

# Getting over you: Contributions of attachment theory for postbreakup emotional adjustment

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## Abstract

This study used an attachment theoretical framework to identify factors that contribute to postbreakup emotional adjustment. Individuals who recently experienced a breakup were examined twice over a 1-month period. Greater desire to utilize an ex-partner as an attachment figure predicted less emotional adjustment. Higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup. People who reflected more about the breakup exhibited less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup compared to people who reflected less, and also less emotional adjustment over the ensuing month if they also reported more attachment anxiety. The article highlights the importance of normative attachment processes, in addition to attachment orientations and coping strategies, for understanding postbreakup adjustment.

It is well documented that romantic breakups are associated with emotional distress and place people at a heightened risk for a variety of poor mental health outcomes (Bonanno, 2004; Sbarra, 2006; Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). For example, adolescents who recently experienced a breakup are at a heightened risk of suicide and first onset of major depressive disorder (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). Given the emotional devastation frequently triggered by breakups, it is important to understand the

basic psychological mechanisms involved in dissolving a romantic relationship and determine whether certain factors promote optimal adjustment to a breakup. The present investigation adopted an attachment theoretical approach to romantic relationship dissolution. By assessing people who experienced a romantic breakup immediately after the event and 1 month later, the goal of this study was to examine how maintained attachment to one's ex-partner and individual differences in attachment orientation and reflecting about one's breakup, predicted postbreakup emotional adjustment.

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## *Normative attachment and adjustment*

Attachment theory suggests that people selectively orient attachment-related functions toward one primary attachment figure who is the most salient and influential person in their lives, as well as a number of tertiary attachment figures that are organized hierarchically (Bowlby, 1982; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). Based on Bowlby's (1982) behavioral-based definition of attachment, these functions are *proximity seeking*, *safe haven*, and *secure base*. *Proximity seeking* occurs when

an individual seeks and enjoys the proximity of his or her attachment figure, while actively resisting separation. An attachment figure functions as a *safe haven* by alleviating distress and providing support when difficulties arise. Finally, an attachment figure functions as a *secure base* by providing a core sense of emotional and psychological security (Hazan, Gur-Yaish, & Campa, 2004). Bowlby argued that people do not successfully adjust to the loss of an attachment figure until they are able to reorganize their attachment hierarchy by no longer desiring to utilize the lost person for these functions (Bowlby, 1979; Hazan et al., 2004).

Considerable research suggests that adult romantic relationships are adult “versions” of the infant–caregiver bond (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Presumably, directing attachment-related desires away from one’s ex-romantic partner is important to emotionally adjust to a romantic breakup. Yet there has been little research directly investigating this basic process. Even if adults know they cannot utilize their ex-partner for attachment-related needs, they likely still desire to do so, in the same way that a child who loses an attachment figure continues to seek the lost attachment figure for comfort and security (Bowlby, 1980). For example, although an individual might stop seeking out the ex-partner when he or she needs help or support (a classic example of the safe haven component of attachment), he or she might still experience strong desires to do so. Many people report struggling with such desires to continue directing attachment-related needs to their ex-partners, such as needs for security, support, companionship, and reassurance, even when it might be inappropriate to do so (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

Such continued desire to use an ex-partner for attachment-related needs is arguably maladaptive, because by definition, the ex-partner can no longer be relied upon (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008). Continued desires to direct attachment needs to the ex-partner also suggest that the individual in question has not effectively reorganized his or her attachment hierarchy such that he or she redirects attachment-related

needs to available attachment figures. Attachment theory suggests that continued desires to direct attachment needs to ex-partners should interfere with postbreakup emotional adjustment. For the person who terminates the relationship, the process of no longer desiring to utilize their romantic partner as an attachment figure likely begins before the relationship ends. Thus, by the time of the breakup, these people may have already started redirecting attachment-related needs away from their ex-partner. Yet this is not likely to be the case for the other partner (the one being “broken up with”), which may be one reason why such people typically exhibit more distress immediately after a breakup (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Surprisingly, no prior research has directly examined whether maintained attachment to one’s ex-partner after a romantic breakup is associated with postbreakup emotional adjustment.

#### *Attachment orientations and reactions to separation*

In addition to examining normative attachment processes, this study also investigated whether individual differences in attachment orientations (sometimes called attachment “style”) are associated with breakup-related adjustment. Individual differences in attachment orientations were first outlined by Ainsworth and colleagues with respect to infants (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed that these same individual differences also describe adults’ orientations toward their romantic partners. Individual differences in attachment orientation are presently conceptualized in terms of the orthogonal dimensions of attachment *anxiety* and *avoidance* (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Specifically, the anxiety dimension is characterized by a preoccupation with partner’s accessibility and excessive worry about rejection and abandonment. The avoidance dimension is characterized by discomfort with closeness, emotional distancing, and a preference to remain highly independent and self-sufficient.

