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The Relation between Attachment Styles and Love Life Narratives

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Abstract

Insecure Attachment and Integrative Life Narratives

Attachment characterizes the bond present between infant and caregiver during the early years of life. Research on this topic reveals that attachment tendencies are relatively stable from childhood to early adulthood and that these tendencies influence individuals' perceptions of their relationship partners (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Van Ijzendoorn, 1995; Simpson, 1990). As such, adult attachment may be considered particularly relevant within the context of romantic relationships. Emerging work reveals that *narrative identity* may provide unique insight into how individuals perceive romantic experiences and how this in turn relates with attachment (Buhler & Dunlop, 2019; Dunlop, Harake, Gray, Hanley & McCoy, 2018). Narrative identity is a person's internal understanding of their past, present, and anticipated future (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Dunlop, Hanley & McCoy, 2019). The present study seeks to contribute to this growing body of literature by determining how features of love life narratives correspond with insecure attachment tendencies.

Early Attachment Research

Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) paved the way for attachment research and its' implications for personality development. Specifically, in studies assessing behavioral differences in maladjusted children, Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) noted that certain children became overtly dependent, whereas others would become self-reliant and affectionless. Explaining why these differences occurred was the early impetus for attachment research. Building upon Bowlby's earlier work, Ainsworth later theorized that the observed differences in child behavior were due in part to early caregiver experiences (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). For example, when assessing Ugandan infants, Ainsworth noted differences in mother and infant interactions, particularly in how infants gained and kept the attention of their mothers when

distressed. Examples of such infant characteristics included: proximity seeking, treating mother as a safe haven/secure base, and separation anxiety when apart from mother (Cassidy, 2008; Fraley, 2018). From these observations, Ainsworth identified three primary patterns of infant behavior upon separation from mothers that are representative of adult attachment tendencies: secure attachment, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1988).

Adult Attachment and the Romantic Domain

Insecure attachment, in general, has been found to predict various detrimental outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Lee & Hankin, 2009; Dunlop, et al., 2019). Insecure attachment is comprised of both anxious and avoidant attachment tendencies. Anxious attachment may be defined by feelings of insecurity and dependency towards one's relationship partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). As a means of coping with these negative feelings, anxiously attached individuals tend to become hypervigilant and excessively clingy. As a result, anxiously attached people often experience low relationship satisfaction and relationship dissolution (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Health outcomes associated with anxious attachment include greater dependency on one's romantic partner, hypervigilance within relationships, as well as decreased relationship satisfaction and well-being (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Moreover, anxiously attached individuals also experience greater separation distress when they are temporarily or permanently separated from their attachment figure, tending to cling to their significant other long after the initial separation (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

By way of contrast, avoidant attachment is defined as the tendency to avoid close relationships and emotional intimacy in favor of independence (Simpson & Rholes, 2017;

Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Common outcomes associated with avoidant attachment include a lack of close relationships and decreased romantic relationship satisfaction stemming from emotional unavailability (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Avoidant individuals also experience problems with self-esteem and well-being, because their need to belong is less than fulfilled (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Indeed, while avoidantly attached individuals value independence, they still feel the distress of not having a stable attachment figure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This distress can cause resentment between the avoidantly attached individual and their significant other, thereby straining natural dependency that exists within romantic relationships. This strain leads to more avoidance of romantic relationships, in general (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Indeed, no matter the length of the relationship, avoidantly attached individuals will inhibit the formation of attachments (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Researchers interested in assessing romantic attachment in adulthood have utilized various measures including ratings of vignettes and self-report questionnaires (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Fraley, Waller & Brennan, 2000). However, the literature would benefit from a multi-method approach to assessing attachment that employs both narrative and self-report methods. Narrative methods, in particular, may shed unique light on the content of attachment tendencies and reveal how the stories one tells about their love life, perhaps, serve to reinforce their prevailing attachment style.

Narrative identity

Recently, researchers have begun to examine the relation that love life narratives may have with attachment tendencies. As stated, narrative identity is an evolving and internal representation of the subjective past, present, and future (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). By

constructing narratives of their lived experience, one is able to negotiate a sense of self-continuity in the face of inconsistencies. To assess narrative identity researchers typically utilize the Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams, 1995), which prompts individuals to narrate important experiences from their life that compose their narrative identity (e.g., life high point, low point, or turning point). Contextualized narratives allow for a more in-depth analysis of narrative identity in that this approach allows the researcher to examine self-representations that exist within particular contexts. This paradigm can, thus, be applied to love life narratives in order to gauge one's self-understanding within the romantic domain, specifically. Romantic narratives are useful for creating a well-rounded understanding of romantic relationships. From couples contextualized romantic narratives researchers are able to determine the trajectory of a relationship including whether a couple will remain together in the future or break up (Dunlop, 2015; Dunlop et al., 2019).

