

The Differences Between Secure and Insecure Attachment Styles in Decision Making under Social Contexts

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Abstract: This study investigates how secure and insecure attachment styles influence decision-making under social contexts, focusing on the interplay between dispositional and situational factors. Attachment theory, as developed by John Bowlby, categorizes individuals into secure and insecure attachment styles, explaining the emotion regulation and interpersonal relationship patterns based off the early-development of individuals. This study tends to investigate the how different attachment styles interplay with social context on the aspect of decision making. It is hypothesized that individuals with secure attachment styles are more likely to exhibit stable and logical relationships when having interpersonal interactions. At the same time, insecurely attach individuals tend to focus on external factors, seeking validations or avoiding social interactions, leading to unstable relationships and illogical decision makings. Developing a combination of the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Questionnaire and hypothetical decision-making scenarios, this study tends to examine behavioral patterns in response to various social pressures. Results are expected to demonstrate statistically significant difference between the attachment style groups on decision making.

Keywords: attachment theory, decision-making, interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, social pressure

1. Introduction

1.1. General background

Decision-making is a general and essential part of human interactions, especially within social contexts during interpersonal interactions, where individuals' internal and external factors shape their decision-making. The common external factors like social pressure, group dynamics, and social expectations could be critical when it comes to influencing individuals decisions. At the same time, internal factors, like personal differences, including personalities, self-expectations, and attachment styles, are the essentials of personal choices. Attachment theory, created by John Bowlby, has been widely used to explain how individuals interact with others, showing dispositional differences in creating and maintaining social bonds, commonly discussed in the context of parenting and romantic relationships. Originally, the theory was developed to explain interactional patterns of bonding between infants and caregivers, but later, it was extended to cover how adults interact in interpersonal relationships like friendship, romantic relationships, and even more professional settings like school and work. Therefore, attachment styles—secure and insecure (anxious and avoidant)—are factors

that should not be ignored when it comes to influencing individuals' decision-making. Multiple research studies have shown that attachment styles are possibly linked to social interactions, conflict resolution, personal relationships, and emotional regulation under personal interactions.

Attachment theory states that individuals develop distinct attachment styles—secure, anxious, and avoidant—through their early life experiences, mostly with their caregivers. These attachment styles influence how individuals perceive social stimuli and respond to them with a specific pattern throughout different interpersonal interactions. Secure individuals are generally more comfortable with intimacy and interdependence, performing more confidently and adaptively [1]. The securely attached individuals possess a more stable, adaptive emotional framework, while those with insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) might have issues with trust and emotional regulations, making their decisions more vulnerable to external factors. Differences between the secure and insecure attachment styles could be crucial factors impacting individuals' social interactions and decision-making.

Also, explaining decision-making solely with attachment styles without considering situational factors would be illogical. The social context, including situational pressure, social expectations, and the presence of others, would inevitably influence individuals. Based on the differences in the essence of different attachment styles, it is likely that individuals who fall into different categories of attachments would be influenced by situational factors to different extents in social interaction.

However, less is known about how attachment influences personal decision-making in a social context. For example, how do individuals with varying styles of attachment navigate decisions involving social pressure or when it comes to meeting social expectations? By understanding the role of attachment styles in individuals' decision-making processes, the individuals' behavioral patterns could possibly become more predictable for the general public and better demonstrate the balance between personal and social factors when it comes to decision-making.

1.2. Significance

The significance of the study is its potential to shorten the cognitive gap between dispositional attachment styles and external situational factors in understanding individuals' decision-making patterns when having social interactions with others. In daily life, in either personal or professional situations, individuals are required to make numerous decision-making that are influenced by self-interests and expectations from others, while others are also facing the same issue. A model of how individuals with different attachment styles react and establish strategies to respond to different social conditions helps individuals' interactions become more predictable and understandable. If individuals could build a schema of the behavioral pattern of how different attachment styles influence individuals' decision-making, it could help minimize the cognitive gap among individuals and reach personal and professional success by assisting individuals to estimate the social pattern of others based on their perceived attachment styles, therefore, building up more effective, understanding communications.

By examining how attachment styles influence decision-making in social contexts, this study aims to provide insights that could improve communication and decision-making efficiency in various situations—for example, helping individuals show more understanding in a friendship or romantic relationship or helping individuals understand the social dynamics of their collaborators in a professional setting. This study aims to help individuals by identifying the role of attachment styles in decision-making to develop better strategies for promoting emotional well-being and social harmony.

