

Avoiding affection, avoiding altruism: Why is avoidant attachment related to less helping?



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ABSTRACT

Avoidantly, compared to securely, attached people help less often and perceive the costs of helping as more severe. Helping relates to empathy and closeness, which may cause avoidantly attached people discomfort. We tested the hypothesis that reducing the potential for emotional closeness for avoidantly attached people would offset their unhelpfulness with one correlational and one experimental study. In Study 1, amongst a sample of 234 people on Mechanical Turk, avoidant attachment related to donating less money to human- and animal-related charities, but not a charity that did not foster emotional closeness. This relationship was mediated by empathy. In Study 2, amongst a sample of 193 college students, avoidantly attached people who believed that their emotions were temporarily unchangeable helped as much as people low in avoidant attachment. Reducing the potential emotional cost of helping increases helping amongst people who are avoidantly attached.

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1. Introduction

It is a chilly December evening, just before Christmas. Henry walks down a snowy street after getting a cup of hot chocolate. He is avoidantly attached: he prizes his autonomy, experiences discomfort getting close to others, and shudders at the thought of socializing at the holiday parties to which he was invited. As he walks to his car, he spies a bell-ringing Salvation Army volunteer requesting donations. He considers donating. Then he and the volunteer make eye contact. The volunteer smiles, trying to establish an emotional connection. Henry's heart rate spikes, his palms sweat, and he picks up his pace. Wanting to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of empathy, Henry hops into his car and drives off.

Why didn't Henry help? This scenario illustrates several factors known to decrease helping, including low empathy (Batson et al., 1991) and being avoidantly attached (Gillath et al., 2005; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). What remains unknown are the boundary conditions of the relationship between avoidant attachment and unhelpfulness. The current investigation tests the hypothesis that avoidantly attached people become unhelpful because helping situations involve emotional closeness,

which they find threatening. By reducing the potential for emotional closeness, we predicted that it would be possible to offset the association between avoidant attachment and unhelpfulness.

1.1. Avoidant attachment and prosocial behavior

Henry's level of comfort getting close to others affected his thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This profile forms the backbone of attachment theory, which argues that the attachment system colors nearly all human activities across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). People who are avoidantly attached (e.g. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), like Henry, show a heightened discomfort getting close to others and regulate their attachment needs by distancing themselves from others. They avoid, ignore, or deny the emotional needs, dependence, and intimacy of others in their relationships with them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In contrast, anxiously attached people crave opportunities for acceptance and remain vigilant regarding overtures that may signal rejection (e.g. Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Finally, securely attached people are low in both anxiety and avoidance; they feel accepted by and comfortable getting close to others (e.g. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

While research on attachment style is mainly focused on how it affects relationship outcomes (e.g. Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004; DeWall et al., 2011; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Schmitt, 2005), recently researchers have examined whether it moderates other behaviors.

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In the past decade, there has been much research studying how attachment style affects prosocial behavior. This research indicates that avoidant attachment relates to lower levels of helpfulness (Gillath et al., 2005; Mikulincer et al., 2005). A series of studies using multiple methods, participants from multiple countries, and several indicators of real and imagined helping yielded a consistent conclusion: avoidant attachment related to lower helping. Specifically, in the U.S., Netherlands, and Israel, people higher in avoidant attachment were less likely to participate in a variety of different volunteering activities as well as to volunteer for value- and understanding-related reasons, compared to people of other attachment styles (Gillath et al., 2005). Additionally, being higher in avoidant attachment was associated with lower self-rated compassion toward and rated and actual willingness to help a woman in distress (Mikulincer et al., 2005). This result held across helping situations both real and imagined and when the person in need of help was either a family member or a stranger. Anxious attachment was not reliably associated with helping or compassion in these studies. Thus, avoidant attachment is consistently associated with a behavioral profile of unhelpfulness.

1.2. Why might avoidant attachment predict decreased prosocial behavior?

Despite the relationship between avoidant attachment and unhelpfulness, it remains unclear why it exists. One possibility is that avoidantly attached people help less because they feel insecure about caring for others. Avoidantly attached people want connections, but fear being rejected (MacDonald, 2009; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They thus tend to have lower expectations for a connection as a self-protection mechanism (e.g. Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, & Baratta, 2012). Helping situations expose avoidantly attached people to factors that can threaten their feelings of security because such situations often involve the expectation of emotional connection. Prior research indicates that avoidantly attached people feel less empathy when asked to respond to helping situations (Mikulincer et al., 2001). Such empathy avoidance is a phenomenon that occurs when, before exposure to a person in need, people are aware that they will be asked to help and that helping will be costly (Shaw, Batson, & Matthew, 1994). Given their aversion to emotional closeness, likely stemming from their fear of rejection, avoidantly attached people may engage in empathy avoidance in helping situations to protect themselves against this uncomfortable possibility.

To identify the mechanism behind why avoidantly attached people are less helpful, we sought to alter the helping situation in ways that would reduce the potential for emotional closeness. We devised two methods to accomplish this goal. First, we manipulated whether the participant could feel emotionally close to the target of a charitable organization. Specifically, participants could donate to charities that support people, animals, or the environment. We predicted that avoidant attachment would predict lower helping toward people and animals (targets people could feel close to), but would not relate to helping the environment. To ensure that our effects were due to emotional closeness, we examined empathy as a mediator of this relationship. Empathy is the ability to share the emotional experiences of others (e.g. Beeney, Franklin, Levy, & Adams, 2011). Research shows similarity between empathy and emotional closeness. For example, empathic concern is associated with greater comfort with closeness (Joireman, Needham, & Cummings, 2001). Additionally, feeling empathy toward a relationship partner in pain increases people's own pain response and this relationship is modulated by interpersonal closeness (Beeney et al., 2011). Finally, the effects of empathy on prosocial behavior are fully explained by closeness. That is, the effect of empathy on prosocial behavior becomes non-significant after controlling for

interpersonal closeness (e.g. Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Maner et al., 2002). Because of the similarities between these two constructs, we tested the mediating effects of empathy on the relationship between type of charity and likelihood of donation.

Our second experiment adapted the mood-freezing procedure developed by Manucia, Baumann, and Cialdini (1984), in which some participants believed that their mood was unchangeable prior to entering a helping situation. Considerable evidence suggests that blunting anticipated emotional responses in this way could profoundly shape judgments and behaviors (e.g. Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001; Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001). We hypothesized that removing the anticipated possibility for discomfort that avoidantly attached people associate with interpersonal situations like helping would reduce the fear of emotional closeness. We predicted that avoidant attachment would relate to lower helping under normal circumstances, but not if participants believed the helping situation could not change their emotional state.

2. Study 1

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that avoidantly attached people would help just as much as others when donating to an environment-related charity, but not when donating to a person- or animal-related charity. It also tested the mediating role of empathy in the relationship between charity type and likelihood of donation.

2.1. Participants

Participants were 234 U.S. residents (139 female) ages 18–63 ($M = 32.01$, $SD = 11.5$). They completed our study online, through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants received \$0.50 for participating.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Attachment style

Participants completed the 12-item Experiences in Close Relationships scale to assess attachment style (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). The ECR-S measures avoidant (e.g. "I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close") and anxious attachment (e.g. "I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner"). Reliabilities for this measure were $\alpha = .55$ for avoidant attachment and $\alpha = .80$ for anxious attachment. On average, participants scored 3.11 ($SD = .82$) on avoidant attachment and 3.84 ($SD = 1.30$) on anxious attachment.

2.2.2. Empathic concern

Participants completed the empathic concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to assess individual differences in people's feelings of concern for unfortunate others (IRI; Davis, 1983). It contains items such as "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." Reliability for this measure was $\alpha = .87$. On average, participants scored 2.74 ($SD = .82$) on the empathic concern scale.

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed the attachment and empathic concern measures. Next, they rated three charities in terms of how likely they would be to donate to them on a scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). We selected one animal-related (American Society for the Protection of Cruelty against Animals;

ASPCA), environment-related (World Wildlife Fund; WWF), and human-related (United Nations Children's Fund; UNICEF) charity. These charities were pre-tested and found not to be significantly different on participants' familiarity with them, perceived reputability, and likelihood of donation.

3. Results and discussion

Consistent with previous research, we examined whether avoidant attachment would relate to lower willingness to donate to charities in which the participant and target could share emotional closeness. To examine the unique contribution of avoidant attachment, we controlled for anxious attachment in these and all other analyses. In this study, avoidant attachment and anxious attachment were positively correlated, $r = .36, p < .01$.

As predicted, avoidant attachment related to lower willingness to donate money to both a human-related ($B = -.36, t(231) = -2.02, p = .04$) and an animal-related charity ($B = -.37, t(231) = -2.12, p = .04$). In contrast, participants who were higher in avoidant attachment style were no less likely to donate to the environment-related charity than people lower in avoidant attachment style, $B = -.08, t(231) = -0.47, p = .64$.

Next, we examined the mediating effect of empathic concern on the relationship between avoidant attachment and likelihood to donate to the human- and animal-related charities. For both the human-related and animal-related charities, the relationship was fully mediated by empathic concern (95% bootstrap confidence interval: -0.36 to -0.08 and -0.24 to -0.03 , respectively). Please see Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 for the full results of the mediational analysis.

These findings offer the first evidence that avoidantly attached people are not uniformly less helpful than securely attached people. When given the opportunity to donate to charities that people could feel empathy toward and thus had the potential for emotional closeness to, avoidant attachment relates to lower helping, which is mediated by lower empathic concern. But avoidant attachment does not affect helping toward a charity unrelated to empathy or emotional connection. This study showed one way to break the link between avoidant attachment and lower prosocial behavior: change the helping situation. Our next study explored whether changing the experience of the avoidantly attached person may also break this link.

4. Study 2

Study 2 tested the hypothesis that making avoidantly attached participants believe that they cannot become close to a target would also break the link between avoidant attachment and lower prosocial behavior. Specifically, we manipulated whether or not participants believed they had the potential to feel any emotion for a brief period of time. We predicted that avoidantly attached participants who believed they could not become emotionally close to the target would be just as likely to help as securely attached participants.

Table 1
Regression coefficients of the mediational analyses of empathy on avoidance and likelihood of donation to UNICEF.

Path	Coefficient	Standard error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
a (IV to mediator)	-.04	.04	-.88	.38
b (mediator on DV)	1.15	.25	4.67	>.001
c (total effect of IV on DV)	-.29	.17	-1.72	.09
c' (direct effect of IV on DV)	-.24	.16	-1.52	.12

Table 2

Regression coefficients of the mediational analyses of empathy on avoidance and likelihood of donation to ASPCA.

Path	Coefficient	Standard error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
a (IV to mediator)	-.04	.04	-.88	.38
b (mediator on DV)	.85	.25	3.37	>.001
c (total effect of IV on DV)	-.29	.17	-1.69	.09
c' (direct effect of IV on DV)	-.24	.16	-1.52	.12

Table 3

Regression coefficients of the mediational analyses of empathy on avoidance and likelihood of donation to WWF.

Path	Coefficient	Standard error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
a (IV to mediator)	-.04	.04	-.88	.38
b (mediator on DV)	.58	.24	2.47	.01
c (total effect of IV on DV)	-.07	.15	-.45	.65
c' (direct effect of IV on DV)	-.05	.15	-.31	.76

4.1. Participants

Participants were 193 undergraduates (122 female)¹ who completed this study for partial course credit. On average, participants were 19.40 years old ($SD = 1.95$).

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Attachment style

Participants completed the ECR-S (Wei et al., 2007) as in Study 1. Reliabilities for this measure were $\alpha = .55$ for avoidant attachment and $\alpha = .68$ for anxious attachment. On average, participants scored 3.19 ($SD = .71$) on avoidant attachment and 3.55 ($SD = .85$) on anxious attachment.

