Turkish Psychological Articles, December 2018, *21*(42), 14-16 DOI: 10.31828/tpy.13019961.2018.42.02.01

Summary
Why is Insecure Attachment Prevalent? Insecure Attachment as an Early Alarm and Escape System

Ezgi Sakman Nebi Sümer

Bilkent University Sabancı University

The attachment behavioral system is an evolutionarily adaptive regulatory device which adjusts proximity to supportive others (i.e., attachment figures), hence ensures protection and survival (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980). It functions with individual differences stemming from experiences with significant others: While if the attachment figure is consistent in providing the much needed sensitive caregiving, the individual develops a sense of security and connectedness that leads to *attachment security*; if the attachment figure fails to fulfill these basic attachment needs, the individual develops *attachment insecurity*. Insecure attachment can result due to two distinct mechanisms: When the attachment figure is constantly harsh, rejecting, and unwilling to provide warm care, the individual develops compulsive self-reliance, and as a result cultivates *attachment avoidance*; when the attachment figure is inconsistent, insensitive, or intrusive in caregiving, the individual intensifies proximity seeking attempts, and consequently develops *attachment anxiety*. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) delineated these mechanisms in their *model of attachment-system functioning and dynamics*.

Attachment Theory has generated an immense body of research and the common theme of this plethora of findings seems to be that secure attachment is the "good" attachment style to have: Securely attached individuals report higher life quality and happiness, they are more successful in close relationships, and they perform better professionally. Conversely, research findings have consistently linked insecure attachment with adverse outcomes, such as problematic close relationships, dysfunctional ways of coping with stress, low life satisfaction and happiness (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007 for a review). Despite this apparent abundance of maladaptive consequences and lack of advantages of insecure attachment, not only it subsists, it is actually quite prevalent: Ample research shows that nearly half of the population exhibits insecure attachment tendencies across stages of development, cultures, and measurement techniques (see Hesse, 2008; van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008 for reviews). It seems odd that insecure attachment would survive years of selection pressures and still be just as widespread as secure attachment if it did not provide humans with any adaptive advantages. Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, and Shaver (2010) have pointed out to this interesting conundrum and called it *the attachment paradox*.

Despite the mainstream attachment research mainly focusing on the benefits of secure attachment, some scholars have put forward the idea that insecure attachment may carry adaptive value in the domains of reproductive fitness and group survival (e.g., Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Chisholm, 1996; and Ein-Dor et al., 2010). These evolutionary accounts of the attachment theory aim to answer the question of *why* different attachment patterns have developed, rather than *how* (as traditional attachment research has done in the past). In the present review, first *the life history models of attachment* that have proposed that insecure attachment may have evolved to increase reproductive fitness will be discussed. Then *the social defense theory*, which posits that insecure attachment may have adaptive advantages for group survival under conditions of imminent threat, will be addressed.

The Adaptive Value of Insecure Attachment from a Reproductive Fitness Perspective: The Life History Models of Attachment

The theoretical frameworks that put forward the idea that the attachment system may have evolved not only to ensure survival in childhood, but also as a mechanism that promotes reproductive fitness in adulthood vis-à-vis the conditions of the environment (Belsky et al., 1991; Chisholm, 1996; see also Ellis, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997) are largely influenced by the *life history theory* (Charnov, 1993; Stearns, 1992). The life history theory posits that all organisms

Address for Correspondence: Ph.D. Ezgi Sakman, Bilkent University, Department of Psychology, Bilkent / Ankara
E-mail: ezgi.sakman@bilkent.edu.tr

have finite resources and face the challenge of allocating these scarce resources between the fundamental goals of survival/growth and reproduction. The core trade-offs that individuals face are to decide whether to reproduce now or in the future, whether to maximize the quality or the quantity of the offspring, and whether to invest more in mating or in parenting. The theory predicts that natural selection favors those mechanisms which achieve the optimal allocation of the resources among these competing goals in accordance with the constraints set by the ecological setting; hence maximize reproductive success (see Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005 for a review).

Inspired the life history theory, Belsky and colleagues (1991) put forward a model proposing that the social and ecological context (e.g., environmental stress, inadequate resources, marital discord) affects parenting (e.g., the sensitivity and responsiveness of caregiving, overall parenting investment), which impacts the psychological and behavioral development of the child (e.g., attachment pattern and internal working models), which in turn influences the somatic development (e.g., sexual maturation), which finally shapes the mating strategy (e.g., short-term vs. long-term, high vs. low quality offspring) of her or him as an adult. Belsky and colleagues argue that children who learn in their familial environment that resources are scarce and/or unpredictable, people are untrustworthy and relationships are unstable, develop insecure attachment style, reach sexual maturity early, adopt a reproductive strategy that favors early-onset, short-term, and multiple pair bonds, and offer low parental investment to their offspring. Conversely, children who have early experiences which indicate that resources are constantly available, people are trustworthy and relationships are rewarding, develop secure attachment style, sexually mature later, employ a reproductive strategy that favors deferred, long-term and exclusive pair bonds, and offer high parental investment to their offspring. Belsky and colleagues regard both strategies as biologically sound in the sense that they both develop as adaptations to the conditions of the environment.