Redemption, Contamination, Affective tone, and Anxiety

Once the appropriate narratives have been collected, they are then quantified in terms of a number of narrative themes. Such themes can be deductive (i.e., derived from previous study) or inductive (i.e., created after reading the qualitative material; Dunlop, Harake, & Wilkinson, 2017). Previous research finds that narrative themes relate with a variety of psychological health outcomes (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). It reasons to suspect then that these themes may also provide important insight into psychological functioning within the romantic domain. In the present study, we assessed three deductive narrative themes: redemption, contamination, and affective tone as well as one inductive narrative theme: anxiety.

The three deductive narrative themes assessed within the current study were redemption, contamination, and affective tone. Redemption is commonly featured in American's narratives,

and is defined by a story arc that begins negativity but leads to a positive resolution (McAdams, 1995). In contrast, contaminated stories begin positively but end negatively. Past work finds that redemptive and contaminated stories tend to correspond with positive and negative psychological health, respectively (McAdams et al., 2001). Affective tone characterizes the positive relative to negative valence within a narrative, rather than the arc of that story. Affective tone has been found to correspond with various positive psychological outcomes (McAdams, 2006).

In terms of our inductive dimension, anxiety was considered relevant given that this theme may be particularly relevant for how people perceive and process the world. Past research finds that narrative processing can relate with positive or negative functioning depending on the person (Thomsen et al., 2016; Catlett 2015). For instance, individuals that perceive events as more dangerous and anxiety-provoking also tend to score higher on measures of personality trait anxiety (Thomsen et al. 2016). Indeed, Thomsen and colleagues (2016) define negative meaning-making within narratives as anxiety. This trend is important in translating to attachment styles because trait anxiety can carry into romantic relationships, particularly affecting whether people develop a more anxious attachment with their romantic partner. Anxiety may be defined as a predisposition to perceive certain situations and people as dangerous and to react anxiously. Given that anxiety appears to manifest within narratives about negative events, it may be important to quantify the degree of anxiety that participants express within their love life narratives. Such anxious content may be related to greater anxious and avoidant attachment tendencies.

Present study

Using data collected by Dunlop and colleagues (2019), the present study sought to examine how themes of redemption, contamination, affective tone, and anxiety within low point

narratives pertaining to one's love life corresponded with anxious and avoidant attachment.

Analyses for the present study are guided by four hypotheses. First, I hypothesized that redemption would relate with lower anxious and avoidant attachment. Second, I hypothesized that contamination would relate with greater anxious and avoidant attachment. Third, I hypothesized that negative affective tone would relate with anxious attachment. Fourth, and lastly, I hypothesized that positive affective tone would relate with lower anxious and avoidant attachment. I did not have directional hypothesis pertaining to the theme of anxiety.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-nine participants were recruited to take part in a survey through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online survey-based website used to reliably gather large scale data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Within the sample, 50% of participants identified as male and 80% as Euro-American (i.e., White/Caucasian). Participants must have been fluent in English and 18 years or older to participate in this online study. Moreover, individuals were able to participate regardless of their current relationship status or previous romantic history (including a lack thereof; see Dunlop et al., 2019).

Materials and Procedures

First, participants took part in a semi-structured Love Life Interview (Dunlop et al., 2019) that is based on the Life Story Interview composed by McAdams (2008). This interview prompts participants for a series of key scenes from their love life (e.g., love life high point, low point, and turning point). Here, we utilized participants responses to the low point prompt below:

Thinking back over your entire LOVE LIFE, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not your lowest experience within this domain. Even though this event is unpleasant, we would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. What happened in the event, where and when, who was

involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about you or your LOVE LIFE.

Non-narrative measures.

