

Parental Attachment, Adult Attachment, and Desired Number of Sexual Partners

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A basic premise of evolutionary psychology is that men and women have evolved different mating preferences, including men's desire for more sexual partners than women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). These sex-difference generalizations have exceptions that are contingent upon what will be most evolutionarily advantageous based on the environment. This explains why attachment patterns, which are based on interactions with others in one's environment, are linked with these evolutionary-based sex differences.

There are two underlying dimensions of human attachment: anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxious attachment refers to the degree to which individuals worry about the availability of their partners, as well as their worth to their partners. Avoidant attachment refers to individuals' desire for self-reliance and emotional distance from others.

Del Giudice (2009) has developed an attachment model proposing that secure attachment is associated with *future* reproductive efforts and insecure attachment, especially avoidant attachment, is associated with *current* reproductive efforts. The model further specifies that the adult attachment relationships that affect reproductive efforts stem in part from infant and childhood attachment patterns.

Njus, Godar, and Tjossem (2012), in a test of Del Giudice's (2009) model, found that adult avoidant attachment mediated the relationship between parental attachment and short-term mating desire, but primarily for men. The present research focuses on the predicted mediation of parental attachment and desired number of sexual partners by adult attachment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 255 women and 150 men (mean age of 19) from a Midwest liberal arts college who received credit in a psychology course for taking part in the study.

Participants completed two attachment questionnaires and one about their personal sexual attitudes. In order to encourage candor in responses to such a personal topic, we assured participants both verbally and in the informed consent that their responses would be anonymous. To further assure participants of anonymity, participants were instructed to place their completed packets in a large box with a slit in the top to prevent researchers from being able to identify which packet belonged to any given participant.

Materials

Participants first completed a measure of adult romantic attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The two subscales of the ECR-R, anxiety (e.g., "I worry a lot about my relationships") and avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down"), each contain 18 items and are responded to on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale.

Participants also completed the 55-item Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1987), which is designed to assess adults' views of attachment with their parents. It has three subscales, the questions of which are asked about each parent. The first subscale is *affective quality of attachment* (e.g., "In general, my mother/father is someone I can count on to listen to me when I feel upset"); the second is *parents as facilitators of independence* (e.g., "In general, my mother/father respect my decisions, even if they don't agree"), and the final PAQ subscale is *parents as a source of social support* (e.g., "During time spent together, my mother/father was someone to whom I told my most personal thoughts and feelings").

Finally, participants were asked a series of questions based on the research presented by Buss and

Schmitt (1993). Among these questions were questions asking how many sexual partners subjects wanted over periods of time ranging from the next month through their lifetime.

Results

A principal components analysis conducted on the sexual attitudes scale revealed two clear factors—number of sexual partners desired in the next month, 6 months, and year (*partners wanted in short term*) and partners wanted in the next 3, 4, 5, 10, 20, and 30 years and lifetime (*partners wanted in long term*). We performed a log10 transformation on each of the composite variables to correct for skewness.

Sex Differences

Males reported wanting more sexual partners than females in both the short-term (.33 vs. .17; $t(400) = 8.75, p < .001; d = .88$) and the long term (.63 vs. .43; $t(400) = 7.17, p < .001; d = .72$). There were no sex differences on either adult attachment scale (both p 's $> .05$). Women scored higher than men on two PAQ subscales: the degree to which subjects reported that their mothers were a facilitator of independence (55.7 vs. 53.62, $t(398) = -2.15, p = .032, d = .22$) and mother as a source of social support (45.96 vs. 43.76, $t(311) = -2.61, p = .009, d = .30$).

Mediation Analyses

Mediation hypotheses were tested using the multiple-step procedure outlined by Kenny (2012). First, number of partners wanted in short (long) term was regressed on the (predictor) variable—the PAQ subscales. Second, the hypothesized mediator (ECR-R anxiety or avoidance) was regressed on the predictor variable. Finally, number of partners wanted in short (long) term was regressed on both the mediator and predictor simultaneously. If the mediator (the ECR-R scale) is significantly related to the outcome variable (partners wanted) and the relationship between the PAQ scale and partners wanted is not significant in the simultaneous regression, the model is considered “fully mediated.” If the relationship between the mediator and outcome variable is significant while the relationship between the predictor and outcome variable is attenuated but still significant, then the model is considered “partially mediated.”

As indicated in Figure 1, for male subjects adult attachment avoidance fully mediated the relationship between five PAQ scales and number of partners wanted in the long term. Adult attachment avoidance fully mediated the relationship between long term partners and father/ mother as a facilitator of independence (Sobel z 's of -2.57, -2.45); affective quality of attachment to father/mother (Sobel z 's of -2.17, -2.57); and mother as source of social support (Sobel $z = -2.33$).

Anxious attachment was not a significant mediator for male subjects, and neither adult attachment scale was a significant mediator for female subjects.

