Attachment insecurity and perceived importance of relational features

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Abstract
Chronic attachment insecurity can affect the outlook people have on relationships. This research examines how attachment insecurity relates to perceived importance of various features in a romantic relationship (e.g., intimacy, independence). Consistent with predictions, the results from Studies 1–3 ($N_1 = 53$, $N_2 = 226$, $N_3 = 196$) revealed that greater attachment anxiety was associated with ranking intimacy higher in importance and independence lower, whereas attachment avoidance was associated with ranking independence higher, intimacy, and trust lower. Study 4 ($N_4 = 175$) further showed that insecure participants recognized that some of their priorities are unique to themselves and not shared by others. Additionally, they did not perceive their current relationships as having more of the relational features they prioritized. Insecure individuals thus have unique relational priorities, which may direct their romantic judgments and decisions.

Keywords
Anxiety, attachment, avoidance, close relationships

Attachment orientations affect the experiences that adults have in their romantic relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1973; Feeney, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989; Levy & Davis, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988; Simpson, 1990). Attachment insecurity has been shown to vary along two continuous dimensions: attachment anxiety, which reflects...
fear of rejection and abandonment, and attachment avoidance, which reflects discomfort with intimacy and dependence (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Chronically insecure individuals exhibit specific tendencies in situations that evoke attachment concerns; anxiously attached individuals overreact in exaggerated attempts to attain reassurance, whereas avoidantly attached individuals effectively underreact by creating distance, reducing intimacy, and seeking independence (Fraley et al., 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Although attachment tendencies have pervasive effects on interpersonal behavior, they may not necessarily be reflected in the beliefs that insecure individuals hold regarding what they consider to be important in a romantic relationship. Attachment anxious individuals, for example, who are overly concerned with being closely connected to a partner may recognize there is value in some autonomy, and avoidant individuals who distance themselves in stressful situations may still acknowledge some intimacy as an important relational feature.

The features of relationships that individuals consider to be priorities may cause them to seek certain types of relationships and avoid others. The current research examined insecure individuals’ explicit relational priorities, as indicated by perceived importance of specific relational features (e.g., intimacy, independence). We first review theory and research regarding insecure tendencies and then compare two methods of assessing the perceived importance of relationship features: rankings versus ratings.

**Insecure tendencies and perceived importance of relational features**

Theory regarding attachment processes in intimate relationships has established that attachment anxiety and avoidance each is associated with specific tendencies in relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Anxiously attached individuals tend to have a heightened concern for trust and excessive needs for intimacy (partner-focused). Indeed, previous work showed that anxiously attached individuals tend to report lower trust (Arriaga, Kumashiro, Finkel, VanderDrift, & Luchies, 2014; Mikulincer, 1998), seek more security and intimacy in a relationship or a hookup (Mikulincer, 1998; Snapp, Lento, Ryu, & Rosen, 2014), and engage in greater relationship-focused disclosure with their partners (Tan, Overall, & Taylor, 2012). They are generally supportive but tend to be intrusive and overinvolved, which satisfies their own needs for intimacy (Feeney & Collins, 2001; Gillath et al., 2005).

In contrast, avoidantly attached individuals tend to have a heightened need for their independence and self-oriented goals (self-focused; Arriaga et al., 2014). Avoidantly attached individuals tend to suppress attachment-related information (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011), disengage in relationship-related disclosures (Tan et al., 2012), and communicate with their partners less frequently than less avoidantly attached individuals (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). They also tend to be concerned with whether a partner abides by their independent goal pursuits (Arriaga et al., 2014).

These well-documented unique tendencies reflect the defensive strategies that insecure individuals develop to cope with the feelings of being abandoned, rejected, or not loved. In an effort to fulfill the unmet needs, individuals who develop anxious tendencies...
intensify efforts to attain attention, care, and exhibit an exaggerated need for reassurance (cf. hyperactivated strategies; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In contrast, avoidantly attached individuals develop tendencies to distance themselves and an exaggerated outward need for independence as a defense mechanism to manage potential attachment distress (cf. deactivated strategies; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Although individuals are able to report on their tendencies, and indeed do so when they complete validated self-report measures of attachment dimensions, such an awareness of chronic tendencies does not necessarily translate into what a person perceives to be important in a relationship. Individuals who are in romantic involvements hold attitudes regarding their relational priorities but do these priorities align with their insecure tendencies?

To answer this question, we sought to examine the perceived importance of relational features among individuals who exhibit high levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance. Specifically, we examined four key relational features that are particularly central in romantic relationships: intimacy and trust (partner-focused) versus independence and personal goal validation (self-focused; Arriaga et al., 2014; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney, 2004; Green & Campbell, 2000; Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014; Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013).