There have been a few notable studies examining associations between attachment

orientation and people's emotional reactions to breakups. Davis, Shaver, and Vernon (2003) found that more anxiously attached people retrospectively reported greater preoccupation with ex-partner, more drug use, and greater physical and mental distress after a breakup compared to less anxiously attached people. Furthermore, Sbarra (2006) illustrated that more anxiously attached people have more difficulty recovering from postbreakup sadness than less anxiously attached people. As for avoidance, some research suggests that more avoidantly attached people have tendencies toward emotional distancing compared to less avoidantly attached people, which may enhance their postbreakup adjustment (Davis et al., 2003). Yet other research suggests that the classic distancing strategies of more avoidant people might actually break down in the face of major attachment stressors such as relationship dissolution, allowing their underlying insecurity to surface. This is supported in work by Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, and Florian (1997), who found that avoidantly attached people experienced *greater* distress following a divorce than securely attached people. Of course, a divorce is arguably a more significant attachment-related threat than the breakup of a dating relationship; hence, it is not clear whether avoidant people who have broken up with a dating partner will experience the breakup as a significant enough threat to erode their dismissive defenses. Thus, we do not know whether more avoidantly attached people will show enhanced or impaired adjustment to the dissolution of a dating relationship compared to less avoidantly attached people.

### *Reflection and adjustment*

The present research also considers how *reflecting* about one's negative emotions about the breakup is associated with postbreakup emotional adjustment. Although there is considerable work examining the impact of reflecting on one's negative feelings in response to the death of a loved one or a stressful life event (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride, & Larson, 1997; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991), no study has prospectively examined

the impact of reflecting on one's negative emotions immediately after a romantic breakup. Within the bereavement literature, reflection has long been presumed necessary to reorganize and eventually relinquish one's previous attachment bond to the lost partner in preparation for forming new attachment. In fact, traditional models of *grief work* are based on the idea that it is important to reflect about one's loss related negative emotions in order to emotionally adjust (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). However, there is an emerging evidence to suggest that intensive processing of one's thoughts and negative emotions regarding a loss might actually be counterproductive for many adults, because it retriggers and reinforces the negative feelings associated with the loss (Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1997; Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993). Furthermore, there is work to suggest that the intense reflection is associated with more severe negative mood after other stressful or traumatic life events (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991).

One possible explanation for these conflicting perspectives is that people differ in the degree to which reflection is adaptive or harmful based on their attachment orientation. Research has consistently shown that more anxiously attached people tend to be less adept at down-regulating negative emotions and often exhibit intensification of emotion especially as a result of attachment-related threats compared to less anxiously attached people (Cassidy, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They also tend to be highly preoccupied with feelings of rejection and abandonment, rely on emotion focused coping strategies, and overemphasize the importance of their lost attachment figure as an element of the self (Davis et al., 2003). Such people might find it difficult to reflect upon their negative emotions related to the breakup without becoming overwhelmed by the negative thoughts and feelings that it triggers. Hence, it is possible that reflection is not *generally* harmful after a breakup (and possibly adaptive), but it is harmful for more anxiously

attached people. The present research investigated this possibility.

### *Hypotheses*

Based on the previous literature review, the current investigation tested the following hypotheses:

1. People who reported higher levels of desired attachment immediately after the breakup will report less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup compared to people who reported lower levels of desired attachment (H1).
2. People who reported their partner terminated their relationship will report less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup compared to people who chose to terminate the relationship or viewed the termination as mutual (H2a). The association between terminator status and emotional adjustment will be mediated by desired attachment. People who reported their partner terminated the relationship will report significantly greater desires to continue utilizing their ex-partners as attachment figures compared to people who chose to terminate the relationship or viewed the termination as mutual, which in turn will be associated with less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup (H2b).
3. More anxiously attached people will exhibit less emotional adjustment compared to less anxiously attached people (H3). As noted earlier, previous findings regarding avoidance are mixed, some suggesting enhanced adjustment and some suggesting the opposite. Hence, an association between attachment avoidance and emotional adjustment will be investigated, but no specific prediction was made.
4. The associations between reflection and emotional adjustment will be moderated by attachment orientation. Specifically, reflection will prove more maladaptive among more anxiously attached people compared to less anxiously attached people such that those who report

higher levels of reflection (compared to those who report lower levels of reflection) and are more anxiously attached (compared to those less anxiously attached) will exhibit less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup and less improved emotional adjustment 1 month later (H4).

