

Exploring the Link between Attachment and the Inclination to Obsess about or Stalk Celebrities

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Insecure attachment to one's parents has been shown to contribute to poor adjustment as an adult. We investigated whether insecure attachment in childhood is associated with attachment to celebrities and a tendency to approve of celebrity stalking behaviors. We measured childhood attachment, celebrity worship, and the tendency to condone celebrity stalking in 299 college students. Those who reported insecure attachments as children were more likely to condone behaviors indicative of celebrity stalking. Moreover, those who formed strong attachments to their favorite celebrities (celebrity worshippers) were more likely to condone celebrity stalking than those who were not as strongly attracted to their favorite celebrities. Contrary to the hypothesis, insecure attachment was not significantly associated with attraction to celebrities. Results are discussed in relation to the "Absorption-addiction" model.

Ainsworth's attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) has long enjoyed considerable popularity among developmental psychologists. Attachment theory posits that warm, responsive parenting produces infants who feel secure enough to explore their environment. Parents who are inconsistent in responding to their infants' signals tend to produce children who are anxiously preoccupied with parental attention, and this reduces exploration. Parents who are cold and rejecting tend to produce children who eventually learn to avoid contact with their parents, exploring instead the "neutral world of things" (Ainsworth, et al., 1978, p. 310).

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Attachment patterns formed in childhood have been hypothesized to have long-term behavioral effects (Greenberger & McLaughlin, 1998). In an oft-cited study, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that adult romantic orientations were generally consistent with childhood attachments. Specifically, those who recalled having secure attachments with their parents tended to form secure attachments with their adult partners; those who recalled inconsistent or rejecting parents were less likely to be securely attached to their adult partners. Furthermore, Levitt, Silver, and Franco (1996) found that insecure attachment styles were significantly associated with being involved in a troublesome relationship.

If faulty childhood attachment predisposes one to form faulty adult romantic relationships, might it also contribute to other adult problems? Indeed, insecure attachments have been linked to symptoms of depression (Roberts, Gotlib, & Kessel, 1996; Van Buren & Cooley, 2002), relatively poor quality interactions between mothers and their own children (Crowell & Feldman, 1987), and difficulty in decoding social cues in adult voices (Cooley, 2005). If insecurely attached children are more likely to have relationship difficulties as adults, they might be tempted to form parasocial relationships. A parasocial relationship is one in which person A is attracted to person B, but person B is usually unaware of the existence of person A (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Such a relationship, common to celebrities and their fans, might be appealing to the insecurely attached individual because it makes few demands. The fan does not usually have a "real" relationship with a celebrity, so the fan does not run the risk of criticism or rejection unless he or she seeks contact with the celebrity (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001).

Many fans are attracted to celebrities for entertainment and/or social reasons (Maltby, Houran, & McCutcheon, 2003), but a substantial number become intensely absorbed in the personal lives of their favorite celebrities (McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003), and a small number engage in behaviors that might be characterized as pathological (Dietz, et al., 1991; Giles, 2000; McCutcheon, Maltby, Houran, & Ashe, 2004).

McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) developed an "Absorption-addiction" model to explain celebrity worship. According to this model many celebrity worshippers never go beyond the relatively benign initial stage of admiration for celebrities because of their social or entertainment value. However, a compromised identity structure in some persons facilitates "absorption with a celebrity in order to establish an identity" (p. 1476). Such persons go beyond the entertainment/social stage to become increasingly absorbed by and addicted to their favorite celebrity. They are likely to agree with such items as "I consider my favorite

celebrity to be my soul mate,” and “I have frequent thoughts about my celebrity, even when I don’t want to,” items found on the intense-personal subscale of the 23-item Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS; Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe & Houran, 2001). People who hold such beliefs appear to be obsessed with and compulsive about their favorite celebrity. Not surprisingly, there is evidence that they are unwilling or unable to be flexible (Maltby, Day, McCutcheon, Martin, & Cayunas, 2004).