We speculated that individuals’ self-perceived relational priorities are consistent with their insecure tendencies. Specifically, highly anxiously attached individuals should perceive greater importance of partner-focused relational features (intimacy and trust) and less importance of self-focused features (independence and personal goal validation), as compared with those who are low in attachment anxiety. In contrast, highly avoidantly attached individuals should perceive less importance of partner-focused features and greater importance of self-focused features, compared to those who are low in attachment avoidance.

In addition to perceptions of what one needs or desires in a relationship, individuals also have perceptions of the relational features that are important to provide in a relationship. We explored perceived importance of relational features from a provider’s perspective (i.e., what is important to provide to a partner). Prior research has revealed that insecure individuals exhibit specific supportive behaviors that stem from their insecurities: Anxiously attached individuals tend to be overinvolved to the point of being intrusive in their support (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Gillath et al., 2005), whereas avoidantly attached individuals tend to be detached and unresponsive when needed by others (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

Consistent with these tendencies, insecure individuals may assign greater importance to providing certain features as an extension of their own needs. Compared with those who are low in attachment anxiety, highly anxiously attached individuals may perceive greater importance of providing trust and intimacy to their partners and less importance of providing independence and goal validation, which they may perceive as encouraging too much partner autonomy that could result in losing a partner. We expected the opposite pattern for highly avoidantly attached individuals: Compared to those who are low in attachment avoidance, they would perceive greater importance of
encouraging a partner’s independence and personal goals, and less importance of providing trust and intimacy, which they tend to devalue to protect personal independence in a relationship.

**Rankings versus ratings**

To assess perceived importance of various relational features, we used ranking measures in addition to the often-used Likert-type rating measures. Participants ranked various relational features according to the relative importance of each and also rated the importance of each feature using a Likert-type continuous scale. These two measures may produce different results. Although rating measures are well validated and widely used, such measures allowed for several features being rated as equally important. Given that positive relational features tend to be desirable (e.g., trust, intimacy, feeling personally affirmed), participants may provide uniformly high ratings for relational features. In contrast, when asked to provide rankings, individuals may compare features carefully and discern which, among comparably positive features, are most (or less) important to them. This ranking task would therefore reduce socially desirable responding (e.g., Stark, Chernyshenko, Chan, Lee, & Drasgow, 2001) and capture meaningful differences among the features based on its relative importance (cf. Biernat, 2003). Thus, rankings may provide a more valid indicator of participants’ explicit priorities.

For these reasons, we predicted that ranked importance would align more closely with insecure individuals’ unique tendencies, such that highly anxiously attached individuals would be more concerned with partner-focused features, compared to those with low attachment anxiety, whereas highly avoidantly attached individuals would be more concerned with self-focused features, compared to those with low attachment avoidance. We also expected that rated importance either would confirm this pattern or reflect fewer differentiations among features if all features are rated as important to a similar level.

**Current research**

We conducted four studies with romantically involved samples. We focused on people who were currently in relationships for two reasons. First, we wanted to increase the possibility that participants were reflecting on their actual tendencies, rather than what they might do were they to pursue a hypothetical relationship. Second, given that global relationship evaluations may shape what people perceive to be important in a relationship, we wanted to be able to measure and control for participants’ current relationship quality. In the first three studies (Studies 1–3), we examined how attachment anxiety and avoidance relate to perceived importance of various relational features using both ranking and rating measures. Study 1 involved a college student sample, whereas Studies 2 and 3 involved online samples. We analyzed each sample individually and also combined all the three samples so as to assess the replicability of each effect (Open Science Collaboration, 2012). Study 4 further examined whether insecure individuals recognize that their relational priorities are unique and whether they consider their current relationships characterized by the prioritized features.
Studies 1–3

Method

Participants. For all three studies, only participants who were currently romantically involved were recruited. In Study 1, college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated in the study for course credits. In Study 2, participants recruited from MTurk took the survey for a compensation of USD$0.50. In Study 3, participants recruited from MTurk took time 1 survey for a compensation of USD$0.15–USD$1.0 and 46.92% of them returned for Time 2 survey for a bonus payment of USD$1.0–USD$3.0. Table 1 provides final samples’ characteristics.