5. One month after the first assessment, decreased desire to utilize one's ex-partner as an attachment figure will be associated with increased emotional adjustment (H5).

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The participants for this study were 108 undergraduate students attending a large public university in the Western United States who had recently ended a romantic relationship (days from breakup at first assessment,  $M = 15.60$ ,  $SD = 7.8$  days). Participants were recruited via email messages sent to all registered undergraduate and graduate students at the university, as well as flyers posted around campus. Participants were paid \$12 for each laboratory visit. Overall, the final sample consisted of 66% females whose average age was 21 years 3 months old ( $SD = 3$  years 3 months, range = 18–33 years). Thirty-three percent of the sample indicated that their partner terminated the relationship. Five percent of the participants were Asian, 78% Caucasian, 7% Latino, 1% Native American, and 9% declined to report their ethnicity. The average relationship length prior to the breakup was 18.7 months ( $SD = 17.0$ ,  $Mdn = 14.0$ , range = 4–90). A total of 108 people completed the first assessment (T1), 23 people chose not to return for the second assessment (T2) for undisclosed reasons, and 9 people completed the second assessment but reestablished a committed relationship with their partner. People who did not complete the follow-up assessment did not significantly differ on any of the T1 measures from people who did complete the follow-up assessment. People who reestablished a committed relationship with their ex-partner were removed after imputation (see below) as they

were from a different population that was not of interest, and they significantly differed on both the adjustment and desired attachment variables; thus, the final sample consisted of 96 people.

### Measures

#### *Attachment orientation*

Romantic attachment orientation was assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale–Revised (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The scale is a 36-item self-report attachment measure containing two 18-item subscales: one assessing attachment anxiety and the other assessing attachment avoidance. The anxiety subscale includes items such as “I worry a fair amount about losing my partner” and “I do not often worry about being abandoned” (reverse scored). The avoidance subscale includes items such as “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down” and “I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners” (reverse scored). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s were .93 for attachment anxiety and .93 for attachment avoidance.

#### *Reflection*

The current investigation used the reflection subscale of the Response Style Questionnaire (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1993) to assess reflection. This self-report measure asks respondents to rate their responses to statements when thinking about their breakup using a Likert scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). The directions were modified slightly to take into account the breakup context: “People think and do many different things when they think about a breakup. Please read each of the items below and indicate whether you never, sometimes, often, or always think or do each one when you feel down, sad, or depressed when thinking about your recent breakup. Please indicate what you *generally* do, not what you think you should do.” The reflection scale consists of five neutrally valenced items that assess the degree to which one thinks or ponders about their feelings related to the breakup (e.g., “Go away by yourself and think about why you feel this

way”). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s were .73 for the reflection items, which is consistent with previous studies using this scale.

#### *Depressive symptoms*

Depressive symptoms were assessed with the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Studies–Depression scale (CES–D; Radloff, 1977). The CES–D is a widely used instrument, with previous studies demonstrating strong reliability and validity. This self-report measure asks respondents to rate how they felt and behaved during the past week using a Likert scale from 1 to 4, in which 1 = *rarely or none of the time (< 1 day)*, 2 = *some or a little of the time (1–2 days)*, 3 = *occasionally or a moderate amount of the time (3–4 days)*, and 4 = *most or all of the time (5–7 days)*. The CES–D uses items such as “I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with the help of my family and friends” and “I felt depressed.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s for this measure were .91 for T1 and .91 for T2.

#### *Positive and negative affect*

Positive and negative affect were assessed with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). This scale is a 20-item self-report measure that has two 10-item subscales that are designed to provide brief measures of both positive and negative affect. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced each particular emotion within the past week, with reference to a 5-point scale. This scale has been shown to be stable at appropriate levels over a 2-month time period. The scale points are: 1 (*very slightly or not at all*), 2 (*a little*), 3 (*moderately*), 4 (*quite a bit*) and 5 (*very much*). The positive affect scale uses items such as “interested and excited”; the negative affect scale uses items such as “distressed and upset.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s for positive affect were .91 for T1 and .91 for T2. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s for negative affect were .89 for T1 and .89 for T2.

#### *Composite index of adjustment*

Given the collinearity between depressive symptoms, positive affect, and negative affect

(depressive symptoms T1 and positive affect T1,  $r = -.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ; depressive symptoms T1 and negative affect T1,  $r = .71$ ,  $p < .001$ ; positive affect T1 and negative affect T1,  $r = -.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ; depressive symptoms T2 and positive affect T2,  $r = -.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ; depressive symptoms T2 and negative affect T2,  $r = .73$ ,  $p < .001$ ; positive affect T2 and negative affect T2,  $r = -.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a composite index for emotional adjustment was created, representing the average of standardized positive affect, standardized and reflected negative affect (so that higher scores represent less negative affect), and standardized and reflected depressive symptoms (so that higher scores represent fewer depressive symptoms). The  $\alpha$ s for the composite index were .85 at T1 and .86 at T2. Higher emotional adjustment scores represent better adjustment.

