

The Relationship Between Adult Attachment Style and Sexual Attitudes

Alexander L. Whiteleather & Diana M. Dumas

Boise State University

Presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association Annual Conference

April, 2004

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between adult attachment style and sexual attitudes. Results indicated that the Preoccupied attachment style is related to the sexual attitudes Permissiveness and Instrumentality and that these relationships are different for males and females. For Permissiveness, male Preoccupied participants scored higher on Permissiveness than participants in the other three groups. For Instrumentality, female Preoccupied participants scored lower on Instrumentality than the other three groups, whereas male Preoccupied participants scored higher on Instrumentality than the other groups. Results suggest that adult attachment may be a useful screening measure to identify students who are at risk for interpersonal problems and high-risk sexual behavior with the aim of developing student prevention programs. Specifically, for males, having a Preoccupied attachment style is associated with beliefs in casual, guilt-free and manipulative sex.

Intimate relationships and sexual behavior are two areas of a college student's life that may affect college success and student health. Attachment theory provides a unique way to understand the interpersonal functioning of young adults. The four-category model of adult attachment proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) is based on the underlying constructs of view of self and other. This model yields four adult attachment styles: Secure (positive self, positive other), a strong sense of self and comfortable with intimacy; Preoccupied (negative self, positive other), lack confidence and self-esteem, but yearn for closeness, and become preoccupied with seeking validation from others; Fearful (negative self, negative other), highly dependent on external validation, but expect rejection and therefore fear close relationships; and Dismissing (positive self, negative other), self-reliant and independent, and not interested in intimacy.

The limited research on the relationship between adult attachment and sexual behavior suggests that secure individuals experience fewer interpersonal problems, have sexual intercourse later, fewer partners, less infidelity, and take less sexual precautions than anxious individuals. Further, attachment related love schemas are differentially related to sexual behaviors.

The goal of this study is to better understand the relationship between adult attachment styles and sexual attitudes, thus adding to the sparse empirical data in this area. It was hypothesized that 1) participants with a Preoccupied style would score higher on the Permissiveness scale than the other three groups, 2) participants with a Secure style would score higher on the Sexual Practices and Communion Scales than the other three groups, and 3) participants with a Dismissing style would score higher on the Instrumentality scale than the other three groups.

Method

Participants Procedures

One hundred ninety-eight undergraduate students (67% female, 33% male) participated in this study. The mean age of the sample was 24.5 (S.D.=8.84). The sample was predominantly Caucasian (83.8%), with 5.1% Hispanic, 2.5% Native American, 4.5% Asian American, and 3.0% other. For marital status, 68.7% were single, 21.7% were married, 0.5% were separated, 8.6% were divorced, and 0.5% widowed.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a General Psychology course and received partial course credit for participation in a one-hour session during which they completed a packet of questionnaires.

Measures

Adult Attachment. The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) contains four short paragraphs describing four attachment patterns: Secure, Preoccupied, Fearful, and Dismissing. The RQ shows convergent validity with attachment interview ratings (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Sexual Attitudes. The Hendricks Sexual Attitude Scale (HSAS; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987) is a 43-item measure of the following sexual attitudes (Bailey, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1987): Permissiveness, defined as a belief in casual, guilt-free sex (e.g. casual sex is acceptable); Sexual Practices, defined as a belief in responsible but nonjudgmental sex (e.g., birth control is part of responsible sexuality); Communion, defined as a belief in idealized sex (e.g., at its best, sex seems to be the merging of two souls); and Instrumentality, defined as a belief in manipulative sex (e.g., the main purpose of sex is to enjoy oneself). Higher scores indicated greater agreement with each attitude. Reliability and validity for the HSAS have been demonstrated (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987).

Results

The distribution of attachment style was: 41.9 % Secure, 12.1 % Preoccupied, 28.8% Fearful, and 14.1 % Dismissing. There were no gender differences in adult attachment styles ($X^2(3,1) = 7.28, p = .06$).

Four 2 (gender) x 4 (attachment) independent-groups ANOVAs were performed to assess main effects and interaction effects for each of the outcome variables. Results were significant for Permissiveness and Instrumentality, and were not significant for Communion and Practices. Means scores of each attachment style for males and females for the Permissiveness and Instrumentality Scales are shown in Table 1.

For Permissiveness, the main effect for Gender, $F(7,191) = 8.27, p < .01$, and the interaction effect for Gender x Attachment, $F(7,191) = 2.65, p < .05$, were significant (see Table 2). Follow-up analyses indicated that females scored higher on Permissiveness than males and, for females, there was no difference across attachment styles, while for males, Preoccupied participants scored higher on Permissiveness than participants with other attachment styles.

For Instrumentality, the interaction effect for Gender x Attachment, $F(7,191) = 3.58, p < .05$, was significant (see Table 2). Follow-up analyses indicated that for females, the Preoccupied participants scored lower on Instrumentality than other participants, while for males, the Preoccupied participants scored higher on Instrumentality than other participants.

Discussion

Results were significant for the sexual attitudes Permissiveness and

Instrumentality, but were not significant for the sexual attitudes Communion and Practices. For the Permissiveness scale, our hypothesis that the Preoccupied participants would score higher than those in the other three groups was partially supported. Although there were no differences across attachment styles for females, for males, Preoccupied participants scored higher on Permissiveness than participants in the other three groups. For the Instrumentality scale, our hypothesis that the Dismissing participants would score higher than the other three groups was not supported. In fact, the Preoccupied group differed from the other three groups. Specifically, for females, Preoccupied participants scored lower on Instrumentality than the other three groups, while for males, Preoccupied participants scored higher on Instrumentality than the other attachment styles. Finally, our hypotheses that participants with a Secure style would score higher on the Sexual Practices and Communion Scales than the other three groups was not supported. Results suggest that adult attachment may be a useful screening measure to identify students who are at risk for interpersonal problems and high-risk sexual behavior with the aim of developing student prevention programs.

References

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- Griffin, W. D., & Bartholomew, K. (1994). Models of the self and other: Fundamental dimensions underlying measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 430-445.
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Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Four Attachment Styles

	Secure (N = 83)		Preoccupied (N = 24)		Fearful (N = 57)		Dismissing (N = 28)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Permissive								
Males	3.59	.93	4.34	.52	3.80	.80	3.65	.90
Females	4.28	.55	4.08	.51	4.27	.63	4.13	.87
Instrumentality								
Males	3.68	.88	4.08	.61	3.48	.80	3.38	.96
Females	3.65	.70	3.00	.68	3.62	.64	3.45	1.11

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Permissive and Instrumentality

	F (7, 191)		
	Gender (G)	Attachment (A)	G x A
Permissive	8.27**	1.13	2.65*
Instrumentality	2.98	0.76	3.58*

*p < .05, **p<.01