Procedure. Across three studies, participants completed a measure of attachment orientations. Then, they ranked and rated the importance of relational features (partner-focused: intimacy, trust; self-focused: independence, personal goal validation) and reported their current relationship quality. In an exploratory vein, Study 3 also included another measure, ranking relational features as a provider. Predictors (attachment orientations) and outcome variables (importance of relational features and current relationship quality) all were obtained in a single occasion for Studies 1 and 2. One concern is that the act of completing an attachment scale itself might affect other responses. To minimize this possibility, Study 3 involved two measurement occasions, in which the attachment scale was administered at the first occasion and the outcome variables were administered 1–2 weeks later.²

Measures

Attachment orientations. Participants completed Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary & Brumbaugh, 2011) to indicate their attachment orientations with respect to romantic partners in general. Three items measure attachment anxiety (e.g., “I often worry about being abandoned.”; αStudy 1 = .89, αStudy 2 = .92, αStudy 3 = .92) and 6 items measure attachment avoidance (e.g., “I don’t feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.”; αStudy 1 = .87, αStudy 2 = .91, αStudy 3 = .90) on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree...
Items were combined to provide indices for anxiety and avoidance such that higher numbers reflected a more insecure attachment. Consistent with prior research, the two dimensions were positively correlated, although inconsistently so across the three studies: Study 1, \( r = .19, p = .163 \); Study 2, \( r = .50, p < .001 \); and Study 3, \( r = .38, p < .001 \). Both attachment dimensions were centered before analyzed in each study.

**Relational features: Ranked importance.** Participants ranked a list of 10 relational features from “most important” (coded as 10) to “least important” (coded as 1). The 4 relational features of interest were intimacy (“providing intimacy”), trust (“being trustworthy”), independence (measured by 2 items: “supporting my independence” and “providing me with freedom to pursue important personal goals”), and personal goal validation (“valuing my important personal goals”), among 5 other filler items (e.g., “managing conflict well”). In Study 3, participants also ranked the same list of relational features but from a provider’s perspective (e.g., “supporting my partner’s independence”). Full scales of these measures are provided in Appendix.

**Relational features: Rated importance.** Participants rated a list of items that tapped relational features on a 7-point scale (1 = *not very important*, 4 = *somewhat important*, 7 = *extremely important*). The four features of interest were intimacy, trust, independence, and personal goal validation; some were measured with existing rating scales, which led to different numbers of items contributing to different features. Intimacy was measured with 3 items (e.g., “It is important to me that a relationship partner provides me with a lot of closeness and intimacy.”); revised from the Relatedness subscale of the Basic Need Satisfaction in Relationships Scale; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; \( \alpha_{\text{Study 1}} = .85, \alpha_{\text{Study 2}} = .84, \alpha_{\text{Study 3}} = .81 \). Trust was measured with 13 items (e.g., “It is important to me that a relationship partner earns and keeps my trust”); \( \alpha_{\text{Study 1}} = .91, \alpha_{\text{Study 2}} = .90, \alpha_{\text{Study 3}} = .90 \). Independence was measured with 3 items (e.g., “It is important to me that a relationship partner does not make me feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways.”); revised from the Autonomy subscale of the Basic Need Satisfaction in Relationships Scale; La Guardia et al., 2000; \( \alpha_{\text{Study 1}} = .64, \alpha_{\text{Study 2}} = .83, \alpha_{\text{Study 3}} = .82 \). Personal goal validation was measured with 6 items (e.g., “It is important to me that a relationship partner understands why I care about my important personal goals.”); \( \alpha_{\text{Study 1}} = .92, \alpha_{\text{Study 2}} = .88, \alpha_{\text{Study 3}} = .91 \). Items were combined to provide indices for each feature such that higher numbers reflected higher perceived importance.

**Relationship quality.** Participants completed a modified brief version of Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory as an indicator of their relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The original scale measures six components of a relationship’s quality (satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love), each using 1 item (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship?”). We added 1 item to tap the seventh component of romance (Fletcher et al., 2000) and an eighth item to tap perceived alternatives (i.e., “How good are your alternatives to this relationship?”). All 8 items used a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) and were averaged to form a single index (\( \alpha_{\text{Study 1}} = .89, \alpha_{\text{Study 2}} = .84, \alpha_{\text{Study 3}} = .84 \)).
Results

Our primary analysis strategy was to analyze each study separately and then combine the findings across the three studies using an inverse-variance weighted meta-analysis method (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001; Wilson’s SPSS MeanES macro, 2005), so as to attain evidence of replicability (Open Science Collaboration, 2012). Across three studies, we conducted a series of multiple regression analyses on each feature’s ranked importance and rated importance individually. Each model examined the main effects of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, and their interactions, controlling for relationship quality. There were no consistent gender differences, which were not examined further.

Table 2 provides the results for each study, as well as the combined (meta-analytic) results across the three studies. The results from ranking measures were mostly consistent with our predictions. Attachment anxiety was associated with higher rankings of intimacy and lower rankings of independence; the associations with trust and personal goal validation were not significant. In contrast, attachment avoidance was associated with lower rankings of intimacy and trust and higher rankings of independence. None of the interaction effects between attachment anxiety and avoidance was significant.

