Attachment Styles and Transitioning Into College

Carrie Phillips
St. John Fisher College, cphillips_no@sjfc.edu

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Attachment Styles and Transitioning Into College

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

Researchers examined whether attachment styles had an effect on interaction anxiety in college freshmen. The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSC) (Griffen & Bartholomew, 1994) was used to categorize participants as secure, fearful, preoccupied, or dismissing. The Interaction Anxiousness Scale (IAS) (Leary, 1983) assessed participants’ anxiety during interactions. Based on past findings that individuals with secure attachment styles had lower anxiety levels (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001), it was hypothesized that secure individuals would have lower interaction anxiety. Results from a between subjects ANOVA revealed that the hypothesis was supported. Results and limitations of the study are further discussed.
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Abstract  
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The first year of college is a stepping-stone that can determine the success of an individual's college career (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). It is also a major transition in the life of an individual that involves emotional adjustment and requires social competence. Attachment styles have profound effects on emotional adjustment and social competence, which are crucial factors in transitioning out of the household and into college. The ability to adjust depends highly on an individual's autonomy and level of security (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004). Loneliness, predicted by non-secure attachment personalities, can lead to negative feelings toward the college experience and impede on the separation-individuation process (Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006). Positive feelings of competence and achievement associated with autonomy and perceived parental support lead to a greater persistence (Ratelle, Larose, Guay, & Senécal, 2005) and a maintained focus on an individual's studies (Larose, Bernier, & Tarabany, 2005). Through persistence and a maintained focus, achievement is self-fulfilled.

Parental attachment has profound effects on emotional adjustment and social competence (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001). Securely attached adolescents have less anxiety of social performance and, in turn, perform more frequently. They also have greater competence in peer relationships and less self-reported depression. Competence in social skills, parental attachment, and lower anxiety levels predict higher levels of self-esteem, whereas anxiously attached adolescents have lower competence and lower levels of self-esteem. Parental attachment styles mediated relational competence in adolescents, which mediated anxiety and self-esteem. Relational competence, social skills, and self-esteem are all essential for transitions throughout the lifespan.

Leaving home is a major transition that usually occurs early on in life (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). The time that this transition occurs is predicted by attachment style, adolescent autonomy, and parent-adolescent conflict. Those who leave the home normatively (21 years old for females, 23 years old for males) are on average more securely attached. Normative leavers reported greater autonomy granted to them in late adolescence and greater support for their independence. Although they reported greater levels of parental conflict during early stages of adolescence these levels decreased during late adolescent stages. Autonomy, support for independence, and appropriate levels of parental conflict facilitates the ability to transition out of the household.

Mattanah et al. (2004) found that secure attachment styles experienced a more positive adjustment to the separation from peers, family, and significant others, as well as individuated more easily into an autonomous self. They found that positive transitions into college on academic, social and personal levels are facilitated through secure attachment and the ease of separation-individuation.

Loneliness in first-year college students impedes on separation-individuation and increased negative feelings and anxiety toward the transition into college. Recent research found loneliness to be negatively correlated with secure attachment styles and perceived parental care, and predicted by self-criticism and ambivalence (Wiseman et al.,
It is possible that low levels of self-criticism found in secure individuals may lead to a higher perception of social networks, or individuals with high levels self-induce isolation. The students' attachment and bonding with parents is continuously important and has impacts long after separation-individuation. Perceived parental support and care predicted academic success and persistence, specifically in science related studies (Ratelle et al., 2005). Involvement of parents was associated with greater autonomy in students and increased feelings of competence, led to greater achievement. Competence and achievement of the student led to greater persistence in the science program.

According to research, learning dispositions found in different attachment personalities predicted achievement (Larose et al., 2005). Individuals with dismissing attachment styles had lower grade averages than autonomous and preoccupied individuals. Autonomous individuals had more stable learning dispositions, such as quality of exam preparation, priority of studies, attention, and willingness to seek help from a teacher. Dismissing and preoccupied individuals showed a decrease of quality in learning dispositions over time. Preoccupied individuals also had a greater fear of failure than autonomous individuals. Transition into the first year of college depends greatly on a maintained focus on individual studies and achievement.

The present study examines the effects of attachment styles on students’ transitions into college. Researchers specifically looked at freshmen attending St. John Fisher College. They hypothesized that individuals with a secure attachment style would transition easier than students with fearful, preoccupied, or dismissing attachment styles. The hypothesis is based on past research that indicated that securely attached individuals had greater competence in peer relationships and lower anxiety levels (Engels et al., 2001). The hypothesis is also predicted based on findings that securely attached individuals adjusted more positively to their separation from peers, family, and significant others when leaving home to go to college (Mattanah et al., 2004). Results help in the examination whether attachment styles play a role in college transition, specifically social competence, anxiety, and ability to socially interact with peers and teachers.

**Method**

**Participants**

The study consisted of 60 participants, 8 males and 52 females. All of the participants attended St. John Fisher College at the freshman level. They volunteered for the study to receive credit for an introductory psychology class.

