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Abstract

There is a paucity of research that examines prejudice from an attachment theory perspective. Herein we make theoretical links between attachment patterns and levels of prejudice. Perceptions of outgroup threat, which activate the attachment system, are thought to lead to fear and prejudice for those high in attachment anxiety, and to distancing and prejudice for those high in attachment avoidance. We review the literature that examines the associations between attachment patterns and prejudice; evidence from attachment priming studies suggest a causal role of attachment security in reducing prejudice. We identify several mediators of these links: empathy, negative emotions, trust, social dominance orientation, romanticism, and contact quality. Future research should manipulate potential mediators and use psychophysiological assessments of threat.

Keywords: attachment; prejudice; racism; immigration; sexism

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Highlights

📌 Insecurity links to prejudice via different mechanisms, but most involve threat. 📌 Research using priming methods suggest attachment insecurity may cause prejudice. 📌 Future research should include the experimental manipulation of mediators.

Attachment and Prejudice

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research that examines prejudice from an attachment theory perspective. Herein we make theoretical links between attachment patterns and levels of prejudice. Perceptions of outgroup threat, which activate the attachment system, are thought to lead to fear and prejudice for those high in attachment anxiety, and to distancing and prejudice for those high in attachment avoidance. We review the literature that examines the associations between attachment patterns and prejudice; evidence from attachment priming studies suggests a causal role of attachment security in reducing prejudice. We identify several mediators of these links: empathy, negative emotions, trust, social dominance orientation, romanticism, and contact quality. Future research should manipulate potential mediators and use psychophysiological assessments of threat.

Attachment and Prejudice

Introduction

Prejudice and discrimination are important social problems worldwide [1]. Our aim is to review the small body of research that applies attachment theory to understand individual differences in prejudice. Because this area is understudied, we chose a more comprehensive approach that covered papers published from 2001 to most recently, 2016, that focused on ethnicity, immigrants, religion, gender, lesbian/gay/bisexual and elderly outgroups. (We excluded two papers on disabled, mentally ill and physically ill because these targets potentially represent a large number of varied categories that were not comprehensively examined). In general, attachment anxiety and avoidance are positively associated with prejudice via different mechanisms, however most presumably involve threat that activates the attachment system. Perceptions of outgroup threat are thought to lead to fear and prejudice for those high in attachment anxiety, and to distancing and prejudice for those high in attachment avoidance (see Figure).

Attachment and Theoretical Links to Prejudice

Attachment theory explains how childhood relationship experiences influence expectations and behaviours within relationships throughout life [2,3]. Individual experiential differences in consistency of sensitivity and responsiveness to needs in early childhood lay the foundations for individual attachment-related behavioural repertoires (patterns). Attachment patterns vary on two dimensions: attachment-related anxiety (related to fear of abandonment) and attachment-related avoidance (related to discomfort with dependency); high levels of either dimension indicate an insecure attachment pattern, and low levels of both indicate a secure attachment pattern. Attachment anxiety is a result of inconsistent and overprotective care, attachment avoidance is a result of neglect and rejection, and attachment security is a result of sensitive responsive care [4] in times of need.

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Why or how would attachment patterns relate to prejudice? Attachment patterns are associated with how individuals regulate affect and deal with threat. "Prejudice is an individual-level attitude (whether subjectively positive or negative) toward groups and their members that creates or maintains hierarchical status relations between groups." [5]. Stephan, Ybarra, and Morrison [6] suggest that people may be predisposed to view outgroup members as threatening.