The results from rating measures revealed a different pattern: As predicted, attachment anxiety was associated with higher ratings of intimacy and trust. However, attachment avoidance was unexpectedly associated with lower ratings of all four relational features. We also observed a significant interaction between two attachment dimensions on intimacy, such that attachment anxiety was associated with higher ratings of intimacy among high avoidance individuals, $\beta_{\text{meta}} = .43$, 95% CI [.32, .53], but not among low avoidance individuals, $\beta_{\text{meta}} = .06$, 95% CI [−.19, .30]. We found the same pattern of results for trust as well, such that attachment anxiety was associated with higher ratings of trust among high avoidance individuals, $\beta_{\text{meta}} = .31$, 95% CI [.19, .43], but not among low avoidance individuals, $\beta_{\text{meta}} = -.003$, 95% CI [−.12, .12].

We also explored whether attachment orientations were associated with perceived important relational features as a provider in Study 3 (see Table 3). The results revealed that attachment anxiety was associated with lower rankings of providing independence. Attachment avoidance was associated with higher rankings of providing independence but lower rankings of providing intimacy. None of the interaction effects between attachment anxiety and avoidance was significant.

Discussion

Ranking results from Studies 1–3 revealed that highly anxiously attached individuals were more likely to prioritize intimacy (a partner-focused feature) and devalue independence (a self-focused feature), than those with low attachment anxiety. In contrast, highly avoidantly attached individuals were more likely to prioritize independence (a self-focused features), and devalue intimacy and trust (partner-focused features), than those with low attachment avoidance.

Perceived importance of relational features extend beyond what one seeks in a relationship; people also have priorities for what they themselves bring to a relationship.
Table 2. Associations of attachment insecurity with importance of relational features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment dimensions</th>
<th>Study 1 (N = 53)</th>
<th>Study 2 (N = 226)</th>
<th>Study 3 (N = 196)</th>
<th>Meta-analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Anxiety × Avoidance</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-.38***</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>-.30*</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.33***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal validation</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranked importance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment dimensions</th>
<th>Study 1 (N = 53)</th>
<th>Study 2 (N = 226)</th>
<th>Study 3 (N = 196)</th>
<th>Meta-analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Anxiety × Avoidance</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.53****</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.54***</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.51***</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal validation</td>
<td>-.40*</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rated importance

Note. Each study provides standardized coefficients for models that tested attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance simultaneously, controlling for relationship quality; the meta-analysis provides an overall effect size (standardized coefficients) and its 95% confidence interval in parentheses (confidence intervals that do not contain 0 are in bold). *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Table 3. Associations of attachment insecurity with ranked importance of relational features as a provider.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment dimensions</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Anxiety × Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>.28***</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal validation</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The table provides standardized coefficients for models that tested attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance simultaneously, controlling for relationship quality.
* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Study 3 revealed that highly anxiously attached individuals were more likely to devalue providing independence to their partners than those with low attachment anxiety, whereas highly avoidantly attached individuals were more likely to devalue providing intimacy and instead prioritize providing independence to their partners than those with low attachment avoidance.

These findings from ranking measures generally support our predictions. The literature has shown that insecure individuals exhibit specific tendencies in relationships as an effort to cope with their unmet needs; our current findings suggest that their subjective judgments of what is important in a relationship (what to receive and what to provide) are consistent with such tendencies. Thus, attachment insecurity is associated with subjective judgments of various features of a romantic relationship: Anxiously attached individuals tend to prioritize reassurance and retain focus on their partners, whereas avoidantly attached individuals tend to prioritize independence and retain focus on themselves.

Rating measures from Studies 1–3 revealed a different pattern of results. Consistent with ranking results, attachment anxiety was associated with higher ratings of intimacy and trust; however, attachment avoidance was surprisingly associated with lower ratings of all four relational features. This unexpected finding reflects a responding bias of attachment avoidant individuals, who generally gave lower ratings of key relational features. This bias particularly affected rating results because participants did not have to directly compare the features. In contrast, ranking measures motivated participants to compare features based on their relative importance, thus producing more valid results of priorities. We discuss this further in the General Discussion.

Study 4

Studies 1–3 revealed that insecure tendencies relate to the perceived importance of relational features. This could suggest that insecure individuals have insight into their tendencies and adjust accordingly the qualities that they seek in a relationship: anxious individuals may recognize that intimacy matters to them and avoidant individuals may acknowledge their need for independence.

