrespect were especially interesting and in line with Sleebos et al.'s (2006a, 2006b) findings. As expected, highly attachment-anxious participants, as compared to less anxious participants, reacted to the induction of group disrespect with stronger worries about acceptance and approval from other group members and lower group commitment. Moreover, although being less committed to the rejecting group, they reacted to the induction of group disrespect with more money donation to the group and higher actual effort expenditure on behalf of the group. That is, attachment-anxious participants made a lot of real, concrete effort on behalf
of the group after being disrespected and even after reporting low commitment to the group.

These effects of group respect and disrespect inductions were not significant among less anxious participants. These participants showed no significant changes in group commitment or group-related worries following the receipt of high, moderate, or low group respect feedback. Moreover, they showed no increase in willingness to contribute to the group and actual pro-group behavior following inductions of high group respect or group disrespect. That is, less attachment-anxious people (i.e., more secure) seemed to be less influenced by group respect feedbacks. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2004, 2005), these individuals are more likely to base their self-worth on domains that do not require constant external validation and therefore are less significantly affected by signals of group respect or disrespect. More secure individuals can mobilize caring qualities within themselves – qualities modeled on those of their attachment figures – as well as representations of being loved and valued by such figures. These representations act as authentic and highly stable sources of comfort and self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004), and can buffer the cognitive, emotional, and motivational impact of signals of group respect or disrespect.

Attachment avoidance was only found to weaken the effects of induced group disrespect on group-related worries. Specifically, participants scoring relatively low on attachment avoidance reacted to group disrespect with heightened worries about being accepted and valued by their group, whereas those scoring relatively high on avoidance showed no significant increase in group-related worries following the induction of group disrespect. That is, attachment avoidance seemed to counteract the activation of group-related worries produced by group disrespect.
Our research has emphasized the importance of attachment theory for exploring *individual differences* in the context of group behavior. We showed that feelings of belongingness to the group and engaging in group serving contributions are highly dependent on individual self representation from which a person perceives the world and reacts to it.

**Conclusion: three attachment styles and prosocial behaviors**

Taking into account all the studies included, this thesis adds some insights into the mechanisms underlying different attachment orientations and their relation to caring and prosocial behavior. Our results support attachment theory and related research (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002) which claims that although both anxious and avoidant people have difficulties in constructing an authentic, cohesive, and stable sense of self-worth, each of these attachment insecurities result in different self-configurations and disorders of the self, and thereby in different ways of dealing with other’s distress and caring behavior.

**Avoidant individuals** appear to engage in fewer volunteer activities and are less motivated by altruistic, other-focused reasons to care for others, than secure individuals. Attachment avoidance has a direct negative effect on participation in volunteer activities without the mediation of other-focused reasons for volunteering. Avoidant people tend to convince themselves and other people as strong and self-sufficient. This fits their defensive tendency to dismiss any signal of others' distress and to suppress painful emotions (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1997).

Avoidant individuals with low morality level show higher motivation to volunteer for egoistic motives. One can refer to this attitude as "using others by helping them"; In "The Use of An Object and Relating Through
Identifications," Winnicott (1969) is concerned with the shift from a narcissistic attitude towards objects as extensions or projections of the self, to what most would regard as a more advanced mode of object-relating in which the object is recognized as separate and distinct from the self. The avoidant person with low morality level appears to use others to fulfill his egoistic needs, whereas avoidant individuals with high moral judgment appear to be less egoistic, and to be led by their moral reasoning more than by their emotional stance in elaborating reasons for volunteering.

Attachment avoidance was only found to weaken the effects of induced group disrespect on group-related worries. That is to say, attachment avoidance seemed to counteract the activation of group-related worries produced by group disrespect. This finding fits the already observed cynical tendency of highly avoidant people to preserve a pretense of confidence, and to dismiss any signal of interpersonal rejection (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, for a review). However, one should note that we have assessed explicit manifestations of group-related worries, which can be easily affected by avoidant defenses. Perhaps the assessment of more implicit manifestations of these worries would reveal the negative emotional and cognitive impact that group disrespect might have even among highly avoidant people. In addition, it is also possible that the distress caused by our induction of group disrespect was not so strong, thereby allowing avoidant people to easily dismiss the worries it can cause. Probably more personally relevant instances of group disrespect could shatter avoidant people's defensive façade of self-worth and elicit heightened group-related worries.