In another model inspired by the life history theory, Chisholm (1993, 1996) argues that the harshness of the environment, as mirrored in local mortality rates, cue the children to develop adaptive attachment styles via the level of parental investment. In ecologies with low mortality rates, securely attached children enjoy longer parental investment, hence they are able to allocate their resources to growth and delay mating; when they do eventually reproduce, they seek long-term mates and offer high parental investment themselves. In contrast, under harsh environmental conditions, as children high on attachment avoidance are forced to become independent at an early age by their rejecting parents, they allocate their scarce resources to early-onset reproduction and adopt a short-term mating strategy. Children high on attachment anxiety do not cease their attempts to extract resources from their inconsistent parents, but funnel these resources not to development but to earlier reproduction. Also within this perspective, attachment security is not regarded as the sole functional attachment orientation; but development of the appropriate attachment tendency is seen as an adaptation to the local environment, which manifests itself in increased reproductive fitness.

The Adaptive Value of Insecure Attachment from a Group Survival Perspective: The Social Defense Theory

The life history models of attachment have received extensive empirical support (for recent reviews, see James & Ellis, 2013; Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Yet they overlook the fact that even though insecure attachment may carry adaptive value in the domain of reproductive fitness, it is still associated with adverse outcomes on the individual level. In an effort to complement this perspective, Ein-Dor and colleagues (2010) put forward their social defense theory and argued that another adaptive advantage of insecure attachment may lie at the group level under conditions of threat. They base their argument on Hamilton's (1964) *kin selection theory* and Sober and Wilson's (1998) *multilevel selection theory*, which suggest that an individual's total (inclusive) fitness is determined not only by his or her own reproductive output, but also by the inclusion of the reproductive success of kin with whom genes are shared.

According to the social defense theory, while attachment security is beneficial to the group under normal circumstances, the relative adaptive advantages of attachment insecurity surface under conditions of emergent threat (Ein-Dor et al., 2010). Ein-Dor and colleagues proposed that people high on attachment anxiety may serve the survival of the group by being *sentinels*, who can detect early and ambiguous signs of an imminent danger and alert the other members, as a result of their hypervigilance to threat and stress cues which stem from their chronically hyperactivated attachment systems. Individuals high on attachment avoidance are also argued to be functional for the group because they are more likely to develop *rapid fight-or-flight* reactions to danger in order to protect themselves and be quick to detect and use escape routes as they are chronically inclined to flee. These cognitive schemas and action tendencies are argued to be beneficial also for the rest of the group as people are likely to follow these members high on attachment avoidance through the escape routes they discovered or created. Ein-Dor and colleagues put their

ideas to empirical test and showed that while individuals high on attachment anxiety have easier cognitive access to the sentinel script (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011a; Ein-Dor & Perry-Paldi, 2014), and more likely to act in accordance with it under conditions of threat (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011b); individuals high on attachment avoidance more readily activate the rapid fight-or-flight schema and engage in behaviors compatible with it when they perceive danger.

Discussion

Despite the impressive amount and eminence of research in the domain of attachment, possible adaptive functions of its insecure form have been widely neglected. Yet, investigating and understanding the adaptive value of insecure attachment may be especially important as recent research findings suggests that its prevalence may be on the rise (Konrath, Chopik, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2014).

When Ein-Dor and colleagues' (2010) group survival perspective and Belsky and colleagues' (1991) and Chisholm's (1993, 1996) reproductive fitness perspective to functionality of different attachment tendencies are put together, they complement each other and why insecure attachment, which has been solidly associated with adverse individual outcomes, has been able to survive years of selection pressures becomes more clear: It serves as armor in harsh ecologies and under conditions of emerging threat by leading the individual to adaptive reproductive strategies and survival tactics, contingent to the demands of the environment, and this results in increased changes of successful reproduction and survival, both as individuals and as groups.

The study of functionality of attachment insecurity could also be carried to the next level of analysis, the cultural level. Studies have documented that although attachment security emerges as a universal norm (van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008), the pattern of adult insecure attachment vary greatly across cultures: Whereas attachment anxiety is relatively common in collectivist cultures, attachment avoidance is more prevalent in individualist cultures (see Schmitt, 2010). Building on the cultural fit hypothesis, which argues that the prevalent form of attachment insecurity is associated with less adverse outcomes (Friedman et al., 2010), Sakman (2016) recently hypothesized that the more prevalent form of insecure attachment might have higher adaptive value in the specific cultural context. The results of the correlational and experimental studies carried out to test this hypothesis showed that while anxious sentinel behaviors are regarded as the more functional strategy in threat situations under a collectivist cultural mindset, which is more strongly related to attachment anxiety; avoidant fight-or-flight behaviors are regarded as the more functional course of action in situations of emergency under an individualist cultural mindset, which is more strongly related to attachment avoidance. These results suggest that the early alarm and escape function of insecure attachment may be regulated in a culturally sensitive manner.

Overall, one could argue that the dominant research perspective in how we relate to significant others should be broadened by the potential strengths and contributions of insecurely attached individuals, who have been widely regarded as deficient and poorly adapted. Mounting evidence suggests that not only they are not dissonant to the norm, they may be just as important as the secure ones in forwarding our existence.