Stalking has been defined as “the willful, malicious, and repeated following and harassing of another person that threatens his or her safety” (Meloy & Gothard, 1995, p. 258). Stalkers appear to be obsessed with thoughts about their victims and often engage in repetitive behaviors designed to attract the attention of their victims (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998). A recent study (Maltby, Day, McCutcheon, Houran, & Ashe, in press) found that scores on a measure of obsessive-compulsive disorder correlated significantly with revised measures of the CAS-intense-personal and CAS-borderline-pathological (but not the entertainment-social subscale). Stalkers sometimes behave irrationally, even violently, toward their victims, in ways that clearly reflect an underlying psychopathology (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998). Those who score high on the borderline-pathological subscale of the CAS endorse irrational items such as “If I were lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it.” It seems reasonable to think that stalkers would be a subset of persons who would score high on the intense-personal and borderline pathological subscales of the CAS, and that high scorers on these two subscales would be more likely than low scorers to endorse pro-stalking attitudes.

Keinlen (1998) and McCann (2001) have hypothesized that insecure attachment patterns may lead to stalking behavior in adolescence and adulthood. Keinlen (1998) suggested that the motivations of insecurely attached individuals may differ according to the type of insecure attachment. The anxious/ambivalent (a.k.a. preoccupied/fearful) individual tends to have a tenuous sense of self worth and exhibits anxiety over social rejection. The anxious/ambivalent stalker would therefore be motivated to seek the approval of the attachment object. The avoidant (a.k.a. dismissing) individual tends to maintain emotional distance from others. Rather than seeking approval, the avoidant stalker may be more likely to pursue the attachment object in order to retaliate against a perceived wrongdoing.

There has been a considerable amount of publicity given to accounts of individuals who have stalked celebrities prior to harming them (Dennison & Thomson, 2002). We now know that stalkers are more likely to victimize persons with whom they have had “real” rather than parasocial relationships (Logan, Leukefeld, & Walker, 2000). On the

other hand, stalkers do occasionally select celebrities as targets (Dietz, et al., 1991; Giles, 2000). Consequently, we believe that it is important to further our understanding of the relationships between attachment style and the tendency to condone behaviors that many would regard as indicative of celebrity stalking.

Specifically, we hypothesized that 1) adults who reported an insecure attachment style as children would report being more attracted to their favorite celebrities than securely attached adults for the “wrong” reasons (i.e., Because they were absorbed in the personal lives of their favorite celebrities and/or because their attitudes toward their favorite celebrity bordered on psychopathology). We also hypothesized that 2) adults who reported an insecure attachment style as children would be more likely to condone stalking and obsessive behaviors directed toward celebrities than adults who reported a secure attachment style. We further hypothesized that 3) greater attraction to celebrities for the “wrong” reasons would be positively related to scores condoning stalking and obsessive behaviors directed toward celebrities.

METHOD

Participants

Data were collected from four samples of undergraduate college students; The first sample consisted of 76 respondents (14 females, 62 males) ranging in age from 16 to 36 years (Mean age = 21.5 yrs.; $SD = 4.8$ yrs.) drawn from a private, technologically-oriented university in central Florida. Of these 64 were single and 12 were married.

The second sample consisted of 77 respondents (56 females, 21 males) ranging in age from 17 to 40 years (Mean age = 20.08 yrs; $SD = 3.5$) drawn from a public university in Savannah, Georgia. Of these 70 were single and 7 were married.

The third sample consisted of 77 respondents (50 females, 27 males) ranging in age from 18 to 42 years (Mean age = 20.66 yrs; $SD = 4.5$) drawn from a public, historically Black university in Jefferson City, Missouri. Of these 65 were single, 9 were married, and 3 were divorced.

The fourth sample consisted of 69 respondents (54 females, 15 males) ranging in age from 17 to 40 years (Mean age = 20.10 yrs; $SD = 4.3$) drawn from a public university in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Of these 67 were single and 2 married.