Studies 1–3, however, did not necessarily capture self-insight and adjustment. Instead, it is conceivable that insecure individuals have adopted priorities that they
perceive to be normatively shared by others, rather than priorities that uniquely satisfy their needs. Anxious individuals may assume that everyone values intimacy, and avoidant individuals may assume that seeking independence is a normative response. Given that many judgments occur beyond the realm of one’s awareness (Bargh, 1994; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), insecure individuals may not have relied on their self-insight to identify what they consider important. In Study 4, we sought to directly test what is considered important as a norm and compare it against what is considered important to oneself. Based on the results from previous studies, we focused on the ranking measure, which provided better discrimination of specific relational features. Participants ranked the importance of relational features from their own perspective (as was done in Studies 1–3) and also from the perspective of most others to indicate their perceptions of the norm. We predicted that insecure individuals’ personal importance rankings may not necessarily match the perceived norm rankings.

Additionally, we explored whether people would perceive their current relationships as having more of the relational feature that they prioritize. As such, we included a measure to assess participants’ evaluations of the four key features of their current relationships. Previous literature (Gere, MacDonald, Joel, Spielmann, & Impett, 2013) has suggested that anxiously attached individuals do not actually experience greater intimacy than do secure individuals. Consistent with this, we predicted that insecure individuals’ personal importance rankings may not necessarily match their actual current experiences.

**Method**

**Participants.** Similar to previous studies, only currently romantically involved participants were recruited. Participants from Mturk (N = 204) took the survey for a compensation of USD$1.0: 14 participants reported they were not in a relationship and 15 participants failed our attention check, leaving our final sample of 175 participants (47.4% male, M_age = 35.01 years, SD = 10.27). The majority of our final sample reported they were in an exclusive relationship (97.7%) and the average duration of their relationships were 93.36 months (SD = 97.79).

**Procedure and measures.** Participants first completed the measure of attachment orientations (α_anx = .92, α_avo = .86) and the ranked importance of relational features that was used in the previous studies (personal importance). They then ranked the same list of relational features but from a normative perspective to indicate their perception of a normative response (normative importance; i.e., How important are these features to most people? see Appendix for the full scale). Finally, to assess their actual experiences, they evaluated their current relationships in terms of the four key relational features (i.e., intimacy, trust, independence, and personal goal validation) on a 7-point scale (e.g., “My current partner supports my independence.”; 1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; see Appendix for the full scale).

**Results**

Analyses examined the same four relational features that were the focus of Studies 1–3: intimacy, trust, independence, and personal goal validation. The first set of analyses
assessed the match of personal importance with normative importance; a second set of analyses assessed the match of personal importance (same as before) with actual experiences.

**Relational features: Personal importance versus normative importance.** We conducted four analyses, one for each relational feature as an outcome (intimacy, trust, independence, and personal goal validation). Each analysis included as predictors each attachment dimension (two between-subjects variables) and target of evaluations (a within-subject variable: personal vs. normative importance), along with all two-way and three-way interactions. These analyses examined whether the association of attachment anxiety or avoidance with judgments of specific relationship features varies when considering what is important to oneself versus important to most people.

Across the four models, none of the three-way interactions, or the Anxiety × Avoidance effects were significant. There were, however, meaningful two-way interactions between specific attachment dimension and evaluating target, suggesting that evaluating target (personal vs. norm) moderated the association of specific attachment dimensions and perceived importance of relational features (see Table 4 for estimates of the interaction effects as well as the simple slopes). Specifically, attachment anxiety predicted a gap in the personal versus normative importance of intimacy: Even though highly anxiously attached individuals ranked independence lower than did less anxiously attached individuals, they did not assume this was a normative response. Similarly, attachment avoidance related to a gap in the perceptions of independence: Even though highly avoidantly attached individuals ranked independence higher than less avoidant individuals, they did not assume this was a normative response. Furthermore, attachment anxiety and avoidance related to a gap in the perceptions of personal goal validation, though the simple slopes were not significant. These results provided some evidence that insecure individuals are aware that their importance judgments differ from the norm; this

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**Table 4.** Predicting relational features from attachment insecurity: Moderation by target of evaluations (personal importance vs. normative importance; personal importance vs. actual experiences).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment dimensions</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P vs. N</td>
<td>P vs. A</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Norm</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>P vs. N</td>
<td>P vs. A</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>0.63*</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>−.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>−.35</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>−.45*</td>
<td>−.18*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>0.52*</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>.56*</td>
<td>−.29</td>
<td>−.41*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.83**</td>
<td>1.14***</td>
<td>.72***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal goal validation</td>
<td>.57*</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>−.28</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.58*</td>
<td>0.74***</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The table provides unstandardized estimates for models that tested attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance simultaneously; the interaction terms between attachment dimensions and the target of evaluations were presented in the P versus N and P versus A columns; the simple slopes of attachment dimensions within each evaluating target were presented in the personal, norm, and actual columns. P = personal importance; N = normative importance; A = actual experience.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
awareness was observed for independence and personal goal validation but not for intimacy and trust.