1.3. Aim and hypothesis

This study explores how secure and insecure attachment styles influence decision-making under social contexts, focusing on how individuals balance personal wants and needs and social pressures and expectations.

This study predicts that individuals with a secure attachment style will inherit emotional stability and confidence in social interactions. They will have a more stable and adaptive emotional framework (when it comes to balancing internal needs and external expectations) and be able to perform more logically in social dilemmas. Therefore, individuals with secure attachment styles will make decisions more confidently and be less influenced by external social pressure.

When it comes to individuals with insecure attachment styles, they were estimated to perform not as stably as secure individuals. They would show greater susceptibility to social pressure while demonstrating vulnerability in their decision-making process. Anxious individuals who are afraid of being rejected or negatively evaluated may make decisions that prioritize others' expectations instead of personal benefits. Avoidant individuals, who tend to prevent intimacy and emotional interactions, may also give up their well-being to avoid social pressure or even try to withdraw themselves from complex social interactions. Their difficulties in emotional regulation could cause them to be more susceptible to external factors.

With what has been discussed, this study hypothesizes that social situations influence individuals with secure attachment styles by balancing internal and external factors, demonstrating emotional stability, and making more logical decisions under a social context. Insecurely attached individuals would show more variability and uncertainty, heavily influenced by the social context.

2. Discussion of relevant literature

This study has its theoretical base embedded in three research, which helped expand this paper's understanding of how attachment styles influence perceptions of others, creating rational schemas that help with the decision-making process, and developing strategies for different individuals that engage in decision making in a social context. The research papers written by Mikulincer and Horesh[2], Baldwin et al.[3], and Gillath and Shaver [4] contributed to the theory base, hypothesis building, method establishment, and result prediction.

2.1. Adult attachment style and the perception of others: the role of projective mechanisms

Mikulincer and Horesh's [2] study, Adult Attachment Style and the Perception of Others: The Role of Projective Mechanisms, sheds light on how attachment styles influence the perception of others through projective mechanisms. Projective mechanisms are the tendency of individuals to project their traits, fears, and desires onto others to better understand others in social interactions. In the study, projective mechanisms were closely attached to attachment styles, with individuals using different projective mechanisms on others.

Through three experiments, the researchers found that individuals with insecure attachment styles tend to project themselves onto others. Anxious individuals tend to project their actual self-trait onto others due to their insecurity and fear of rejection. The avoidant individuals project their unwanted qualities onto others, creating perceptions of others with qualities they detest or tend to avoid. These mechanisms provided insight into the processing social interactions among insecurely attached individual, and explained how these individuals create their perceptual and cognitive basis of social interactions. This helps these individuals interpret others' intentions and indirectly develop social strategies for their decision-making. However, secure individuals are less reliant on self-projection, which leads to more accurate perceptions of others and interpretations of their

expectations. They can better take the social input from the interactions without being influenced by insecurities, providing them with more adaptive decision-making.

2.2. An exploration of the relational schemata underlying attachment styles: self-report and lexical decision approaches

In “An exploration of the relational schemata underlying attachment styles: Self-report and lexical decision approach,” Baldwin et al. [3] investigated the cognitive mechanisms that underlie the attachment styles. The concept of relational schemata introduced by the researchers is mental models that demonstrate expectations and behaviors in interpersonal relationships. The research was developed centering on relational schemata to explore how attachment styles affect social interactions. The study used self-report measures and decision-making.

The researchers found that individuals with secure attachment styles had more positive relational schemata. This means that they tend to expect positive outcomes in their social interactions and anticipate that others will be supportive and understanding. They are also quicker to recognize positive interpersonal social outputs. Because they tend to expect positive outcomes, they are more likely to take risks in decision-making and align with their long-term goals rather than being influenced by immediate social pressures.

However, insecure individuals were more likely to recognize negative outcomes in social interactions. They tend to expect rejection or negative social evaluation in social situations, which leads them to make decisions that prioritize short-term emotional security over long-term outcomes. For example, they may seek social approval from others by conforming to social norms or avoid making decisions that might lead to disagreements with others, even if these decisions do not align with their personal goals.