All told, none of those who agreed to participate refused after seeing the questionnaire containing the four scales described below. Data from seven persons were excluded because of a substantial amount of missing data.

Measures and Procedure

All respondents were administered the following four scales:

(1) The *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS; McCutcheon, et al., 2002; McCutcheon, et al., 2004). The CAS is a Likert-type scale with “strongly agree” equal to 5 and “strongly disagree” equal to 1. It has been factor analyzed into three subscales: entertainment-social (10 items), intense-personal (9 items), and borderline-pathological (4 items). Alpha reliability coefficients typically range from .84 to .94 for the scale as a whole, with alphas of about .70 for the shorter borderline pathological subscale (McCutcheon, et al., 2004). In this sample alphas ranged from .89 (entertainment-social) to .65 (borderline pathological), with intense-personal (.79) in between. Most of the many attempts to validate the CAS have been successful. For example, CAS scores have been found to correlate positively with the self-reported number of movies watched per week (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001) and scores on the entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline pathological subscales have been found to correlate significantly with Eysenckian extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism subscales respectively. Furthermore, Eysenckian lie scores correlated no higher than .07 with any of the three CAS subscale scores (Maltby, et al., 2003).

(2) The *Obsessional Relational Intrusion & Celebrity Stalking* scale (ORI & CS; unpublished). The ORI & CS is an 11-item Likert-type scale with “very inappropriate” equal to 1 and “very appropriate” equal to 7. Each item presents a brief fan-celebrity scenario and asks the respondent how appropriate or inappropriate was the fan’s action. For example, item four reads “A fan somehow found out the private phone number of the fan’s favorite celebrity, and called four times in two days, making obscene comments each time.” The items were chosen to reflect some of the most common types of obsessive and stalking behaviors cited by Cupach and Spitzberg (1998), with crucial elements of the definition (malice, threat, repetition) provided by Meloy and Gothard (1995) also embedded in all but item 11, “A fan wrote a letter to the fan’s favorite celebrity, a person the fan had never met, describing in great detail how much the fan enjoyed looking at publicity photos of the celebrity.”

A pilot study of the ORI & CS was conducted with 61 undergraduates at a small university in central Florida. The mean score was 26.2 ($SD = 7.2$), far below the midpoint of 44, indicating, as expected, that most of the fan behaviors were seen as inappropriate. Item 11 had the highest mean score (Mean = 4.11, $SD = 1.5$, as compared to Mean = 2.2, $SD = 1.2$, for the other ten items), as predicted. By design, the crucial elements that help to define obsession and stalking are either missing or not clearly present in item 11. The alpha reliability was .74; corrected item to total correlations ranged from .16 (item 3) to .55 (item 11). The mean of the

inter-item correlations was .20, indicating that the scenarios were not measuring exactly the same construct. In the present sample alpha was .79.

(3) The *Relationship Questionnaire* (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The RQ consists of four brief descriptions of relationship styles, one indicative of a secure attachment, the other three indicative of three different types of insecure attachments. The “secure” description reads “It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don’t worry about being alone or having others not accept me” (p. 244). Each description is followed by a seven-point, Likert-type scale anchored by “very unlike me” at 1 and “very like me” at 7. In spite of the Likert scale format, scores are typically used to categorize respondents into one or the other of four attachment categories. The RQ has enjoyed widespread usage and has been favorably reviewed (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). Our principal interest was in the power of perceptions of childhood attachment to parents or guardians to predict attitudes about celebrities and celebrity-related stalking, so we changed the wording to past tense. We also made it clear in both the directions and the wording of each item that our focus was on childhood relationships with one’s parents. For example, the “secure” description was changed to “It was easy for me to become emotionally close to my parents or guardians in the first 16 years of my life. I was comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I didn’t worry about being alone or having them not accept me.” If a respondent’s highest score was on this scale we categorized the respondent as “one,” securely attached. If the highest score was recorded on any of the other three scales we categorized the respondent as “zero,” insecurely attached. In Table 2, RQ scores are categorical, and the point-biserial formula – one variable is continuous and the other dichotomous – was used to compute correlation coefficients involving the RQ. Because we, like Shaver and Fraley (2004), are wary of categorical measures based on one choice, we also used a second measure of childhood attachment that used continuous scores.