#### *Attachment-related desires*

To assess the degree to which people perceived and treated their ex-partners as attachment figures, participants completed a modified version of the WHOTO, a self-report measure based on Bowlby's behavior-based definition of attachment, to assess how much they desire to utilize their ex-partner as an attachment figure compared to other attachment figures (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). This scale has been used in previous research (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Hazan, Hutt, Sturgeon, & Bricker, 1991) to assess the degree to which people turn to various members of their social network for specific attachment functions. Consistent with previous research (Fraley & Davis, 1997), the *proximity*, *safe haven*, and *secure base* scales were used. Each attachment scale uses three separate items to assess where people perceive various attachment figures on their attachment hierarchy for proximity seeking, safe haven, and secure base functions. An example of proximity seeking item is "Who is the person you like to be with as much as possible?" An example of safe haven item is "Who do you seek out when you're worried about something?" An example of secure base item is "Who do you know who will always be there

for you, no matter what?" Respondents are able to list up to five people in response to each question, in order of importance, which reflects the first five members on their attachment hierarchy. As noted above, the present investigation focuses on where people desire their ex-partner to be on their attachment hierarchy even if there are self-imposed and/or socially imposed reasons why they may not be able to use them for these functions. Hence, after each question on the WHOTO, people were asked to report on where they desire the ex-partner to be on their attachment hierarchy. Specifically, after each item participants were asked the following question: "Even if you know you cannot or should not, if you could place your former romantic partner anywhere on the above list, where would you *desire* to put him or her?" Depending on where an individual desired to place their ex-partner for each question on their attachment hierarchy, they received a score to reflect the position. If an individual desired for their ex-partner to be first on a particular function, he or she received a rating of 5; if listed as second, he or she received a rating of 4, and so on. If an individual did not desire for their ex-partner to be on their hierarchy for a particular question at all, he or she received a score of 0. Given the collinearity between items at each time point (proximity seeking T1 and safe haven T1,  $r = .83$ ,  $p < .001$ ; proximity seeking T1 and secure base T1,  $r = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ ; safe haven T1 and secure base T1,  $r = .75$ ,  $p < .001$ ; proximity seeking T2 and safe haven T2,  $r = .88$ ,  $p < .001$ ; proximity seeking T2 and secure base T2,  $r = .82$ ,  $p < .001$ ; safe haven T2 and secure base T2,  $r = .84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a composite three-item index for desired attachment was created by combining desired proximity, desired safe haven, and desired secure base at each time point. This was calculated by summing scores from each index and dividing by 3. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s were .88 for desired attachment at T1 and .90 for desired attachment at T2.

#### *Procedure*

Participants completed two laboratory visits, approximately 4 weeks apart ( $M = 33.1$  days,

*Mdn* = 31 days). The night before their first laboratory visit (T1), participants filled out an online version of the WHOTO questionnaire, and then completed additional questionnaire measures during each of their visits.

## Results

Multiple imputation was employed to impute T2 missing data due to attrition following the recommendations of Graham (2009). Multiple imputation produces unbiased parameter estimates that appropriately reflect the true variability of the missing data and has been shown (through simulation studies) to be a more valid and less biased analytical approach than listwise deletion. Multiple imputation has been shown to perform well when data are missing at random and even acceptable under some case of nonrandom missingness. It is robust to departures from normality assumptions and performs well even with low sample size. Following standard practice, the imputation procedure was repeated five times in order to approximate the true measurement variance represented in real data. All analyses were completed with each of the full imputed data sets, and the coefficients generated by each separate data set were averaged to produce final estimates. See Schafer and Olsen (1998) for more information on this approach. All reported analyses below reflect these pooled estimates.<sup>1</sup>

Means and standard deviations for all study variables are presented in Table 1.<sup>2</sup> All