Experiences in close relationships scale. Next, participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (Fraley et al., 2000) to assess their level of insecure attachment. Participants rated items such as “I am afraid that I will lose my partner’s love” and “I don’t feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners” on a five-point Likert scale for scores on anxious ($M = .24$, $SD = .42$, $\alpha = .97$) and avoidant attachment ($M = .18$, $SD = .43$, $\alpha = .97$), respectively. Following this, participants completed a series of measures unrelated to the current study and provided basic demographic information including age and gender.

Narrative measures

To code the low point narratives used in the present study, a graduate student and myself coded each narrative for redemption, contamination, affective tone, and anxiety. Low point narratives were divided into four batches (each batch containing about 35 narratives). To ensure reliability we each coded the narratives on our own, then met to compare and resolve any major differences between our codes. Redemption ($M = .26$, $SD = .43$) and contamination ($M = .39$, $SD = .40$) were each coded on a dichotomous presence or absence scale (0 = absence of code, 1 = presence of code). Affective tone was quantified on a five-point Likert scale with higher values indicating more positive tone (1 = *very negative*, 2 = *somewhat negative*, 3 = *neutral or lack of emotion*, 4 = *somewhat positive*, and 5 = *very positive*; $M = .28$, $SD = .42$). Lastly, I created a three-point anxiety scale to quantify anxious content in participants low points ($M = .54$, $SD = .40$). The coding system was derived with anxious content either being absent, moderate, or highly present within the narrative. A score of “1” represented low anxiety, “2” represented

medium anxiety, and “3” represented high anxiety and continuing feelings of negativity from the experience (see Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 for examples of each, respectively).

Results

Hypothesis 1

To address Hypothesis 1, I conducted two Pearson Bivariate correlations. Results indicated that redemption was not correlated with anxious attachment ($r = -.07, p = .23$) but had a marginal and negative relation with avoidant attachment ($r = -.15, p = .06$). Thus, my first hypothesis was partially supported.

Hypothesis 2

To address Hypothesis 2, I conducted two Pearson Bivariate correlations. Contrary to my hypothesis, there was not a significant relation between contamination and anxious attachment ($r = .12, p = .22$) or avoidant attachment ($r = .04, p = .61$).

Hypothesis 3

To address Hypothesis 3 and 4, I conducted four Pearson Bivariate correlations. Results indicated that negative affective tone was not significantly correlated with anxious ($r = -.07, p = .48$) or avoidant attachment ($r = -.08, p < .05$). In terms of Hypothesis 4, I conducted two Pearson Bivariate correlations controlling for word count and found that positive affective tone was not significantly correlated with anxious attachment ($r = -.07, p = .48$) or avoidant attachment ($r = -.08, p = .42$). Thus, hypotheses 3 and 4 were not supported.

Anxious content

Though I did not have directional hypotheses pertaining to anxious content within participants' narratives, I found that greater anxious content was associated with greater anxious attachment ($r = .22, p = .02$) within participants narratives (see Table 6).

Discussion

In the present study, we were interested in assessing how features of participants' love life narratives related with their attachment tendencies. We coded narrative themes of redemption, contamination, affective tone, and anxiety within participants love life low points. We found partial support for my first hypothesis such that while redemption did not relate significantly with anxious attachment, it was marginally associated with lower avoidant attachment. Though relations with anxious attachment were non-significant, the marginal association between redemption and avoidant attachment may indicate that redemptive storytelling promotes less avoidant attachment. That is, individuals who redeem romantic low points may choose to make sense of these negative experiences so that they can continue to have romantic relationships, whereas those who would rather *avoid* relationships might be less inclined to redeem these negative experiences.

Results also indicated that there was no relation between contamination and either component of insecure attachment. This speaks against my second hypothesis and suggests that themes of contamination may not propagate insecure attachment. However, this finding may also be due to the negative nature of the narratives analyzed. Future research should assess more positive narratives, such as high points and turning points in the romantic domain, to determine whether themes of contamination would correlate with insecure attachment.

On a separate note, affective tone, whether positive or negative, did not predict insecure attachment. Thus, my third and fourth hypotheses were also not supported. Again, this may be due to the negative nature of the low point narratives. Indeed, no narratives in this sample were coded as being "very positive" (see Table 3). Therefore, the affective quality of only low point narratives may be less indicative of individuals' actual attachment.

In terms of anxiety within narratives, results indicated that anxious content within narratives was associated with anxious attachment. This finding demonstrates that anxious attachment tendencies are more prominent in anxiously attached individuals. Typical low point narratives of highly anxious participants within the sample tended to expand bad experiences to more global aspects of life, concluding that the negative experience forever ruined future romantic relationships. For example, participants who provided narratives where their romantic partner cheated on them believed that they could not trust any romantic partner in the future. This finding suggests that narrative themes may influence people's understanding of events in their romantic relationships, which can serve to reinforce or potentially improve their current attachment tendencies.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study contributes to understanding how attachment tendencies are manifest within love life narratives. Although hypothesis 2 and 3 were not supported we did find partial support for hypothesis 1. In addition, we were able to discern the potential importance of anxious content within love life stories. Though my study had various strengths, there were several notable limitations. First and foremost, our study was limited in its inclusion of only one narrative prompt (i.e., love life low point). Future research should assess other narratives including love life high points or turning points to see if relations would differ based on the type of narrative elicited. For example, attachment styles may be more apparent within high point and turning point narratives due to their more positive nature. Applying themes of redemption, contamination, and affective tone within these stories, may yield differing relations with attachment. In addition, our sample was not representative of a diverse demographic. Indeed, the sample was predominantly White, so findings may differ within a sample that is more

representative of Latinx, Black/African American, and Asian individuals. In addition, as stated in Dunlop and colleagues' (2019) study, this sample did not take sexual orientation into account. Taken together, ethnicity and sexual orientation may have impacted the results of the study rendering it less generalizable to a broader population.

Future research should apply narrative methods to the study of romantic attachment in order to potentially aid individuals suffering from the negative outcomes associated with insecure attachment. The narrative methods used in the present study may provide the awareness necessary for people with insecure attachments to navigate current or future relationships. In addition, our inductive anxiety theme may also contribute to future research paradigms and allow for a more in-depth look at the correlates of insecure attachment. Overall, the present study contributes to the understanding of romantic attachment as assessed through love life narratives.

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Table 1: *Redemptive and Non-Redemptive Narrative Examples*

<i>Redemptive</i>	<i>Non-Redemptive</i>
<p>Before I met my husband in the early 80s, I'd been dating an older guy for about six months. One night we were playing cards at his mother's house, and I beat him several times. Looking back, I suppose this wounded his pride, especially, when I made an innocent joke about it. He suddenly slapped me across the face. Horrified, I got up and ran from the house, and he pursued me. He shoved me down the sidewalk and got on top of me and kept hitting me. Luckily, his family intervened. How did I feel, horrified. I think he would have hurt me severely if no one had helped. His kind mother took me home and in the car ride, I felt depressed, shocked, and wounded deeply. I'd never thought he'd do something like that. I felt a sense of betrayal over his actions. He'd betrayed my trust in him. I never wanted to see him again. So, I believe that this shows that, though I was young, I was strong and made a good decision in severing all ties with him. He stalked me for a while after that though would follow me to school and back and harass me. He didn't want to let go.</p>	<p>Without a doubt, the lowest point in my love life was the one and only time I cheated on my wife. While on a business trip to Peru, I had a prostitute proposition me in the hotel bar. Due to a pending pregnancy, my wife and I had not been sexually intimate in a couple months and this seemed like an innocent, fun way to end an evening. I have to admit; I enjoyed her company and we had sex together. Almost immediately after, I was overcome with guilt and self-loathing. It was the ultimate betrayal and it took me a long time to put it behind me. It happened almost 9 years ago and thinking of it now still causes my soul to ache as I type this. My love life was and is good. To this day, I don't understand why I ever thought this was a good idea. I did it willfully, but why I still don't know.</p>

Table 2: *Contaminated and Non-Contaminated Narrative Examples*

<i>Contaminated</i>	<i>Non-Contaminated</i>
<p>I had been dating Eric for a few weeks, and I was finding it odd that he never invited me over. I really liked and we really hit it off sexually. He was passionate and very good looking. I was getting pretty attached to him. When I asked him about why he never invited me to his place, he said, "Well, I told you that my home life was complicated." then went on to change the subject with a "I really don't want to talk about it." I was increasingly less satisfied with this answer. I was sitting home alone one evening and decided to call him. I only had his cell number, and when I call it a woman answered. I asked for Eric and she said he was at work, and had left his phone, she asked if I wanted to leave a message and I said that I try to call another time. She asked if there was anything that she could do for me, and I chuckled and said no thanks. She then asked, "Just how do you know my husband." I just hung up the phone. Eric never called again. I was said, but not enough to ever dial that number again.</p>	<p>I was playing with my ex at the time and they started to fight me. I was trying to calm them down, but that only made the situation worst. My ex mom came running down the stairs hearing what was doing on, but it looked like to her I started the fight. So, she started going after me as well. I ended up leaving and telling my ex it was over because you never physically put your hands on someone you love as if they are an enemy. My ex begged for me to stay and was very apologetic. But I ignored it and moved on. I had to do what was best for me.</p>