(4) The 12-item “care” subscale from the *Parental Bonding Instrument* (PBI-C; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). This subscale is anchored by “very like” equal to 3 and “very unlike” equal to 0 for six of the items (“was affectionate to me”); the scoring is reversed for the remaining six (“seemed emotionally cold to me”). Respondents are asked to complete the measure for how they remember their parents during their first 16 years. The authors of the scale report good reliability and validity based on several studies (Parker, 1983; Parker, et al., 1979). In the present sample alpha was .89. The measure was originally designed so that respondents filled it out twice; once with the mother as the target

parent, and once with the father. We combined the two so that respondents targeted both parents (or guardians) at once. Thus, scores could range from 0 (very insecurely attached) to 36 (very securely attached).

All four measures were administered to small groups of college students in different orders to minimize the possibility of a systematic order effect. Students were given course credit in exchange for their participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means and standard deviations for the measures used in this study are reported in Table 1. All three CAS subscales correlated positively with each other (all correlations significant at $p < .001$; see Table Two). Furthermore, these correlation coefficients, along with means and standard deviations for the three subscales of the CAS are consistent with previous studies using the same instrument (McCutcheon, Maltby, Houran & Ashe, 2004). The mean (23.49) and standard deviation (7.0) obtained in the present study for the ORI & CS are similar to the mean (26.20) and standard deviation (7.2) obtained in the pilot study. Since the PBI-C and the RQ both attempt to measure security of attachment to one’s parents, we expected and found a highly significant positive relationship between scores on these measures ($r = .64, p < .001$). Together, these findings suggest that our participants responded thoughtfully and carefully to the items on each scale.

TABLE 1 Means and Standard deviations for the Measures Used

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
CAS-ES	25.43	8.3
CAS-I-P	14.94	5.4
CAS-BP	7.27	2.9
ORI & CS	23.49	7.0
PBI-C	27.51	7.5
	Frequency	
RQ	198/298*	

*About 66% classified as “securely attached”

Note: Sample size ranged from 297 to 299 because of missing data

We regressed age, sex and marital status as predictors of each of the six measures we used. Multiple R s for CAS-ES (.13), CAS-IP (.13), CAS-BP (.05), RQ (.08), and PBI-C (.125) were all non-significant. The multiple R for ORI & CS (.23) was significant at the .001 level. The effect was due to sex and age, but not marital status, such that males were slightly more likely to endorse celebrity stalking and older participants

were less likely to endorse it. On the whole, the results of these six multiple regressions suggest that age, sex, and marital status are not major predictor variables in the present study.

TABLE 2 Correlation Matrix for the Measures Used

	CAS-IP	CAS-BP	ORI & CS	RQ	PBI-C
CAS-ES	.66***	.73***	.25**	-.11	-.10
CAS-IP		.65***	.35***	-.09	-.08
CAS-BP			.25**	-.11	-.10
ORI & CS				-.16**	-.20**
RQ					.64***

** significant at .01 level (2-tailed)

*** significant at .001 level (2-tailed)

Hypothesis one was that adults who reported an insecure attachment style as children would report being more attracted to their favorite celebrities than those who reported a secure attachment. We qualified this prediction by limiting it to those who felt an attraction to their favorite celebrity for what would be the “wrong” reasons, according to the “Absorption-addiction” model. This hypothesis was not supported. All four correlation coefficients between our two measures of attachment, RQ and PBI-C, and CAS-IP and CAS-BP were negative, as predicted, but none were significant (see Table two). It should be noted that scores on the entertainment-social subscale were also weakly and negatively correlated with both the RQ and PBI-C. Thus any relationship between the tendency to worship celebrities and security of childhood attachment, if there is one, is extremely weak and seems to apply equally to all three CAS subscales.