**Relational features: Personal importance versus actual experiences.** We conducted similar analyses to compare participants’ personal importance rankings with their actual experience evaluations. Each analysis included as predictors each attachment dimension (two between-subjects variables) and target of evaluations (a within-subject variable: personal importance vs. actual experiences), along with all two-way and three-way interactions. This analysis examined whether the association of attachment anxiety or avoidance with judgments of specific relationship features varies when one considers abstract (personal) importance versus actual experiences.

None of the three-way interactions or the Anxiety × Avoidance effects were significant. There were, however, meaningful two-way interactions between specific attachment dimension and evaluating target, suggesting that evaluating target (personal importance vs. actual experiences) moderated the association of specific attachment dimensions and perception of relational features (Table 4). Specifically, attachment anxiety predicted a gap in the personal importance versus actual experience of intimacy: Even though highly anxiously attached individuals ranked intimacy higher than did less anxiously attached individuals, they did not perceive having more intimacy in their relationships. Furthermore, attachment avoidance predicted a similar gap in perceptions of independence: Highly avoidantly attached individuals ranked independence higher than did less avoidantly attached individuals but perceived having less independence in their relationships. Attachment avoidance also related to a gap in perceptions of trust and personal goal validation: Even though highly avoidant individuals did not rank these two features lower than their less avoidant counterparts, they perceived having less of these two features in their relationships.

**Discussion**

Results from Study 4 extended previous findings by suggesting that in some cases, insecure individuals recognize that their relational priorities are unique. Evidence for such awareness was observed for self-focused features (independence and personal goal validation) but not for partner-focused features (intimacy and trust). Perhaps individuals, out of self-presentation concerns, are more willing to report their responses as deviating from a normative response when judging features that are less central to relationships (independence, personal goal validation) relative to more central features (trust, intimacy).

We also explored and found that insecure individuals do not perceive their current relationships having more of the relational features that they prioritize. This is consistent with the existing literature that attachment insecurity is associated with poor relationship quality. Our data further suggested that even though anxiously attached individuals prioritize intimacy and avoidantly attached individuals prioritize independence, they do not perceive these features being enhanced in their current relationships. This gap may contribute to their feelings of disappointment and relationship dissatisfaction.
General discussion

The current research examined how attachment insecurity relates to people’s relational priorities. Results across four studies provided evidence that attachment insecure individuals have unique relational priorities, which are consistent with their insecure tendencies; additionally, they are conscious of the fact that their priorities differ from the norm.

Implications for attachment security

The subjective judgments of relational features are meaningful because they suggest the conscious process that insecure individuals adopt in evaluating potential or current relationships. These perceptions of what is important in a relationship, however, may do more than simply guide conscious judgments; they may stray individuals from a path of attaining greater security. As anxiously attached individuals prioritize receiving intimacy, and devalue independence for themselves and their partners, they may seek and maintain relationships that can be characterized by those features. Avoidantly attached individuals prioritize independence for themselves and their partners; these judgments may direct them to approach relationships that allow them to pull away when needed. Ironically, these features that are perceived as important may not provide greater security over time. Research has suggested that it is the self-focused relational features (personal goal validation, Arriaga et al., 2014; self-view, Carnelley & Rowe, 2007), which are associated with a decline in attachment anxiety; and it is the partner-focused relational features (trust, Arriaga et al., 2014; providing or seeking support, Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, & Wilson, 2003), which are associated with a decline in attachment avoidance. The mismatch between features that are considered as important by insecure individuals and features that may actually promote security over time contributes to our understanding how insecurity may perpetuate itself.

The discrepancies between people’s relational priorities and their perceptions of the features in their current relationships can also reinforce their insecure beliefs. We found that insecure individuals do not consider their current relationships having the features they prioritize. This gap may heighten their need or attention for the specific features, causing anxiously attached individuals to seek more intimacy, and avoidantly attached individuals to seek more independence.

Perhaps the good news is that insecure individuals are aware that their relational priorities deviate from a normative response, as evidenced in Study 4. This suggests that insecure individuals recognize their unique priorities, even though they may not realize such priorities are maladaptive in the long run. This awareness can be an important initial step for insecure individuals to correct or curb their defensive reactions.