This research helped me develop my methods by showing examples of attachment styles self-reports and gave me the idea of how to create interpersonal interaction decision tasks. The research also revealed how attachment styles shape emotional reactions, cognitive expectations, and recognition within a social interaction. It predicts that secure individuals are pre-disposed to seek favorable outcomes in a social context, while insecure individuals tend to expect negative outputs. These biases help shape their behavior models in a social context, leading insecure individuals to make more defensive, protective, and conservative decisions.

2.3. Effects of attachment style and relationship context on selection among relational strategies

In the third study, “Effects of Attachment Style and Relationship Context on Selection among Relational Strategies,” Gillath and Shaver[4] provided insights into how attachment styles influence the selection of relational strategies within different relationship contexts. The study explored how both internal factors like attachment styles and situational factors shape individuals’ decisions in this social context. It took a deeper digging into the social context with a specific insight towards interpersonal relationships, positive or negative to investigate the interaction between attachment styles and relationship context. The research used the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) questionnaire that created 25 scenarios that depicted relationship challenges to help investigate how individuals react to this type of social interaction. The research found that situational factors play a significant role in decision-making; individuals tend to behave insecure when they are in unsupported relationships. However, attachment styles still have a considerable influence on individuals’ decision-making, especially on how individuals tend to make decisions that go along with their dispositional attachment styles. It demonstrated that both attachment styles and situational factors independently influenced behavioral choices. The study showed no significant interactions between the two factors,

meaning that even though both dispositional and environmental factors shape decision-making in a social context, attachment styles generally act as a stronger predictor of relationship strategies, no matter how the context in an interpersonal interaction changes. It helped with this study by patricianly eliminating the bias that could be caused by situational factors, which could lead individuals to lean towards making decisions that are majorly influenced by the social context. It demonstrated how individuals tend to rely on embedded attachment patterns even when social conditions tweak like realistic ones.

2.4. Attachment in adulthood: structure, dynamics, and change

As it has been mentioned in previous sections, Mikulincer and Shaver [1] extensively explore how attachment theory applies to adulthood, focusing on the structure, dynamics, and changes in adult attachment. The research explicitly discuss the critical role of secure attachment styles in the field of emotional regulation and decision-making processes. It also inferred that individuals with secure attachment exhibit higher levels of emotional stability and confidence, particularly when facing social pressure. The study highlights that this internal stability causes them to have successfully balance internal and external needs, therefore enabling them to make logical and adaptive decisions. However, insecurely attached individuals are found to struggle to manage emotions effectively, unable to behave logically under external pressures or constantly relying on less adaptive coping mechanisms. Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change provided this research with theoretical backups, along with a support towards the hypothesis of this study.

2.5. An investigation of decision making styles and the five-factor personality traits with respect to attachment styles

In this research, Deniz, Hamarta, and Arı [5] explore the relationship between attachment styles and decision-making tendencies, with a specific interspect into personality traits. The research highlights that securely attached individuals demonstrate a strong positive correlation with effective decision-making and enhanced social skills. This suggests that the secure attachment style is highly related to personality traits like confidence, which could lead individuals to evaluate their internal and external demands, therefore making decisions that align with both personality goals and social expectations. In contrast, individuals with insecure attachment styles are more likely to exhibit inconsistent or maladaptive decision-making strategies as they struggle with correct emotional regulation. They also tend to heighten external factors like social pressures, causing illogical decisions. This study also contributes to the theoretical foundation of this research by again reinforcing the hypothesis that attachment styles play a significant role in shaping decision-making patterns in social contexts. It also introduces the indirect role of personality traits that play in decision making, drawing a clear correlational line between attachment styles and internal stability.

2.6. Synthesis and implications

Together, these studies provided a basic comprehensive understanding of how attachment styles could influence social decision-making. Mikulincer and Horesh [2] demonstrated how projective mechanisms influence individuals' social perceptions, which indirectly influence individuals' decision-making. Baldwin et al. [3] provided the study with the method base. They introduced how relational schemata (cognitive model of social expectations) differed based on attachment styles and, therefore, shaped individuals' decision-making based on their perceived social expectations. Gillath and Shaver [4] enhanced how situational factors and dispositional attachment styles could shape individuals' strategies within social relationships. At the same time, it demonstrated how these two factors are independent, helping the study eliminate the possible confounding variable, which

situational factors overpower dispositional factors and make the individuals' decision-making lean toward more situational-based decision-making.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study involves more than 128 participants (to ensure that the numbers of secure and insecure individuals are equal, an estimated 150 participants would be recruited) aged 18–40, recruited from a university and through online platforms, later divided into two groups with 64 participants in each group. One group contains secure attachment styles; the other comprises individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles.