Hypothesis 2 posited that adults who reported an insecure attachment style as children would be more likely to condone stalking and obsessive behaviors directed toward celebrities than adults who reported a secure attachment. Scores on the ORI & CS were negatively and significantly related to scores on both the RQ (-.16) and the PBI-C (-.20), thus providing support for the hypothesis (see Table 2). Do insecure childhood attachments predispose one to become a stalker, as suggested by Keinlen (1998) and McCann (2001)? It seems reasonable to assume tentatively that those with a history of insecure attachment who also condone stalking would be more likely to engage in stalking.

Why were insecurely attached persons more likely to endorse stalking-like behaviors directed toward celebrities? Attachment theory maintains that anxious/ambivalent, (aka preoccupied/fearful) types are more likely to be needy, socially demanding, and to cling to others (Sable, 1997). Consistent with this theory, Davis, Ace, and Andra (1998)

studied couples that had broken up and found that anxious/ambivalent types were indirectly linked to self-reported stalking behavior, if there was a high degree of anger about the dissolution of the relationship. Dye and Davis (2003) found a positive relationship (.26) between anxious attachment and a measure of stalking behavior. Keinlen (1998) suggested that avoidant or dismissing insecure types are also predisposed to stalking behaviors, especially when the individual exhibits antisocial personality traits. Although they do not seek social relationships as a rule, the avoidant individual may react to perceived rejection with rage. Stalking, in this case, becomes a means of retaliation. Further research on insecure attachments and stalking behaviors should strive to determine the motivations for stalking behaviors in order to test whether the motivations differ by the type of insecure attachment.

Hypothesis three was that greater attraction to celebrities for the “wrong” reasons (absorption & addiction) would be positively related to scores condoning stalking-like behavior directed toward celebrities. Scores on CAS-IP ($r = .35, p < .001$) and CAS-BP ($r = .25, p < .01$) correlated significantly with ORI & CS scores, thus supporting our third hypothesis (see Table 2).

However, scores on the CAS-ES were also correlated ($r = .25, p < .01$) with ORI & CS scores (See Table 2). There are at least two possible interpretations for this latter finding. One is that being attracted to celebrities because of entertainment and social reasons may not be as benign as suggested by the “Absorption-addiction” model. Evidence bearing on this point is unclear. For example, one study showed that high scores on CAS-ES were linked to extraversion, a relatively neutral trait, while scores on CAS-IP and CAS-BP were linked to neuroticism and psychoticism, respectively (Maltby, et al., 2003). On the other hand, the CAS-ES was linked with social dysfunction and depressive symptoms in another study (Maltby, et al., 2001).

A second interpretation calls into question the reliability, and thus indirectly the validity, of CAS-BP. We note that alpha for this subscale in the present study was only .65, and that alphas in other studies have been consistently lower than alphas for the other two CAS subscales (McCutcheon, et al., (2004). Perhaps a better measure of CAS-BP would have yielded a stronger correlation with ORI & CS. Hopefully, such a finding would have separated both CAS-IP and CAS-BP from CAS-ES and been more consistent with the “Absorption-addiction” model.

Recently a 7-item revision of the CAS-BP used in England has resulted in slightly higher alpha reliabilities (.70 & .74). Perhaps more importantly it correlated significantly (as did a slightly revised version of CAS-IP, but not a slightly revised version of CAS-ES) with such indicators of possible pathology as obsessive-compulsive disorder,

fantasy proneness, dissociation, and ego identity (Maltby, et al., in press). One possible direction for future research is a conceptual replication of the present study on American participants, using the revised CAS-BP. Another direction that might prove useful is the continued development and validation of the ORI & CS. Based on the pilot study and the present one it shows promise. If it can be shown to distinguish persons who have a history of stalking behavior from those who do not, it might prove to be especially useful for both research and clinical purposes.

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