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of all study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attachment anxiety	3.36	1.21
Attachment avoidance	3.26	1.20
Reflection	2.26	0.66
Desired attachment T1	7.98	4.89
Desired attachment T2	6.77	5.30
Depressive symptoms T1	2.18	0.62
Depressive symptoms T2	1.86	0.56
Positive affect T1	1.07	1.48
Positive affect T2	2.77	0.78
Negative affect T1	2.51	0.85
Negative affect T2	2.17	0.76

independent variables were centered.<sup>3</sup> Zero-order correlations among study variables are presented in Table 2. Examination of the coefficients reveals that people who reported higher levels of initial desired attachment reported less T1 emotional adjustment compared to people who reported lower initial desired attachment (H1). People who reported that their partner had terminated their relationship reported lower T1 emotional adjustment compared to people who did not report their partner terminated the relationship (H2a). Consistent with H3, more anxiously attached people reported less T1 emotional adjustment compared to less anxiously attached people. Furthermore, people who reported higher levels of reflection reported less T1 emotional adjustment compared to people who reported less reflection. After examination of these zero-order correlations, a multiple regression was performed to examine the unique contribution of each of these variables in predicting T1 emotional adjustment, while controlling for gender, which was previously shown to be associated with breakup adjustment (Davis et al., 2003). As can be seen in Table 3, the

1. Using the imputation approach to handle attrition yielded identical significance levels to traditional listwise deletion with a small exception in Block 2 of the second regression analysis predicting change in adjustment (i.e., Table 4). Specifically, reflection was associated with T2 adjustment in the listwise approach at  $p < .05$ , while it was associated with T1 adjustment in the imputation approach at  $p < .10$ . Consequently, the overall model in this same block yielded a significance level of  $p < .05$  using listwise rather than  $p < .10$  using multiple imputation.
2. Given that the adjustment variables were standardized before the composite index was formed, the mean is 0 and therefore not interruptible. Therefore the means of each component of the item index are presented in Table 1. It should be noted that the standard deviations of composite index for adjustment variable were .86 at T1 and .83 at T2.

3. To rule out potential confounds, initial analyses included a number of additional variables that I expected might influence breakup adjustment: days since the breakup and prebreakup relationship length. These variables did not influence the strength or direction of the effects of interest; thus, they were dropped from the final analysis to simplify presentation of the results.

**Table 2.** Correlations among attachment orientation, coping strategies, normative attachment, emotional adjustment

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. T1 emotional adjustment								
2. T2 emotional adjustment	.54**							
3. T1 desired attachment	-.27**	-.08						
4. T2 desired attachment	.14	-.20 <sup>†</sup>	.50**					
5. Attachment anxiety	-.45**	-.28**	-.05	-.07				
6. Attachment avoidance	-.15	-.08	-.22*	-.29**	.28**			
7. Reflection	-.39**	-.36**	-.05	.03	.12	.02		
8. Partner terminated	-.25*	.00	.28**	.09	.19 <sup>†</sup>	-.23*	.00	
9. Gender ( <i>male</i> = 0, <i>female</i> = 1)	-.11	.02	.08	.15	.12	.12	.09	.00

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.** Summary of regression analysis predicting T1 emotional adjustment

Variable	$\beta$
Partner terminated	-.14
Gender ( <i>male</i> = 0, <i>female</i> = 1)	-.02
Attachment anxiety	-.35**
Attachment avoidance	-.14
Reflection	-.36**
T1 desired attachment	-.30**
$R^2$	.42***

\*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

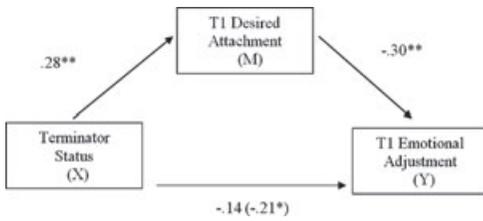
simultaneous inclusion of these independent variables using multiple regression did not change the significance levels of the coefficients, with the exception of terminator status, which was no longer significant. This indicates the possibility of mediation.

To determine whether or not T1 desired attachment mediated the relationship between terminator status and T1 emotional adjustment (H2b), Baron and Kenny's (1986) regression procedures for testing mediation were employed. Regression coefficients for this mediating test are presented in Figure 1. Gender, attachment orientation, and reflection were included as covariates in all regression equations (Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). As previously mentioned, people who reported their partner terminated the relationship

**Table 4.** Summary of hierarchical regression analysis predicting T2 emotional adjustment controlling for T1 emotional adjustment (higher scores indicate better emotional adjustment)

Variable	$\Delta R$	$\beta$
Step 1	.29***	
Emotional adjustment T1		.54**
Step 2	.11 <sup>†</sup>	
Emotional adjustment T1		.47**
Partner terminated		.13
Gender ( <i>male</i> = 0, <i>female</i> = 1)		.10
Attachment anxiety		-.10
Attachment avoidance		.05
Reflective rumination		-.17 <sup>†</sup>
T1 desired attachment		.10
T2 desired attachment		-.20*
Step 3	.05*	
Emotional adjustment T1		.50**
Partner terminated		.12
Gender ( <i>male</i> = 0, <i>female</i> = 1)		.15
Attachment anxiety		-.08
Attachment avoidance		.04
Reflective rumination		-.17 <sup>†</sup>
T1 desired attachment		.09
T2 desired attachment		-.21*
Attachment Anxiety $\times$ Reflective Rumination		-.19*
Total $R^2$	.45***	

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1.** The mediating role of desired attachment in the association between terminator status (1 = partner terminated the relationship, 0 = I terminated the relationship or breakup mutual) and T1 emotional adjustment. Beta coefficients are standardized. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

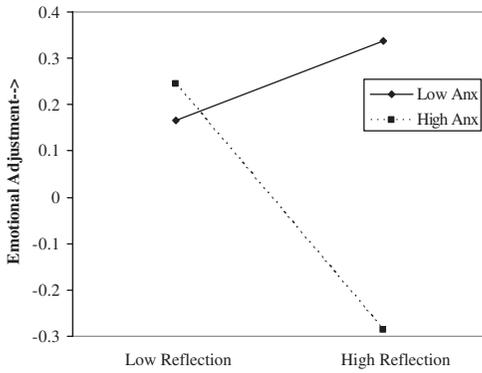
reported less T1 emotional adjustment compared to people who did not report their partner terminated the relationship, which established that there was a relationship to be mediated. Second, the hypothesized mediator, T1 desired attachment, also predicted T1 emotional adjustment such that people who reported higher levels of desired attachment reported less emotional adjustment compared to people who reported less desired attachment. Third, people who reported that their partner terminated their relationship reported higher levels of desired attachment compared to people who did not report their partner terminated the relationship. Finally, when T1 emotional adjustment and terminator status were added simultaneously, the association between terminator status and emotional adjustment was reduced to nonsignificance. A Sobel test confirmed this reduction was significant ( $Z = 2.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, all of Baron and Kenny's criteria for mediation were met and H2b was confirmed such the association between "terminator status" and T1 emotional adjustment was mediated by the fact that people who had partners that terminated the relationship had significantly greater desires to continue utilizing their ex-partners as attachment figures.<sup>4</sup>

4. After the all independent variables were simultaneously included in the regression analysis, all two-way interactions were included in a subsequent block, followed by all three-way interactions. None of these interactions reached significance; thus, I chose to omit them from Table 3 for presentation clarity.

Next, a test of whether or not these hypothesized variables predicted change in emotional adjustment from T1 to T2 was conducted. A hierarchical multiple regression was employed. In the first step, T2 emotional adjustment was regressed on T1 emotional adjustment (to reflect residualized change from T1 to T2). In the second step, gender, terminator status, attachment orientation, T2 desired attachment, reflection, and T1 desired attachment were added (T1 desired attachment was added so that T2 desired attachment would reflect residualized change in desired attachment). The two-way interactions were entered in the third step.

In accord with H5, decreased desired attachment was associated with higher levels of emotional adjustment. Higher levels of reflection were associated with less increased emotional adjustment, albeit at trend level. Gender, terminator status, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance were not significantly associated with T2 emotional adjustment.<sup>5</sup> As predicted (H4), attachment anxiety interacted with reflection in predicting emotional adjustment from T1 to T2. The addition of this interaction term accounted for a significant amount of additional variance in the overall model. Figure 2 represents this interaction. The outcome is T2 emotional adjustment, controlling for T1 emotional adjustment, so that higher scores represent better emotional adjustment from T1 to T2. Reflection was significantly associated with less improved emotional adjustment at T2 when attachment anxiety was high (1 *SD* above the mean),  $t = -4.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ; however, this was not the case when attachment anxiety was low (1 *SD* below the mean),  $t = .31$ , *n.s.* None of the other nonhypothesized two-way interactions were significant.

5. Given that previous retrospective work (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007) demonstrated that rumination mediated the association between attachment anxiety and breakup adjustment, I conducted additional analyses to explore whether the lack of an association between attachment anxiety and change in adjustment was attributable to the possible mediating role of coping strategies. When attachment orientation was also entered into the model *without* reflection and it remained nonsignificant, as did avoidance. Thus, no sign of mediation was detected.



**Figure 2.** The moderating role of attachment anxiety in the relationship between reflection and T2 emotional adjustment (controlling for T1 emotional adjustment).

*Note.* The graph represents predicted values for T2 emotional adjustment for people 1 *SD* above and below the mean for both reflection and attachment anxiety.

## Discussion

Drawing upon attachment theory as a framework for understanding loss, the article extends recent efforts to determine predictors of emotional adjustment after nonmarital dissolution. This study is the first to examine how normative attachment processes are associated with postbreakup emotional adjustment. Results showed that people who reported a greater desire to utilize their ex-partner as an important attachment figure exhibited less emotional adjustment immediately after a breakup compared to people who reported less desire to utilize their ex-partner as an attachment figure. Furthermore, people who exhibited less declined desire to utilize their ex-partner as an attachment figure 1 month later reported less improved emotional adjustment compared to individuals who exhibited more declined desire. People who did not choose to terminate their relationship reported less emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup, and this association was mediated by their greater desire to utilize their ex-partner as an attachment figure. This study also extends work evaluating how attachment orientations and reflecting about a breakup contributes to postbreakup

emotional adjustment. Attachment avoidance was not associated with postbreakup emotional adjustment. Results indicated that more anxiously attached people exhibited lower levels of initial emotional adjustment compared to less anxiously attached people. Furthermore, people who reported high levels of reflection about the breakup reported less initial emotional adjustment compared to people who reported low levels of reflection about breakup. Furthermore, people who reported higher levels of reflection about the breakup reported less improved emotional adjustment in the following month if they also reported being more anxiously attached.

I began with the premise that in order to emotionally adjust to a breakup, people must stop desiring to utilize their ex-partner as an attachment figure. By systematically documenting that desired attachment is associated with emotional adjustment even after controlling for attachment orientation and terminator status, this study lends support to Sbarra and Hazan's (2008) recent theoretical argument suggesting that the degree to which one feels dysregulation when separated from an attachment figure should be associated with the degree to which one desires to use a partner (or ex-partner) when they cannot do so. The finding that the association between terminator status and initial postbreakup emotional adjustment was mediated by desired attachment helps explain why people going through a breakup, who do not choose to terminate the relationship, experience more distress (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Understanding mechanisms that underlie why people who do not choose to terminate the relationship exhibit poorer emotional adjustment compared to people who terminate the relationship is important for both theoretical and applied work.

The association between attachment anxiety and initial emotional adjustment adds to previous work showing similar associations using both prospective and retrospective designs (e.g., Davis et al., 2003; Sbarra, 2006). Previous studies examining the association between attachment avoidance and emotional adjustment after a loss have produced conflicting results—some showing that avoidance is associated with mild improvement

(Davis et al., 2003), while others showing it is not (Birnbaum et al., 1997). Given that more avoidantly attached people did not show improved emotional adjustment compared to less avoidantly attached people, it appears that the strategies highly avoidant people typically employ to disengage from attachment-related threats may not be fully engaged in a breakup context (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). As Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, and Nachmias (2000) suggested, more avoidantly attached people may be unable to employ defensive strategies when presented with stark attachment-related threats, such as the dissolution of a romantic relationship. Yet contrary to previous findings regarding avoidant people's responses to divorce (Birnbaum et al., 1997), I did not find that more avoidantly attached people showed significantly poorer adjustment to their breakups than less avoidantly attached people. This may suggest that nonmarital breakups represent an intermediate form of attachment-related threat—not threatening enough to facilitate poor adjustment, but threatening enough to prevent the engagement of dismissive strategies that might actually enhance adjustment. Investigating specific thresholds for attachment-related threats among avoidant people may shed light on this issue. One possibility is that an avoidant individual's previous history with romantic breakups will affect the likelihood that he or she will be able to engage dismissive coping strategies in the face of relationship loss.

Although traditional models of *grief work* suggests that it is adaptive to reflect upon one's emotions related to a loss in order to "work through" the painful experience, recent work suggest that may not be the case given that reflecting upon one's negative emotions may be harmful (see Wortman & Silver, 2001, for a review of this controversy). This study suggest that reflecting about one's breakup-related emotions is associated with poor emotional adjustment immediately after the breakup regardless of attachment anxiety; however, reflection was only maladaptive for more anxiously attached people 1 month later. Thus, processing one's negative emotions

may be maladaptive regardless of attachment anxiety immediately after the breakup because the loss is too salient and painful for everyone. However, over time, it is only maladaptive to reflect upon one's breakup if one is more anxiously attached. This interaction supports the expectation that it is particularly maladaptive for a more anxiously attached person to "work through their emotions" given their inability to down-regulate or compartmentalize the intense negative emotions likely triggered by reflection. It is possible that some of the inconsistency in the literature regarding whether it is adaptive or maladaptive to reflect upon one's emotions after a loss (Wortman & Silver, 2001) is attributable to variability in people's capacities for effective emotion regulation. Future studies should closely examine anxious people's experiences with reflection in other contexts such as bereavement.