To ensure the diversity of the sample, participants would be balanced across biological sex, race, and background. Participants would be excluded if they showed distress or salient bias in their self-report process. The sample size is based on prior studies above investigating attachment styles and decision-making, such as those by Mikulincer & Horesh [2] and Gillath & Shaver [4]. The examination would be carried out on a regular two-tailed T-test, with an alpha level of 0.05 ($\alpha < 0.05$), a power of 0.8 ($1 - \beta = 0.8$), and an effect size of 0.5 ($d = 0.5$).

3.2. Measure

3.2.1. Adult attachment styles self-report questionnaire

The study will measure attachment styles using the most extensively used tool, the Adult Attachment Styles Self-Report Questionnaire, which categorizes participants. The self-report tool chosen for the study is the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Questionnaire. The questionnaire would separate the individuals into secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment styles. The tool consists of 36 items, with 18 measuring attachment-related anxiety (e.g., Fear of being left out) and 18 measuring attachment-related avoidance (e.g., Avoiding showing others one's true feelings). The scoring would put individuals into secure, anxious, and avoidant groups, which later would be reconstructed into "secure" and "insecure" subgroups.

3.2.2. Hypothetical social-decision-making scenarios decision-making test

Participants will be presented with seven hypothetical social-decision-making scenarios. Each scenario reflects regular interpersonal conditions, including social pressure, interpersonal conflicts, social expectations, group collaborations, personal requests, romantic relationship problems, and family issues. These tests would be weighing an individual's reactions to these social inputs. They would measure the participants' decision-making with multiple choices representing secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles (e.g., Compromising for social approval, avoiding making decisions in the situation or balancing internal and external factors).

3.3. Procedure

a. The participants would be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that helps identify their age, gender (or biological sex), social status, exposure to anxiety-related mental disorders (individuals with such disorders would be excluded from the research), and prior social experiences.

b. Individuals would give informed consent. The consent would be obtained from all participants to ensure they are aware of their right to withdraw from the study any time they want to and feel safe to present their personal choices under social scenarios.

c. Participants would then be asked to take the ECR scale to identify their dispositional attachment styles. Based on the response, the participants would be categorized into subgroups of secure and insecure attachment styles. An attention check question will be included in this questionnaire. Individuals who fail the attention check will be excluded.

d. Participants would then engage in the hypothetical social-decision-making scenarios decision-making test, completing seven multiple-choice questions, each represented in seven social scenarios. Individuals would be asked to rate their confidence in each choice in the scenarios.

3.4. Data analysis

Data will be analyzed using a two-tailed T-test to examine the statistical significance between the secure and insecure attachment styles subgroup in their influences on social decision-making. Also, a one-way ANOVA test will be carried out to test for the interaction effects between attachment styles and the situation context. However, it would not be represented in the predicted result section.

4. Predicted result

Securely attached individuals must show more balanced and adaptive decision-making in social scenarios. This group is more likely to remain uninfluenced by social factors like social pressure and expectations throughout the seven tests of social scenarios, demonstrating emotional stability, low levels of anxiety, and willingness to solve the issue logically. They would be represented with higher self-reported confidence when doing the tests.

Insecure individuals (both anxious and avoidant attachment styles) are predicted to show lower levels of adaptive decision-making in the seven social scenarios. They are exposed to more emotionally driven decision-making, seeking social approval from others, or making avoidant choices by withdrawing themselves from the situation. More specifically, anxious individuals are more likely to make decisions that meet social expectations and compromise by giving up their needs. Avoidant individuals would try to avoid being the decision-maker in the scenarios or withdrawing from the situation.

It is predicted that the null hypothesis would be rejected in the two-tailed T-test, meaning that there is a statistically significant difference between the secure group and the insecure group in their social decision-making patterns, given the alpha level of 0.05 ($\alpha < 0.05$), and the power of 0.8 ($1 - \beta = 0.8$).

5. Conclusion

This study investigates individual dispositional attachment styles' role in decision-making under social contexts. Securely attached individuals demonstrate stronger adaptivity in making decisions, remain uninfluenced by situational factors, and can balance the internal and external factors within a situation. Insecure individuals tend to be less adaptive, demonstrate emotional instability, and tend to make decisions that meet social expectations or withdraw themselves from the situations. These findings help create a more predictable and understandable pattern for individuals in social interactions.

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