As for Anxious individuals, although preliminary results have shown no significant correlation between anxious attachment and volunteerism (Gillath et al., 2005), further investigation indicated that highly anxious people actually do volunteer when egoistic motivations for volunteerism are
involved (i.e., self-protection, self-enhancement, social approval, career promotion motivations). That is, they are not less likely to show caring behavior such as volunteering, but their reasons for volunteering are often tinged with self-centered motives and with their strong needs to feel love and acceptance (e.g., Cassidy & Kobak, 1988).

It appears that egoistic motivations are mediating the relation between anxious attachment and voluntary behavior. That is, highly attachment-anxious people volunteer mainly when egoistic motivations for volunteerism are involved (i.e., highly anxiously attached participants are more likely to engage in volunteer activities than their less anxious counterparts mainly when they endorse self-centered reasons for volunteering).

Attachment-anxious people are hyper-sensitive to signs of social approval and their over-dependence on external sources of self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). They chronically seek others' love and approval and their sense of self-worth is based on others' positive feedback. These working models appear to also affect the ways in which they react to the induction of group disrespect; Attachment-anxious people show stronger worries about acceptance and approval from other group members and lower group commitment. On the other hand, they also react to the induction of group disrespect with heightened willingness to contribute to the rejecting group and higher actual pro-group behavior. Their pro-group responses are driven by strong motives of social approval and strong self-relevant doubts, and thus can disappear as time elapses from the high group respect feedback and no further positive feedback is given. Absence of continual positive group feedback might interfere with their long term pro-group caring responses.

**Attachment security** is generally associated with higher volunteerism to care for and to help people for other-focused reasons. Secure attachment
includes positive representations of oneself as worthy and competent (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). During interactions with available, sensitive, and supportive attachment figures, people find it easy to perceive themselves as valuable, lovable, and special, thanks to being valued, loved, and regarded as special by caring attachment figures. Moreover, they learn to view themselves as active, strong, and competent and mobilize caring qualities within themselves – qualities modeled on those of their attachment figures – as well as representations of being loved and valued by such figures, and these representations act as authentic and highly stable sources of comfort and self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004), provide a base of buffering the impact of signals of group respect or disrespect, and promote empathy, caring and prosocial behavior.

Overall, this thesis emphasizes the importance of attachment insecurities (anxiety, avoidance) in explaining caring, prosocial behavior. Further studies using interview-based measures and assessing actual caring behavior, are necessary to increase our confidence in the validity and generalizability of the observed links between the systems of attachment and caregiving. It appears that feelings of belongingness to the group and engaging in group serving contributions are highly dependent on individual self representation from which a person perceives the world and reacts to it.

**Limitations of the current studies.**

Although we reported studies conducted in three different countries (Israel, the Netherlands, and the United States), using both correlation and experimental methods, one has to keep in mind that we looked at student samples from western societies and used self-reports measures. It is recommended that future studies will examine a wider variety of subjects,
add more objective measure and extend the causal methods to examine the effects of individual differences in attachment insecurities on caring behavior within different context (e.g., groups, parenting, working relations) and devise ways of increasing people’s compassion, caring and effective altruism.

A future research might focus on experimental methods. Attachment security can be manipulated by making it temporarily accessible by priming, in order to examine the effects of manipulated attachment patterns on volunteerism. This would help researchers to address the limitation of the correlational studies between attachment patterns and volunteerism.

It would be fascinating to examine whether prosocial behavior as emerging in insecure attachment individuals, is related or mediated by understanding of other's mental states, as indexed by the theory of mind. "Theory of mind" refers to the capacity to envision mental states in self and others and try to explain the difficulties in understanding other people's beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. It has been extensively studied in both normal and abnormal development, especially in individuals with autism and Asperger syndrome (Baron-Cohen, 2001; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Frith, 2000). Fonagy and Target (1997) suggest that the ability to mentalize, to represent behavior in terms of mental states, or to have "a theory of mind" is a key determinant of self-organization which is acquired in the context of the child's early social relationships. They present evidence for an association between the quality of attachment relationship and reflective functioning in the parent and the child. Apparently, examining insecure attached individuals from the perspective of the "theory of mind" might create important insights into their reflective functioning and uncover new directions for treatment which will allow insecure individuals to
understand themselves and others better, to take other's perspective, and perhaps develop a more caring attitude toward others.
References:


