

Predictors of romantic relationship formation: Attachment style, prior relationships, and dating goals

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Abstract

This prospective study ($N = 90$) investigated the early formation of romantic relationships within an attachment-theoretical framework. Specifically, it tested whether general attachment to romantic partners was predictive of single individuals' progressing from not dating to dating and from not dating or casual dating to a committed and exclusive relationship when simultaneously considering desire for starting a committed relationship, prior dating involvement, and self-perceived physical attractiveness. Attachment avoidance, but not anxiety, was predictive of not entering into committed dating relationships even with rival predictors included. The transition from not dating to casual or committed dating was mainly predicted by prior dating success with some support for a potential additional role of the desire to form a committed relationship.

In the 1960s and 1970s, during the heyday of research on early romantic relationships, the focus was almost entirely on initial romantic attraction. With the inception of attachment theory as a major framework for

studying romantic relationships, researchers shifted their attention toward the examination of intact relationship dynamics (Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). As a result of this shift, many early relationship processes outside of initial attraction remain under-investigated—especially from an attachment perspective. In particular, we know very little concerning how people progress from not dating to casually dating and finally committing to a romantic partner (cf. Eastwick & Finkel, 2008a). In this prospective study, we employed attachment theory to predict who out of a group of single individuals would start to date or enter a committed romantic relationship in the near future.

Adult attachment theory provides a framework for understanding individual differences in the degree to which people are comfortable utilizing a close other for security and support provisions (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Although individual differences in attachment style have been shown to influence interpersonal functioning over the life course (see Diamond & Fagundes, 2008, for a review),

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researchers have given little attention to how attachment style influences relationship formation (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008a). Adult attachment style is conceptualized in terms of the orthogonal dimensions of attachment *anxiety* and *avoidance* (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). The anxiety dimension is characterized by a preoccupation with the partner's accessibility and excessive worry about rejection and abandonment. The avoidance dimension is characterized by being uncomfortable with closeness and a preference to remain highly independent and self-reliant.

Differences in anxious and avoidant individuals' willingness to commit to a romantic partner were first noted by Hazan and Shaver (1987; see also Morgan & Shaver, 1999). Anxiously attached individuals reported eagerness to commit and fall in love with a romantic partner, whereas avoidantly attached individuals were reticent about commitment and falling in love. Yet, one's willingness to commit may not necessarily be predictive of *actual* commitment behaviors. Researchers, therefore, have examined how individual differences in attachment style are retrospectively associated with marital commitment patterns. For instance, Senchak and Leanord (1992) illustrated that anxious men had much shorter courtships than avoidant men. However, the retrospective nature of studies such as this makes it impossible to determine whether these findings are attributable to one's preexisting attachment style, changes in attachment style due to one's current relationship, or perceptual and memory biases that are influenced by attachment style. Furthermore, retrospective designs investigating early relational formation make it difficult for researchers to pinpoint when attachment style is *most* influential during relationship formation. As a result, no research up to this point has attempted to determine how individual difference factors such as attachment style are associated with the transition from not dating to casually dating and on to initial commitment.

In addition to circumventing typical problems of retrospective studies, the current study included three other theoretically important predictors of dating success: dating goals

assessing the desire to start a committed relationship, prior involvement in romantic relationships, and self-perceived physical attractiveness. Research on relationship goals has shown that men who desire greater intimacy are more likely to start a relationship (Sanderson, Keiter, Miles, & Yopyk, 2007) and that both men and women who show a greater desire to start a family are more likely to subsequently cohabit or get married (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Second, social psychological research has shown that one of the best predictors of future behavior is past behavior (see Ouellette & Wood, 1998, for a review). Thus, it would be expected that people with more dating experience are more likely to date. Finally, physical attractiveness has been identified as one of the best predictors of initial romantic interest (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008b; Feingold, 1990). Both objective and self-perceived attractiveness are associated with measures of opposite-sex popularity and sexual experience (cf. Feingold, 1992). Self-perceived attractiveness further is a robust predictor of success across a variety of domains likely and highly associated with self-esteem (Connors & Casey, 2006; Jones & Adams, 1982).

In addition, attachment style would be expected to relate to all three variables. Attachment anxiety is associated with strong willingness to commit, and attachment avoidance is associated with less willingness to commit (Morgan & Shaver, 1999) as well as endorsement of commitment avoidance as a partner-selection strategy (Druen, 1995). These findings suggest that attachment anxiety should be positively related to the desire to start a committed relationship and the number of prior committed relationships, whereas avoidance should be negatively related to these variables. Insecurely attached individuals have further been shown to perceive themselves as less physically attractive (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Therefore, we included dating goals, prior relationship involvement, and self-perceived attractiveness to determine if attachment style is associated with dating success above and beyond these rival predictors or if associations with attachment style can be

reduced to consciously held goals and popularity with the opposite sex.

Our study sought to address this issue by prospectively following 90 single individuals' dating and commitment behaviors over time and including the range of introduced predictors of relationship formation. Our first hypothesis was that even after controlling for rival predictors (i.e., dating goals, prior relationship involvement, and self-perceived physical attractiveness), individuals high on attachment anxiety would be more likely to enter into a committed romantic relationship. Second, we hypothesized that individuals who are high on attachment avoidance would be less likely to commit to one person even when rival predictors are included. As there are no prior studies on relationship formation that have differentiated between casual and committed dating, we were not able to derive specific predictions on when in this transition process insecure attachment would play the greatest role but included this as an open research question.

Method

Participants and procedure

We selected $N = 90$ participants from a larger sample of 149 participants of a longitudinal study on choosing romantic partners and college majors. The selected participants were not in a committed romantic relationship at the beginning of the study and did not drop out of the study before providing information on their dating life. Between August 2006 and April 2007, we recruited undergraduates at the University of Utah and Salt Lake Community College (through e-mail). The selected 90 individuals were between 18 and 27 years old ($M = 21.5$ years), and 48.9% were men. Participants were predominantly Caucasian (87.8%; 12.2% of Asian or Hispanic descent or multiracial) and 61.1% belonged to the dominant religion in Utah (Latter-Day Saints [LDS]; 25.6% had no religious denomination; 13.3% belonged to other religions). Religious denomination was not predictive of relationship initiation, $\chi^2(2) = 1.39$, *ns*, and was not significantly related to prior dating involvement, self-perceived physical attractiveness,

and attachment avoidance and anxiety, all $F_s(1, 88) < 1.80$, *ns*. Thus, it was not included as a covariate in our analyses.

Participants first completed an intake assessment at our lab, which included all measures used in this study. For each assessment completed during the study, they received a monetary compensation of \$10 per 60–90 min of testing. We then followed up on their progress in finding a romantic partner with online assessments until August 2007. Owing to timing of recruitment in relation to study period, individual duration of study participation varied. Furthermore, 7 participants included in our sample dropped out of the study prematurely (but previously provided dating assessments that were included in the present analyses). Thus, variations in the time of study participation were considered in the regression analyses.

If participants started dating during the study, they filled out weekly and monthly assessments on how they decided on whether to commit to this partner or not and, if a committed relationship resulted, on the development of this relationship. Based on these measures, we assigned each participant to one of the three *dating-success groups*: Group 1 ($n = 42$) includes those participants who did not report dating past a first date during the study, Group 2 ($n = 13$) comprises those participants who dated one or more partners casually but did not start a committed relationship, and participants in Group 3 ($n = 35$) committed to a romantic partner during the study. As Group 2 was too small to allow for a separate analysis (see the Results section for more details), we combined it with Group 3 when testing for predictors of dating versus not dating. In determining predictors of starting a committed relationship, we compared Groups 1 and 2 with Group 3.

Measures

Duration of study participation

As mentioned above, the duration of study participation varied between individuals. To account for resulting differences in time available for dating, we computed a variable reflecting the duration of study participation

(in months) as the time between the intake and final assessment (or dropout), which ranged from 0.3 to 13.0 months ($M = 8.4$ months).

Dating goals

We formulated four items that were rated on 6-point scales to assess the participants' goals for exclusive dating (e.g., "I want to find someone with whom I can have a serious and committed relationship" and "I am not interested in dating or looking for a partner"; reversed). These items were averaged to form a measure of the desire to start a committed relationship, which has an internal consistency of $\alpha = .68$.

Prior dating involvement

The intake assessment included a measure of participants' romantic relationship history asking about the start and end dates of all prior romantic relationships. Based on the responses on this questionnaire, we derived the number of prior casual relationships (i.e., participant never dated these partners exclusively) and number of prior committed relationships. We also created a variable reflecting the recency of involvement in each of these types of relationship. This variable has a 5-point scale representing when the most recent relationship ended (1 = *no prior involvement in this type of relationship*, 2 = *more than 12 months ago*, 3 = *6–12 months ago*, 4 = *2–5 months ago*, 5 = *a month or less ago*). We z-standardized the number of prior relationships and recency measures and averaged them to form an indicator of *prior dating involvement* (including four measures), $\alpha = .67$.

Self-perceived physical attractiveness

Participants were asked to rate their physical attractiveness. They responded to the question "How physically attractive are you?" on a scale from 1 (*far below average*) to 7 (*far above average*).

Attachment avoidance and anxiety

We used the 36-item Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR-R;

Friley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) with a 7-point scale. This measure includes two 18-item scales assessing avoidance, $\alpha = .94$, and anxiety, $\alpha = .93$.

Results

Our central aim in this paper was to identify predictors of starting to date and starting a committed relationship. Accordingly, we identified those participants who did not date past a first date ($n = 42$), dated casually but did not commit to a partner ($n = 13$), and started a committed relationship during the study ($n = 35$). We used logistic regression to predict group membership from participants' dating goals, prior dating involvement, self-perceived physical attractiveness, and attachment avoidance and anxiety (all independent variables were centered). We further included duration of study participation, age, and gender as control variables. As seen in Table 1, attachment avoidance was negatively correlated with our rival predictors dating goals, prior involvement in dating, and physical attractiveness; anxiety was marginally negatively related only to physical attractiveness.

As the current sample was relatively small, we needed to address the possibility of overfitting the data when running logistic regression, where it is recommended to have at least 10 participants per predictor in each group (see Babyak, 2004, for a brief overview). Rather than conducting a multinomial logistic regression analysis predicting membership in the three dating-success groups (and possibly obtaining spurious findings in our group of 13 casual daters), we ran two binary logistic regressions. First, we predicted who dated casually or committed to a partner ($n = 48$) when compared with not dating at all ($n = 42$). Second, we predicted who committed to a partner ($n = 35$) when compared with not dating and casual dating ($n = 55$). Given that this still led to participant/predictor ratios of 5.3 and 4.4 in our smaller groups, we conducted additional bootstrap analyses in Mplus Version 5.1 to check the robustness of our findings. The bootstrap estimates are based on 5,000 samples of $N = 90$ drawn with replacement from our original sample. Mplus

Table 1. Intercorrelations of study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Duration of study participation (months)							
2. Age (years)	-.08						
3. Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)	-.01	.32**					
4. Dating goals: Desire for committed relationship	-.05	.33**	.22*				
5. Prior dating involvement (<i>z</i> score)	-.11	.08	.05	.07			
6. Self-perceived physical attractiveness	-.12	.10	.12	-.03	.14		
7. Attachment avoidance	.27*	-.08	-.41**	-.29**	-.23*	-.27*	
8. Attachment anxiety	.11	.01	-.30**	.11	.03	-.18 [†]	.45**

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

further uses a different default estimator for logistic regression than SPSS (i.e., weighted least squares [WLSMV] instead of maximum likelihood [ML]; cf. Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2008). The bootstrap analyses largely confirmed our findings, but the estimated odds ratios, $\text{Exp}(B)$, tended to be smaller (Table 2).

We found only one significant predictor of starting to date versus not dating (left side of Table 2). More prior dating involvement was predictive of starting to date; that is, an increase in prior dating involvement by 1 *SD* increased the odds of dating by 1.97 (using the more conservative estimate from the bootstrap analysis). We further found that dating goals were a marginally significant predictor of dating, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.60$, $p < .10$. However, this finding did not hold up in the bootstrap analysis, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.31$, $p = .17$, and therefore needs to be regarded with much caution. Neither attachment anxiety (Hypothesis 1) nor avoidance (Hypothesis 2) was predictive of starting to date when rival predictors were included.

This pattern of findings changed when we identified predictors of relationship commitment (right side of Table 2). Dating goals, prior dating involvement, and self-perceived physical attractiveness as well as attachment anxiety (Hypothesis 1) were not significantly related to starting a committed relationship. In line with our second hypothesis, attachment

avoidance emerged as a robust predictor of exclusively committing to one's dating partner when compared with not dating or dating only casually. An increase in avoidance by one unit on the 7-point scale reduced the odds of relationship commitment by 0.63. The group means also reported in Table 2 show that those who did not commit to a partner during the study had an average avoidance score of 3.77 compared with 3.23 among those who started a committed relationship.