Rankings versus ratings

Perceived importance was measured with both rankings and ratings in Studies 1–3. Rating results from three studies converged with ranking results among highly anxiously attached individuals who were more likely to prioritize intimacy and trust
(partner-focused features) than those with low attachment anxiety. An interesting pattern emerged for highly avoidantly attached individuals who devalued all four relational features (i.e., lower ratings across all four variables) than those with low attachment avoidance. This suggests a tendency to place less importance in general on key facets of romantic relationships, which is consistent with the notion that avoidantly attached individuals heavily suppress their attachment-related thoughts and desires as a defensive mechanism to cope with their insecurity (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002).

However, when forced to differentiate between the relational features, avoidantly attached individuals assigned higher importance to self-focused features while downplaying the importance of partner-focused features, revealed by the ranking measures. The distinct pattern of results from ranking and rating measures suggest ranking measure provides unique information about personal priorities. Our studies provide initial evidence for utilizing a ranking measure of subjective importance in relationship research.

**Limitations**

These findings are qualified by three main limitations. First, though the findings revealed that insecure individuals prioritize specific relational features, it is unclear how these priorities are formed. Perhaps people recognize their attachment insecure tendencies, and this awareness directs their judgment of relational features; or insecure individuals are unsatisfied in certain relational domains, and this lack of satisfaction motivates them to prioritize particular relational features. Future research should investigate these possibilities.

Second, some of the differences between ranking and rating measures in Studies 1–3 may have to do with the fact that we used several items to tap each feature in rating scales and only 1 or 2 items for each in ranking scale. For example, trust was only measured using “being trustworthy” in ranking measures. However, we used 13 items to capture the same construct in rating measures. It is possible the “rated trust” had a much richer content than the “ranked trust”. This may be part of the reason why anxiously attached individuals rated trust higher but did not rank it higher. Future research should use exact same items for both ranking and rating measures.

Third, in Study 4, participants evaluated the relational features in their current relationships; these evaluations disconnect from their priorities. Perhaps these results are not surprising. The evaluations of current relationship features are subjective and may be affected by attachment insecurities. Indeed, anxiously attached individuals may not report experiencing more intimacy is precisely because they prioritize this feature, which leads to high expectations that are difficult to be met. Future research may consider using a more objective standard to obtain participants’ actual experiences of the relational features. Nevertheless, our findings are still meaningful by suggesting insecure individuals’ do not consider themselves having more of the features they consider to be the most important to them.

In conclusion, insecure individuals hold beliefs about the importance of various features of a romantic relationship, beliefs that are consistent with their interpersonal tendencies. Future research is needed to examine whether and how these judgments
direct them to approach and maintain certain relationships, that may reinforce their insecure beliefs and, away from others, that may potentially help to improve their security over time.

Appendix

Ranked importance of relational features (Studies 1–4)

Please read the following things that people consider to be important in a relationship partner. Rank each item according to its importance to you, with “1” being the most important, “10” being the least important. Use each number, 1 to 10, only once. Remember, lower numbers mean more importance.

**What is most important to me in a relationship partner?**
- Supporting my independence
- Providing me with freedom to pursue important personal goals
- Valuing my important personal goals
- Perceiving me as competent
- Providing intimacy
- Being trustworthy
- Being accepting of me
- Providing protection and security
- Managing conflict well
- Providing a satisfying relationship

Ranked importance of relational features (as a provider; Study 3)

Please read the following things that people consider to be important in a relationship partner. Rank each item according to its importance to you, with “1” being the most important, “10” being the least important. Use each number, 1 to 10, only once. Remember, lower numbers mean more importance.

**What’s the most important to me in terms of how I want to be as a romantic partner?**
- Supporting my partner’s independence
- Providing my partner with freedom to pursue his or her important personal goals
- Valuing my partner’s important personal goals
- Perceiving my partner as competent
- Providing intimacy to my partner
- Being trustworthy
- Being accepting of my partner
- Providing protection and security to my partner
- Managing conflict well
- Providing a satisfying relationship

Ranked importance of relational features (perceived norm; Study 4)

Now, you will see the same list of things people consider to be important in a relationship partner. But, this time we are interested in knowing how most people would rank these
things. Of course, what most people consider to be important can be the same as, or
different from what you consider to be important. Rank each item according to its
importance to most people. Same as before, “1” being the most important and “10”
being the least important. Use each number, 1 to 10, only once. Remember, lower
numbers mean more importance.