Generally speaking, threats are posed in times of danger, stress or illness: The attachment behavioural system is activated in order to obtain felt-security. Those high in attachment security can effectively regulate negative affect by self-soothing or seeking support from others. Their high social competence and humanity-esteem [7,8] reflect their positive models of self and others [9]. Furthermore, they are open to experiences [10] suggesting more engagement with and acceptance of outgroup members. In contrast, insecure individuals theoretically would respond to outgroup-related threats with greater prejudice. Those high in attachment anxiety have hyperactivated attachment systems that lead them to focus on threat in their environments. They have low unstable self-esteem [11], hold partner views that fluctuate in valence over time and are ambivalent [12,13], have more aversive relationship and social goals [14,15], use more stereotyped judgments [16], and are low in humanity-esteem [7]. Prejudice may be a way to protect the self from threat for these people. Those high in avoidance have chronically deactivated attachment systems; they turn away from relationships and rely compulsively on the self in times of threat. Similar to anxious individuals, they make more stereotyped judgments and are low in humanity-esteem [7,16]; however, avoidant individuals hold negative models of others [9], are low in agreeableness [17], have low approach motivation [18] and low appetitive relationship goals [14]. Prejudice and discrimination may be further manifestations of the need to distance the self from others for avoidant individuals. Research reviewed below directly tests the links between attachment patterns and prejudice against different target groups, examining mechanisms such as empathy and contact quality.

Attachment and Prejudice: Evidence about ethnic and gender outgroups

The most consistently examined targets of prejudice in this area are immigrants and people of different ethnicities or religions, with a few studies of other outgroups (e.g., aged adults [19], LGB individuals with mixed results, [20,21,22,23], and gender). For example, Di Pentima and Toni [24] examined the links between attachment orientation and subtle and blatant prejudice against immigrants. They discovered that secure Italian adolescents (age 13-19) were lower in blatant and subtle prejudice compared to adolescents with insecure styles. Consistent with this, research in the Netherlands has shown that secure adults had more positive attitudes toward immigrants' integration into the host society, whilst insecure adults had more negative attitudes; specifically dismissing-avoidant individuals thought that immigrants should maintain separation from the host society and attachment-anxious individuals thought immigrants should be marginalized [25,26]. This is consistent with avoidant individuals' negative models of others and desire to maintain distance and anxious individuals' ambivalent view of others and desire to protect the self.

Past research suggests that high quality contact with outgroup members decreases prejudice [27]. Boccato, Capozza, Trifiletti, and Di Bernardo [28] address the interesting question of how attachment patterns influence the extent to which people interact with outgroup members (immigrants). They find that secure attachment is positively associated with amount of contact with immigrants and contact quality. Furthermore, contact quality mediates the link between security and positive evaluations of outgroup members. Their findings show that openness to exploration (particularly social exploration) mediates the link between security and contact quantity and quality. Avoidant attachment is negatively associated with outgroup evaluations. These researchers also go beyond explicit evaluations and use the IAT to assess implicit approach versus avoidance motives toward immigrants, finding attachment security is associated with a lower tendency to associate immigrants with avoidance-related words and a higher tendency with approach-related words. This suggests that secure individuals are more accepting of people from different countries because their felt-security

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allows them to be open to new experiences and implicitly move toward them.

Attachment patterns also predict prejudiced attitudes regarding gender. Hart and colleagues [29,30] examined how models of romantic others that underlie attachment patterns predicted benevolent and hostile sexism among male and female samples. Attachment anxiety was associated with more benevolent and hostile sexist attitudes (i.e., ambivalent sexism), whereas avoidance was associated with only more hostile sexist attitudes toward the opposite sex. Furthermore, attachment anxiety predicted high romanticism, which in turn, predicted high benevolent sexism, whereas avoidance predicted low romanticism, which in turn, predicted low benevolent sexism. Some results differed across men and women. For men, avoidance was associated with low benevolent sexism toward women, and the link between avoidance and hostile sexism was mediated by social dominance orientation (i.e., preference for maintaining status hierarchies). For women, the link between avoidance and hostile sexism was mediated by (low) trust. These results suggest that men and women of each attachment style have different motives/reasons (romanticism, trust, social dominance) that drive their sexism. Interventions to reduce sexism might focus on the particular drivers for a given individual based on their attachment patterns and gender.