Nonetheless, reflecting about one's emotions associated with a loss may still prove to be an important part of long-term growth and recovery. Saffrey and Ehrenberg (2007) demonstrated that reflecting upon positive aspects of a breakup experience was associated with positive adjustment, but their participants were assessed at a considerably later time than participants in this study (i.e., on average, 5 months after the breakup occurred vs. less than 1 month). This might be interpreted to suggest that reflecting on a breakup *can* be adaptive, but perhaps only after the more immediate, intense emotions associated with the loss have dissipated (see Sbarra, 2006, for a review about the normative time course of nonmarital emotional adjustment). Thus, in addition to assessing the degree to which one reflects on a breakup, researchers should take into account when people reflect. It is notable that the final phases of many stage models of breakup and divorce highlight the importance of reflecting on one's former relationship in order to come up with a resolution that creates meaning and facilitates growth (Rollie & Duck, 2006). However, the present findings point to the fact that excessive reflection before emotional adjustment has taken place is likely unhelpful, especially for people who are unable to down-regulate their negative emotions (e.g., people

high on attachment anxiety). Future studies focusing on the *timing* of adaptive versus maladaptive forms of reflection can make an important contribution to the development of effective clinical interventions aimed at promoting recovery from relationship loss.

### *Limitations*

This research is limited by the fact that participants were students at a university campus. As a result, it is not possible to determine the degree to which the findings generalize to other populations such as married people and older adults. One particular concern when assessing younger people in relationship research is that they are typically involved in relatively new romantic relationships. Although the participants' relationships in this study were relatively long for a college sample, it is important to examine processes of relinquishing the attachment bond in much longer relationships. Given that the dissolution of longer term relationships is likely to involve more severe and prolonged distress, it is possible that the association between the attachment and adjustment is more complex in these cases.

Another important limitation is that people's levels of attachment anxiety may be somewhat elevated during these assessments given that an anxious individual's "worst fears" are, in effect, coming true (especially for those who were rejected by their partners). Yet other studies have shown similar associations between attachment anxiety assessed before subsequent dissolution and initial adjustment levels (Sbarra, 2006). It would be interesting for future research to treat attachment anxiety as a time-varying covariate to see if attachment anxiety increases after a breakup among people who are already more anxiously attached.

Although study participants came in for their first assessment very soon after their breakup occurred, it is inevitable that to some degree, changes in attachment and emotional adjustment had already begun. It would be ideal to have measures of normative attachment, relationship quality, and attachment orientation immediately before the breakup.

This would allow researchers to investigate whether people who view their romantic partner higher on their attachment hierarchy in an intact relationship have more difficulty emotionally adjusting to the loss of this person. Of course, the only way to collect such data is to follow a large number of people longitudinally, assessing their relationships on a regular basis, and waiting until their relationships end. Ideally, such research could continue to follow people many months after the breakup to examine longer term processes.

Finally, because these tests are correlational, causality cannot be determined. In the case of the relationship between desired attachment and emotional adjustment, it cannot be determined whether desired attachment drives changes in adjustment, or vice versa. It is certainly possible that people's desires to direct attachment functions toward their ex-partners are partially influenced by their feelings of distress. Hence, as people begin to feel better, it may become "easier" to no longer desire to utilize an ex-partner as an important attachment figure. Most likely, the association between desired attachment and adjustment is bidirectional, so that each process reciprocally influences the other over time. Closer investigation of this possibility, using more fine-grained longitudinal analysis, is a critical direction for future research.

### *Conclusions*

This study extends our understanding of what predicts emotional adjustment in the context of a romantic breakup. This study sheds light on whether reflecting about one's breakup-related negative emotions is maladaptive by illustrating that immediately after a breakup, reflection is maladaptive regardless of attachment anxiety. Furthermore, people who reflect more about a breakup exhibit less emotional adjustment overtime if they also exhibit more attachment anxiety. Furthermore, this study makes a contribution to our understanding of how a continued desire to utilize an ex-partner as an attachment figure is associated with poor emotional adjustment to a breakup. Based on Bowlby's (1980) original observations of children losing their attachment figures,

one of the foundational theoretical tenets of attachment theory is that people do not emotionally adjust to the loss of an attachment figure until they no longer desire to utilize them for attachment-related functions. Yet adult attachment researchers have devoted little attention to empirically examining whether a maintained desire to utilize an ex-partner as an attachment figure is associated with emotional adjustment after relationship dissolution. By systematically documenting that desired attachment is associated with emotional adjustment even after controlling for attachment orientation and terminator status, this study suggests that dissolution researchers devote increased attention to evaluating *normative* attachment in addition to attachment orientation.

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