**What is most important to most people in a relationship partner?**

- Supporting their independence
- Providing them with freedom to pursue their important personal goals
- Valuing their important personal goals
- Perceiving them as competent
- Providing intimacy
- Being trustworthy
- Being accepting of them
- Providing protection and security
- Managing conflict well
- Providing a satisfying relationship

**Rated importance of relational features (Studies 1–3)**

People have lots of different things that matter to them in a romantic relationship partner. What characteristics matter most to you? Please indicate what matters most to you using the following scale:

\[
1 = \text{not very important}, \quad 4 = \text{somewhat important}, \quad 7 = \text{extremely important}
\]

It is important to me that a relationship partner . . .

**Intimacy**

- makes me feel loved and cared about.
- does not make me feel like we have a lot of distance in our relationship.
- provides me with a lot of closeness and intimacy.

**Trust**

- is predictable from one day to the next.
- behaves in a very consistent manner.
- does not make me fearful of saying or doing something which might create conflict.
- is dependable, especially when it comes to things which are important to me.
- keeps the promises he/she makes to me.
- considers how his or her decisions affect me personally.
- instills confidence that he or she is telling the truth.
- always is ready and willing to offer me strength and support even when the future is uncertain.
- be concerned about my welfare even in situations we have never encountered before.
- reacts in a positive way when I expose my weaknesses to him/her.
- earns and keeps my trust.
- be a person I can count on no matter what.
- be there for me when I need them.
Independence

... makes me feel free to be who I am.
... makes me feel I have a say in what happens, and I can voice my opinion.
... does not make me feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways.

Goal validation

... understands why I care about my important personal goals.
... feels enthusiastic about my important personal goals.
... believes in my important personal goals as much as I do.
... does not have misgivings about my important personal goals.
... does not doubt that I can achieve my important personal goals.
... does not disapprove of my important personal goals.

Experiences of relational features (Study 4)

Rate your current partner by answering each question below. Please indicate your agreement with each statement using the following scale: 1 = not at all; 7 = extremely.

My current partner supports my independence.
My current partner provides me with the freedom to pursue important personal goals.
My current partner values my important personal goals.
My current partner provides intimacy.
My current partner is trustworthy.

Authors’ Note

This article is accepted for presentation at the upcoming meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, IL (2016, May).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Although attachment orientations are measured continuously, attachment tendencies often are described in categorical terms (e.g., secure, anxious; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) to identify individuals who have chronic insecure tendencies or an attachment “style,” as indicated by signature responses that form a predictable pattern and are easily activated.
2. We explored but found little evidence for the effects of activating possible attachment-related distress on perceived importance of relational features. Study 1 used a paradigm of ostracism (i.e., Cyberball; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) whereby participants were randomly
assigned to one of the three conditions: inclusion, ostracism, or control. We reasoned that being ostracized, relative to other conditions, would be likely to trigger attachment-related distress (MacDonald & Borsook, 2010; Yaakobi & Williams, 2016). We analyzed the effect of the manipulation, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance on each ranked and rated perceived importance of relational features, after controlling for relationship quality. Only one effect associated with the manipulation was significant. A simple slope analysis revealed that attachment anxiety was associated with lower ratings of personal goal validation among included participants, $\beta = -.81$, $t = -3.69$, $p < .001$, but not among those in ostracism or control conditions, $\beta = .23$, $t = .64$, $p = .523$.

We further explored a recall-based attachment-priming paradigm (Sakaluk, 2014) in Study 3. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: secure prime, anxious prime, avoidant prime, or control. We conducted similar regression analyses as we did in Study 1. Three manipulation-relevant effects were significant. (1) Attachment anxiety was associated with lower rankings of independence in anxious prime condition, $\beta = -.38$, $t = -2.72$, $p = .007$, but not in other conditions, $\beta = .04$, $t = .23$, $p = .82$. (2) Attachment anxiety was associated with higher ratings of intimacy only among individuals with high avoidance. This relationship was even stronger when the individuals with high avoidance received an avoidant prime, $\beta = .99$, $t = 6.09$, $p < .001$, but weaker when they did not, $\beta = .33$, $t = 2.22$, $p = .028$. (3) Attachment anxiety was associated with higher ratings of independence only among less avoidantly attached individuals who were in secure prime condition, $\beta = .55$, $t = 2.03$, $p = .043$.

Taken together, these results do not provide consistent evidence that invoking attachment distress causes chronically insecure individuals to exaggerate the perceived importance of relational features; very few significant findings were observed and some results are difficult to explain. It may be that the effect sizes of the manipulations are small and our studies (especially Study 1) are underpowered to detect such small effects. It is also possible that people’s relational priorities are less influenced by contexts. Even though insecure orientations can be activated in stressful situations, what people value in relationships may be a trait-like, stable construct. We treated these exploratory manipulation variables as covariates in our primary analyses. Details are available upon request.

References