Primed Attachment and Prejudice Studies

The above studies are correlational and cannot address causal processes. In an attempt to examine causation, researchers have manipulated attachment security temporarily by priming it subliminally or supraliminally to examine how it affects prejudice and discrimination. Research shows that participants primed with an attachment pattern think, act and feel in ways consistent with those who have that attachment orientation, due to the activation of working models of attachment [31]. For example, primed security leads to higher empathy and compassion [32,33] and more positive self- and other-views [34,35]. These features suggest reductions in or resilience to threat which, in turn, should be associated with less prejudice.

Mikulincer and Shaver [36] were the first to use security priming to explore its effect on negative attitudes toward outgroups: Arabs, ultraorthodox-Jews, Russian immigrants, and LGB

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individuals. In general, they found that security-primed participants (compared to neutral- and positive-affect control-primed) failed to rate ingroups more favourably than outgroups or indicate they were more willing to interact with ingroup than outgroup members. Attachment orientation did not moderate these effects and positive mood did not explain them. Evidence demonstrated that these effects were due to lowered realistic and symbolic threat appraisals from security primes, and security-prime effects occurred even when a threat to self-esteem or worldview was induced. This supports the idea that the attachment system regulates responses to threat which influence prejudice.

In a series of studies, Boag and Carnelley [37,38] extended this research and examined the effects of security-priming on prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behaviour toward Muslims and immigrants. Their results demonstrated that security- (versus neutral-) primed participants report higher empathy and lower prejudice; furthermore, empathy mediated the link between prime and prejudice. In addition, primed attachment avoidance (compared to security) led to low empathic concern, which in turn led to high prejudice. Finally, those primed with security (versus a neutral-prime) sat closer to where a Muslim participant they expected to interact with was purported to be sitting, suggesting primes can influence attitudes and behavior.

Saleem and colleagues [39] built on these findings by investigating the role of emotions. Security-priming (versus neutral) led to reduced negative emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, fear) about outgroup members (Arabs and Muslims), and security-priming (versus neutral- and positive-affect primes) led to lower negative emotions and stereotypes of ISIS members, less support of aggressive actions against ISIS, and less likelihood to sign a petition for anti-ISIS policies (the latter two DVs indicated outgroup harm). Finally, the effect of security-priming on outgroup harm was mediated by negative emotions but not negative stereotypes.

Taken together, research highlights the importance of defense and negative emotions driving the effects of attachment insecurity on prejudice. In contrast, lowered perceived threat, lower negative emotions, and increased empathy due to felt-security induced by security-

primes led to lowered prejudice (see Figure). This is consistent with viewing attachment patterns as affect-regulation strategies [40] and the privileging of fear discussed by Crittenden [41] and paranoia discussed by Fonagy and Higgitt [42] in response to neglect or rejection.

The above research examines how security-priming can reduce prejudiced views and discriminatory behavior. In a different focus, Davis, Soref, Villalobos, and Mikulincer [43] examined whether people primed with security (versus control-prime) could be made to admit to holding prejudiced attitudes, assumptions and behaviors in the past. They argued that felt-security resulting from the prime would lead to lowered defences and therefore increased disclosure of past prejudice. Consistent with their expectations, security-priming (compared to insecurity- and neutral-priming) led Israeli Jews to admit to having more negative attitudes and behaviors toward Israeli Arabs. Taken together these research findings suggest that security priming leads to less negative attitudes and discrimination toward outgroup members. However, if people have engaged in stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination in the past, security priming makes them more likely to confess this, presumably due to lowered psychological defences. This begs the question: Is it necessary to recognize one's own prejudiced views as an initial step to tackling them and moving toward acceptance and tolerance? Research suggests that being aware of one's prejudice may be a necessary but not sufficient step to challenging prejudice views [44,45]. Attachment security may help in at least two ways to reach that goal (recognizing past biases and lowering defences). Future research should directly test the role of lowered psychological defences in this process.