4.3. Procedure

Participants arrived at the laboratory under the guise of completing an experiment about the effects of mood on memory. They first completed the ECR-S (Wei et al., 2007). Next, they were asked to take a fast-acting drug (actually a placebo) that supposedly improved memory. Participants were informed that either the drug only improves memory (control condition) or that in addition to memory improvement, the drug also had a side-effect of preserving one's mood in its current state (mood-freeze condition). Although participants just took a placebo (a Vitamin C pill), we led them to believe that regardless of what happened until the drug "wore off," their mood would remain unchanged. Participants in the control condition were not informed about mood-related side-effects. A similar mood-freezing paradigm has been successfully used in previous research on helping behavior (Manucia et al., 1984), aggression (Bushman et al., 2001), and impulse control (Tice et al., 2001).

After taking the pill, participants were informed that the next task involved observing a participant completing aversive tasks and trying to remember as many details of the tasks as possible. They observed this "live" performance on a television in the lab, with a video camera hooked up to it. The performance was actually a pre-recorded performance of a confederate looking at gory pictures and keeping her hand in a bucket of ice-cold water. The video stopped to give the confederate a break, after she appeared uncomfortable about completing the next task—touching a tarantula. During this time, participants completed a bogus memory task

¹ The data of 38 participants who expressed suspicion about the study were removed from the analyses.

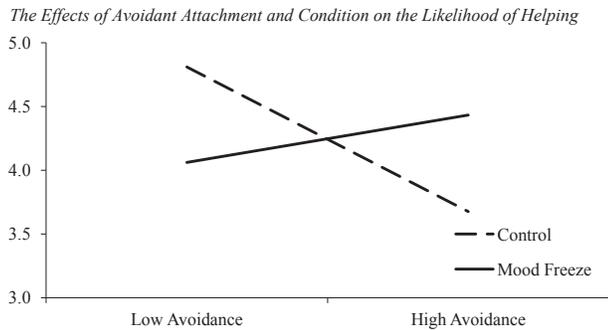


Fig. 1. The effects of avoidant attachment and condition on the likelihood of helping.

about details of the interaction they had just watched (to remain consistent with the cover story).

Finally, participants were informed that there was a possibility the other participant may be unable to continue with the experiment. They were asked to report how likely on a scale of 1(not very much at all) to 7(very much) they would be take the other person's place and finish the experiment. This paradigm has been used in previous research to successfully measure helping behavior (Mikulincer et al., 2005).

5. Results and discussion

We performed a regression analysis that measured the effects of avoidant attachment, mood-freezing condition, and their interaction on helping, while controlling for anxious attachment. In this sample, avoidant and anxious attachment correlated, $r = .31$, $p < .01$. There was no significant main effect of avoidant attachment, $B = -.20$, $t(192) = -1.00$, $p = .32$, anxious attachment, $B = -.17$, $t(192) = -1.04$, $p = .30$, or condition, $B = -.01$, $t(192) = -.03$, $p = .97$.

As expected, we observed a significant interaction between avoidant attachment and condition, $B = 1.07$, $t(192) = 2.76$, $p = .01$ (see Fig. 1). We found that in the control condition, avoidant attachment related to lower intentions to switch places with the other participant, $B = -.74$, $t(192) = -2.67$, $p = .01$. In the mood-freeze condition, however, avoidant attachment was unrelated to participants' helpfulness, $B = 0.33$, $t(192) = 1.18$, $p > .05$.

Additional analyses examined the effect of condition at varying levels of avoidant attachment (i.e., one standard deviation above and below the mean). At low levels of avoidant attachment, participants helped more in the control rather than mood-freeze condition, $B = 0.82$, $t(192) = -1.98$, $p < .05$. At high levels of avoidant attachment, however, participants helped more in the mood-freeze rather than control condition, $B = 0.77$, $t(192) = 1.92$, $p < .05$.

Controlling for levels of anxious attachment, people high in avoidant attachment were less helpful in the control condition, but not in the mood-freeze condition. When people high in avoidant attachment believed that their moods would not change, they were just as likely to help as people relatively lower in avoidant attachment.

6. General discussion

Prosocial behavior is a vital part of society. Millions of lives are saved each year by money donated to organizations like the American Cancer Society, the Red Cross, and St. Jude's Children's Hospital. Prosocial behavior saves lives and improves the quality of life for some individuals. Despite numerous opportunities to help, however, many people opt not to. Why?