**Materials**

Researchers used the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) examine the 4 categories of attachment styles, secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful for each participant. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items in which participants were asked to rate themselves on a 5-point scale. The scale ranged from “not at all like me” to “very like me”, including “neutral” as an option. Items were general statements about ease of relationships; for example, “I find it difficult to depend on other people.” Items were scored based on the 4 attachment patterns, based on indicators from the original questionnaire. Some items were scored in reverse, also indicated by the original questionnaire. This questionnaire measured the degree of attachment patterns; it was not developed to classify individuals into the 4 categories.

A second survey, Interaction Anxiousness Scale (Leary, 1983) was used to assess participants’ interactions as they pertained to their freshman year at St. John Fisher College. The scale consisted of 15 items. Participants were asked to rate the degree that each item was characteristic of them. Ratings were based on a 5-point scale, ranging from “Not at all characteristic of me” to “Extremely characteristic of me”, with “Neutral” as an option. Items consisted of general statements about social anxiety, for example, “I often feel nervous even in casual get-togethers”. Items indicating a high anxiety level were scored according to the scale; items relating to a high confidence level were reversed and then scored according to the scale. Higher scores indicated higher anxiety levels.

**Procedure**

Participants completed both surveys via the Internet in an experiment program used by St. John Fisher College. They were given the choice to back out of the study at any time during the
surveys and also allowed to skip over questions. After they completed both surveys they were thanked and informed on whom to contact for debriefing information.

**Results**

The research question asked whether there was an affect of attachment style on college transition, specifically the anxiety of college freshmen. The hypothesis stated that secure attachment styles would have less social anxiety than the non-secure attachment styles of preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. Data from the RSQ was transformed to use as a construct to categorize individuals into one of 4 attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing. Questions were coded with the attachment style that most reflected the question. Means for each attachment style of each participant were calculated. Each participant was categorized as having a specific attachment style based for which attachment style they had the highest mean score. A between-subjects analysis of variance was conducted on the data collected from the surveys used in the study. ANCOVA results indicated a significant effect of attachment on anxiety levels, $F(3, 53) = 7.16, p<.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .288$. The effect size indicates a moderate relationship. Post hoc Tukey HSD tests indicated that securely attached individuals had significantly scored significantly less on the Interaction Anxiousness Scale than fearful, dismissing and preoccupied freshmen, which indicated lower levels of anxiety. These findings indicated that securely attached individuals had lower anxiety than individuals with non-secure attachment styles.

The results of this study were concurrent with past findings indicating that individuals with secure attachment styles had lower anxiety levels (Engels et al., 2001). Low interaction anxiety may have implications that the individual had greater competence in peer relationships as well. It may also indicate that their transition out of the house was more positive, even when faced with separation from peers, family, and significant others (Mattanah et al., 2004).

There were several limitations to this study. The first limitation had to do with sample size and participant bias. There were only 60 participants who completed the study, 52 of them were females and 8 were males. This limited the power of the findings and increased the risk for Type II error. Although the hypothesis was supported, there was the possibility of significant differences between the other attachment styles as well. Increasing the sample size would increase the power of the study. Although gender was not looked at, it would have increased the validity if there were more males who participated in the study.

The second limitation stemmed from the directness of the questions, which could have increased participant reaction. It may have been fruitful to add other questions to the surveys as a way to divert the attention away the main focus of the survey.

The third and fourth limitations are due to demographical questions that would have led to a more thorough examination. The first question would be age. Age was important because although most of the freshmen are 18, there may have been outliers who were older and therefore more experienced with the transition process. The other question would be where do they reside. This would have been important because some of the freshmen may still live at home, which could mean that they have not experienced the full college transition and individualization-separation process that others have. Similarly, some freshmen may already live by themselves off campus and have either been more experienced with the process, or have gone through a bigger transition of living.

**Discussion**

Based on past findings that indicated that securely attached individuals had greater competence in peer relationships and lower anxiety levels (Engels et al., 2001) and adjusted more positively to their separation from peers, family, and significant others when leaving home to go to college (Mattanah et al., 2004) it was hypothesized that freshmen with secure attachment styles would have less anxiety than preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing freshmen. Results from this study found that freshmen who were categorized as securely attached, based on a modified version of the Relationship Scales Questionnaire, scored lower on the Interaction Anxiousness Scale than fearful, dismissing and preoccupied freshmen. These findings indicated that securely attached individuals had lower anxiety than individuals with non-secure attachment styles.

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completely independent instead of the semi-independent lifestyle of college dorms. The last limitation had to do with the Relationships Scales Questionnaire (RSC). Due to the fact that it had been modified it may have become a less valid measure of attachment styles. This decreases the internal validity of the study.

For future research it would be beneficial to increase the sample size and aim for a more even distribution of males and females. Another consideration to make would be to add filler questions to the surveys to divert attention away from the direct point of the study, as well as add more demographical questions in order to paint a fuller picture. It may also be useful to test and retest the validity of the modified version of the RSC.

References


Table 1 Means Summary of Interaction Anxiousness Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment Style</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>