Discussion

The current study examined who out of a group of single individuals would progress from not dating at all to casually dating and exclusively committing to a romantic partner. Our central aim was to determine how attachment style is associated with casual dating and initial commitment after controlling for other theoretically important predictors of dating success. Before discussing our hypotheses, we will briefly address the findings for these rival predictors. Prior dating involvement was predictive of dating when compared with not dating but was not a robust predictor of commitment. One possible explanation for this finding is that people with more dating experience have better dating skills, which may facilitate casual dating but not commitment. Future research, therefore, may benefit

from assessing whether specific dating skills such as confidence and communication ability mediate this association. Dating goals were not significantly associated with casual dating or initial commitment when a bootstrap analysis was conducted. As dating and commitment require reciprocation, it is possible that the qualities one must have to attract a partner override one's desire for a relationship. However, we obtained evidence for a potential role of the desire to form a committed relationship in predicting dating. Thus, dating goals are a good candidate for inclusion in future studies that could shed more light on the role of goals as opposed to dating skills. Self-perceived physical attractiveness was not predictive of either dating or relationship commitment. Given that romantic partners tend to be matched on both objective and subjective physical attractiveness (see Feingold, 1988), one possible explanation for this finding is that people who perceive themselves as comparably unattractive are unsuccessful in attracting the romantic interest of more attractive individuals but succeed when pursuing partners who think of themselves as similarly (un)attractive.

Contrary to our first hypothesis, attachment anxiety was not associated with a greater likelihood to date or to commit to a romantic partner. These findings were surprising given that anxious individuals report that they are very "willing and able to commit to a long-term relationship" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Given that commitment is a dyadic process such that both members must agree, this finding lends some support to Morgan and Shaver's (1999) argument that anxious individuals may not actually commit at higher rates even though they want to given that their partners often do not share the same sentiment.

In line with Hypothesis 2, attachment avoidance was associated with a decreased likelihood of starting a committed relationship. Given that previous support for avoidant individuals' reluctance to commit comes from attachment measures assessed *after* a commitment was made, this is an important finding such that it (a) rules out the possibility of avoidance being confounded by current relational processes and (b) shows that avoidantly

attached individuals show less ability to commit already in a dating relationship and not only when it comes to marriage (Senchak & Leanord, 1992). Yet, we are left to wonder by which process avoidance is related to refraining from commitment. Individuals high on avoidance are likely to withdraw from their partners if they feel pressured or stressed as a deactivating strategy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Given that these individuals build their working model of self and other around self-reliance (see Fraley & Shaver, 2000), it would not be surprising that progressing from a casual to a committed dating relationship is so threatening to an avoidant person's working model that he or she preemptively terminates the relationship. However, we also know from studies on hypothetical relationships that avoidant individuals are perceived as less desirable dating partners than both anxious and secure individuals (see Klohnen & Luo, 2003, as one example and for an overview), which suggests that dating partners may choose to end relationships with individuals high on avoidance as they get to know them better.

Although individuals high on avoidance were associated with less likelihood to commit, they were not associated with a decreased likelihood to date. As avoidant individuals are more likely to have promiscuous sexual relations with multiple partners (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), it is not surprising that highly avoidant individuals are as likely to casually date as other individuals. Although avoidance thus appears to matter most when it comes to relationship commitment, prior success in dating was most predictive of starting to date (with a potential additional role of the desire to start a committed relationship).

Although this is one of the first studies to prospectively follow individuals as they date and commit to their romantic partners, it is not without limitations. First, due to our moderate sample size, it would be premature to conclude that our nonsignificant predictors have no influence on dating success. This is underscored by the comparably large confidence intervals of the obtained odds

ratios pointing to the possibility of future significant findings. Studies with larger samples could tell whether the null findings are merely weaker than the ones we found for prior dating involvement and attachment avoidance or whether these variables actually are not predictive when studied prospectively (rather than in retrospect or concurrently). Second, we did not collect data from our participants' dating partners to avoid undue influences on these fledgling relationships. However, if it were possible to collect data on both members of a dyad, this would provide useful information about how preexisting predictors of relationship formation dyadically interact with each other. Future studies may consider speed dating as a way to systematically encourage people to date each other from a pool of individuals where the researcher has information about both members of the dyad (Finkel et al., 2007).

In spite of these limitations, this study demonstrated that attachment avoidance is associated with relationship commitment even when considering rival predictors. It is also the first study to the best of our knowledge to prospectively treat casual dating and committed dating as two distinct processes and to demonstrate that different variables emerge as the strongest predictors of making these two transitions. We hope this study serves as a catalyst for future research to prospectively study these two phenomena.

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