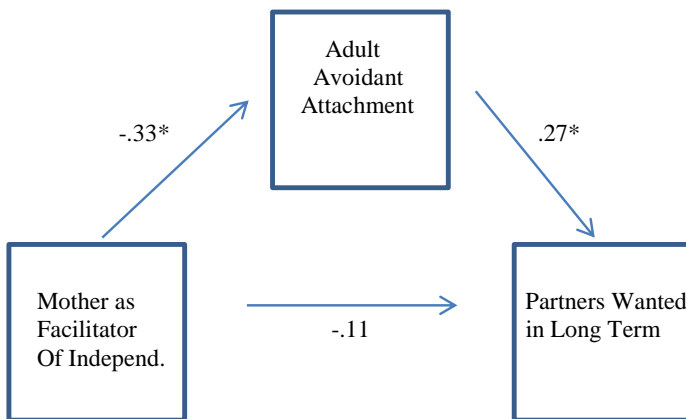
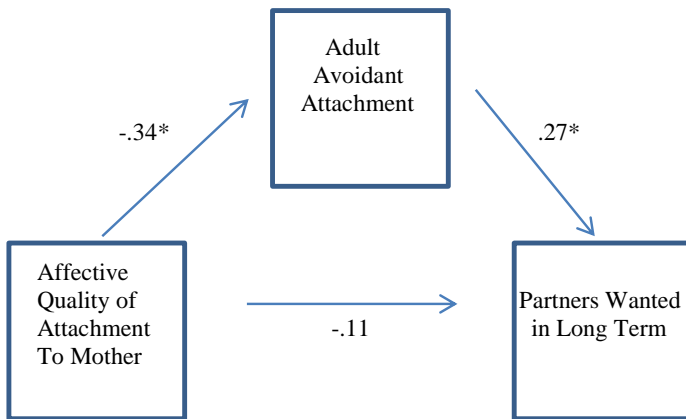
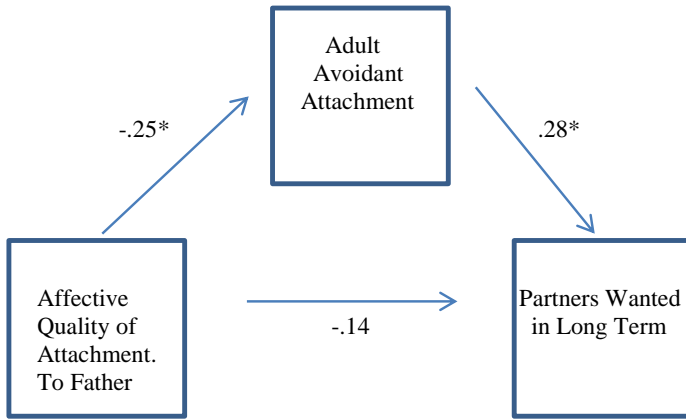
Discussion

Consistent with past research, men reported wanting more sexual partners than did women in both the short term and the long term. As discussed above, Del Giudice (2009) proposed that avoidant attachment is associated with current reproductive efforts, and Njus et al. (2012) found partial support for this hypothesis, primarily for men. Results of the present study suggest that males' insecure attachment to parental figures is related to attitudes toward sexual behavior—but only when that insecure parental attachment is associated with avoidant attachment as an adult, and only for the number of sexual partners desired in the long term—3 years and longer.

These data provide evidence that individual differences in attachment can moderate evolved desire for sexual variety. Ultimately, however, these results—parental attachment being related to long-term and not short-term desire for partners, and only for men—raise more questions than they answer. Future research should focus on the relationship—or lack thereof—between parental attachment and desire for sexual variety in women

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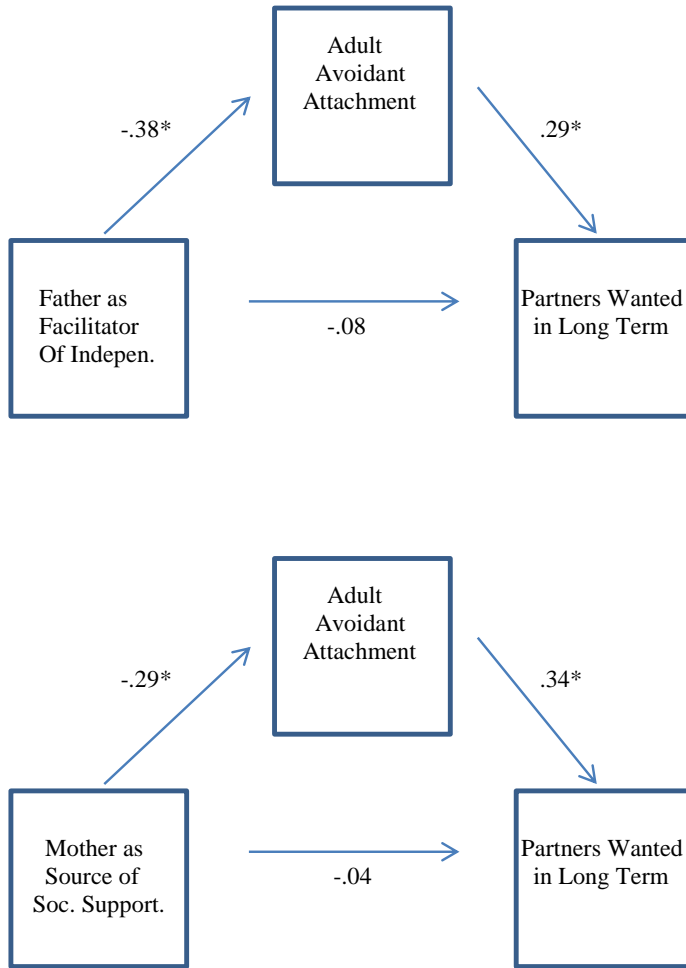


Figure 1. Mediation models for male subjects: standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between PAQ subscales and number of sexual partners wanted in the long term as mediated by adult avoidant attachment.

* $p < .05$