Understanding a person's attachment style offers a clue regarding their unhelpfulness – and how to offset these drops in helping. Prior work shows that avoidant attachment relates to lower helping, but the boundary conditions of this relationship remain unexamined. Because avoidantly attached people fear emotional closeness, they may feel less empathy in helping situations as a self-protection mechanism. Assuaging the fear of rejection for avoidantly attached people may lead them to help just as much as those lower in attachment avoidance.

Our two studies show converging evidence for this hypothesis. Study 1 demonstrates that avoidant attachment relates to lower helping toward charities with targets with whom participants can feel emotional closeness, which is mediated by lower empathic concern. But avoidantly attached people show little sign of unhelpfulness toward a charity that involves no potential for emotional closeness. Study 2 altered the helping experience by telling some participants that their mood was frozen prior to the helping opportunity. Under these conditions, avoidantly attached people helped as much as people low in avoidant attachment. Replicating previous research (Manucia et al., 1984), participants low in avoidant attachment helped more when they believed helping could change their mood compared to when they believed their mood was frozen.

The current findings provide novel insight into the relationship between avoidant attachment and prosocial behavior. They extend previous research by identifying ways to break the link between avoidant attachment and lower helping. Avoidantly attached people are not uniformly unhelpful. As long as the target of the helping is not someone with whom they can feel an emotional connection or they cannot feel emotions at all, they help just as much as securely attached people.

6.1. Limitations and future directions

Although the current findings consistently supported our hypothesis, there are several limitations that might serve as avenues for further research. For example, these studies test only two sets of circumstances in which avoidantly attached people help as much as people low in avoidant attachment. Further work may investigate types of helping situations that do not require people to feel much empathy to motivate them to help. These may represent other situations in which avoidantly attached people will help just as much as others.

Relatedly, we did not measure emotional closeness directly in these studies, but measure or manipulate it indirectly. In Study 1, we use different types of charities in which people can feel different levels of closeness to the recipients. We also measure empathy, a construct very similar to emotional closeness (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1997; Joireman et al., 2001; Maner et al., 2002) to ensure that participants' donation amounts were due to their levels of empathy or closeness to the targets. In Study 2, we manipulate participants' perceptions of whether or not they are able to feel emotions. If people think they are unable to become emotionally close to the target, then this will affect their level of prosocial behavior. Future research may want to directly measure emotional closeness as a manipulation check to ensure this is the mechanism that is driving the effect.

Additionally, in Study 2, we did not measure whether participants' moods actually remained unchanged in the mood freeze condition. We think the essential part of this manipulation was whether or not participants anticipated their moods would remain unchanged. Given that we excluded from our analyses all participants who expressed suspicion about this manipulation, we are confident that participants did believe their moods would remain unchanged. However, it would be also interesting to measure

whether participants' actual moods had an effect on helping behavior.

Additionally, the results of Study 1 imply that people high in avoidant attachment are generally as unwilling to help animals as they are to help people. Further research may investigate the effects of avoidant attachment on people's relationships with their pets. Research suggests that pets can fulfill people's social needs (e.g. McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011). People high in avoidant attachment may be less likely to have pets or may have less satisfying relationships with their pets compared to people low in avoidant attachment. Given the powerful effect that pet ownership can have on a person's well-being, it would be important to know whether avoidantly attached people get the same benefits from having a pet or if they have to look elsewhere to fulfill their social needs.

Finally, this research has implications for targeting donation strategies to individuals. While people lower in avoidant attachment may feel increased empathy after seeing pictures of cute children or animals, people high in avoidant attachment may not. People high in avoidant attachment may respond better to donation requests that are less targeted to their emotions.

6.2. Concluding remarks

Numerous factors contribute to unhelpfulness, including avoidant attachment. Because of the potential threat of emotional closeness, people high in avoidant attachment are less likely to feel empathy and help others. However, this threat can be reduced if they do not face the possibility of emotional closeness. When helping benefits an entity incapable of emotional connection or when avoidantly attached people believe their emotions are impossible to change, they help as much as securely attached people.

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