Discussion and Conclusions

Research involves participants from several countries (UK, US, Italy, Israel, Netherlands) using different prejudice targets, suggesting some robustness in effects. Exceptions are homonegativity, disability, and ageism, where research is sparse or has mixed results. Future research should continue to test causal effects and include the experimental manipulation of mediators [46]. Researchers should directly measure perceived threat (and its reduction), perhaps using psychophysiological assessments (skin conductance level or heart-rate) or

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hormone assessments (cortisol) which are not subject to self-report biases. Interventions designed to decrease prejudice and discrimination should target the specific drivers of these for each attachment pattern; for example, empathy for avoidant individuals, and romanticism for anxious individuals. In general, reducing perceptions that outgroup members are threatening should reduce fear and paranoia and thus, reduce prejudice.

In conclusion, prejudice is linked to attachment insecurity via different specific mechanisms, but most involve threat which activates the attachment system. Research using priming methods suggests attachment insecurity may cause prejudice. Available evidence is sparse; future research should investigate causal mechanisms.

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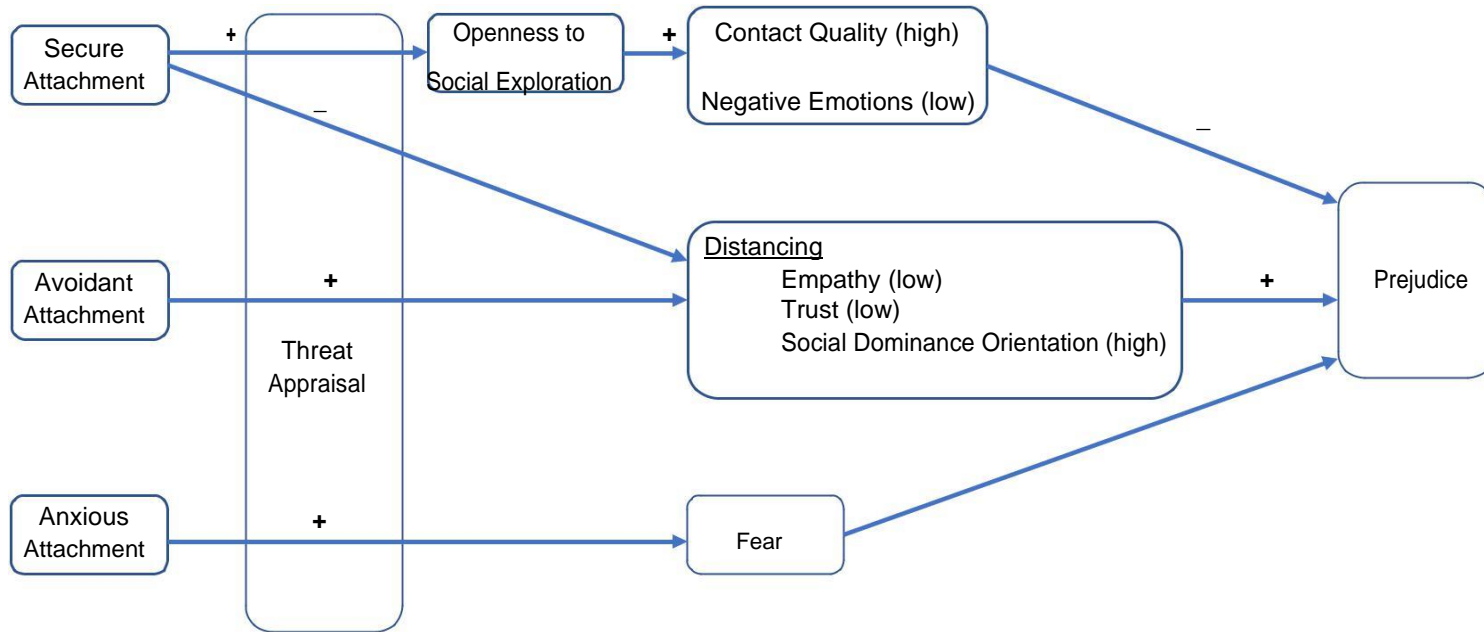


Figure 1. Conceptual Relations between Attachment and Prejudice

Note: — No Evidence

This is a conceptual model that shows hypothesized links, only some of which have been tested. See text of paper for details.