Table 3: *Affective Tone Narrative Examples*

<i>Very Negative</i>	<i>Somewhat Negative</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Somewhat Positive</i>	<i>Very Positive</i>
The same girl whom I was going to marry, made me go across the country to a friend's house to set up a living situation for me and her. She then left me shortly after and pretty much made me go all the way out here for no reason. I am isolated from everyone in my family, all of my friends, and I can't go back.	Without a doubt, the lowest point in my love life was the one and only time I cheated on my wife. While on a business trip to Peru, I had a prostitute proposition me in the hotel bar. Due to a pending pregnancy, my wife and I had not been sexually intimate in a couple months and this seemed like an innocent, fun way to end an evening. Almost immediately after, I was overcome with guilt and self-loathing. It was the ultimate betrayal and it took me a long time to put it behind me. It happened almost 9 years ago and thinking of it now still causes my soul to ache as I type this. My love life was and is good. To this day, I don't understand why I ever thought this was a good idea. I did it willfully, but why I still don't know.	In my previous love life when I was cheated on, I was at a low point in my life being cheated on. I felt I was too good and too handsome of a fellow to be cheated on at any time with this woman. We even got into physical fights and that is not who I am as a person. I love with a passion and she was not the person for me. I had to learn the hard way.	I met my now wife 10 years ago, however, we weren't together for the entire 10 years. We took a break from each other for about 18 months after we were dating for about a year due to some issues we were having, during that time life seemed unbearable. We both dated other people, but I did it to try and hide or cover up my true feelings for my now wife. It truly is a defining event in my life that made me realize that she was the one for me, and I had to do whatever I could to get us back together.	No narrative was given a code of 5, due to the negative undertone of the low point narrative.

Note. Narratives were edited for brevity. 1 = Very negative, 2 = Somewhat negative, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Somewhat positive, 5 = Very positive.

Table 4: *Anxiety Narrative Examples*

<i>Little or No Anxiety (1)</i>	<i>Moderate Anxiety (2)</i>	<i>Very High Anxiety (3)</i>
A low point in our love life was having a miscarriage It was very discourage and a downer. It made me feel angry sad and hurt. Hurt that I wouldn't be having a child that was made from love. Grief stricken because I had no one to relate to me and just disappear because it was hard to go through.	On my 18th birthday, my ex-girlfriend cheated on me. it was a very bad point in my life and tore me apart.	The lowest point without a doubt is finding out my girlfriend was cheating on me. I had suspected she was, so I decided to follow her home one day after she got out of work. She told me was going home, but I had a feeling she wasn't. I waited in her job's parking lot and trailed her when she left. I followed her to a house that was actually near hers. She got out of the car and knocked at the door. I saw a man come out, hug her, and then kiss her. My heart instantly hit the ground. I was then overwhelmed with so many emotions ranging from anger to sadness. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go beat up the guy and her, but I didn't. I just drove away and went home to loathe. This moment was devastating to me because once again I felt alone. The one person I thought I had totally stabbed me in the back. It was a painful time, but it showed me that once again you can only trust and depend on yourself.

Note. 1 = a little anxiety, 2 = moderate anxiety, 3 = a lot of anxiety.

Table 5: *Correlations Between Narrative and Non-Narrative Measures*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1 Redemption	0.26	0.43	-				
2 Contamination	0.39	0.40	-.52**	-			
3 Affective tone	0.28	0.42	.56**	-.57**	-		
4 Anxiety	0.54	0.40	-.37**	.60**	-.56**	-	
5 Anxious attachment	0.24	0.42	-.07	.12	-.07	.22*	-
6 Avoidant attachment	0.18	0.43	-.15	.04	-.08	.07	.67**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Redemption and Contamination (0 = absent, 1 = present). Affective tone (1 = very negative, 2 = negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = positive, 5 = very positive). Anxiety (1 = a little anxiety, 2 = moderate anxiety, 3 = a lot of anxiety).