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Attachment Reorganization Following Divorce: Normative Processes and Individual Differences

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Abstract

This paper uses attachment theory as a lens for reviewing contemporary research on how adults cope with marital separation and loss. The first section of the paper discusses the process of normative attachment reorganization, or the psychology of adaptive grief responses following relationship transitions. We argue that changes two processes, in particular, can be used to track changes in this normative reorganization process: narrative coherence and self-concept clarity. The second section of the paper suggests that individual differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance shape the variability in this normative reorganization process, largely as a result of the characteristic ways in which these styles organize emotion-regulatory tendencies. The paper closes with a series of integrative questions for future research, including a call for new studies aimed at understanding under what contexts anxiety and avoidance may be adaptive in promoting emotion recovery to separation and divorce experiences.

Keywords

attachment; divorce; separation; loss

Although every marital separation and divorce is unique, all relationship breakups share a set of common challenges. Broadly speaking, we can classify these challenges as *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal*. How people renegotiate their ongoing relationship with a former partner plays a critical role in their overall adjustment to divorce [1–3]. Similarly, the intrapersonal work of adjusting to a separation—that is, coping with grief and reorganizing one’s sense of self—also is associated with successful adaptation over time [4]. For example, recent work suggests that a trajectory of increased depression following marital dissolution is most highly associated with early mortality in the 6 years post event [*5]. More often than not, what happens between people as a relationship ends can set the stage for how any one

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person copes with the pain of separation [cf. 6]. Both of these dynamics, the interpersonal and the intrapersonal parts of recovery, can be understood as attachment processes.

Attachment theory, as outlined by the British physician, John Bowlby [7], and as extended by many others [see 8], provides a robust framework for understanding how people cope with loss and manage the social transition of divorce. In this brief review, we focus on two aspects of attachment theory that are relevant to how people cope with marital separation. The first centers on the question of normative attachment reorganization—that is, how all people go about psychologically restructuring their relationship with a former partner in the wake of a breakup. The second centers on the individual differences of attachment anxiety and avoidance, two factors that shape attachment-related emotion regulation and guide much of the research considered in this special issue [9,10]. Throughout, we maintain that in addition to idiosyncratic features of any one relationship (e.g., its history, the context of the breakup, whether children are involved, etc.), individual differences in anxiety and avoidance operate in combination to shape the normative reorganization process. These two themes are represented together in Figure 1, illustrates the central attachment dynamics that we believe shape how people respond to a relationship breakup. The figure depicts several elements that are beyond the scope of this paper (e.g., the background factors that give rise to individual differences in anxiety and avoidance) but central to a complete attachment-related understanding of separation and divorce.

Attachment Reorganization: An Organizing Construct

In the third volume of his trilogy on attachment and loss, Bowlby [7] extended his ideas about how children and adults respond to separations from an attachment figure when that separation appears or becomes permanent. As noted by Fraley and Shaver [**11], Bowlby believed that the human grief response was an integral element of the *attachment behavioral system*, a biological program that was designed by natural selection to ensure an individual's survival and, for children, to limit long-term separations from a primary caregiver. The system appears to be regulated by a sense of felt security—the experience of the world as a safe place in which to explore—and relationship disruptions trigger a stereotyped behavioral response that typically includes a period of activated protest, the followed by a sense of despair before concluding with what Bowlby [7] described as a state of “detachment” that reflected recovery and a preparedness to engage in renewed interests and the social world [see **11].

What does successful attachment reorganization look like? Sbarra and Hazan [12] attempted to answer this question by suggesting the process of reorganization involves a shift from coregulation, which is manifest as a state of interdependent regulation of psychological and biological responses within an intact pair bond [see 13], to a state of independent regulation in which a sense of felt security is no longer contingent on interactions with one specific person. At this reorganized endpoint, which Bowlby [7] believed was the natural outcome of uncomplicated mourning, reminders about the loss are no longer challenges that require substantial emotion-regulatory effort.

When it comes to divorce, several dimensions of this normative model of recovery now have empirical support. In Figure 1, we illustrated two elements of this process—self-concept clarity and narrative coherence. Although these are normative processes, people also vary in the extent to which they achieve adaptive outcomes. Borelli, Sbarra, and Mehl [**14], for example, recently found that independent judges could reliably detect participants' ongoing attachment to a former partner, that these judge ratings were significantly associated with participants' self-reported attachment to their former partner, and, importantly, participants first-person plural pronoun use (often referred to in the literature as *we-talk*) operated indirectly to statistically explain the association between judge-rated and self-report attachment to a former partner.

In their cross-sectional study, Borelli, Sbarra, and Mehl [**14] also found that continued attachment to a former partner was associated with greater reported self-concept disturbance, which has emerged as a construct of interest in multiple reports on romantic breakups and bereavement [15–17]. A recent experimental study of romantic breakups found that simply participating in research involving repeated, laboratory-based assessments improved participants' separation-related outcomes via decreases in self-concept disturbance [18]. In this study, decreases in self-concept disturbance across nine weeks were associated with higher levels of *we-talk* at the final assessment. In data from a separate sample of divorcing adults, greater *we-talk* at an initial assessment was associated with greater self-concept disturbance over 4.5 years [**19].

In Sbarra and Hazan's [12] process model, another key dimension of normative attachment reorganization was posited to be cognitive adaptation, or changes in adults' appraisals of the loss event over time. As grief abates, people no longer experience reminders about or provocations related to a breakup event as stressful events that require emotion regulatory effort. In large part, we believe this process of cognitive adaptation hinges on adults' abilities to create meaning and some form of narrative coherence following their separation experience. Bourassa and colleagues [**20] recently reported that adults' narrative coherence around their marital separation (operationalized as the extent to which participants felt they understood the story of their divorce and the extent to which the story of their separation made sense to them), predicted decreased psychological distress 7.5 months later. The finding is consistent with the larger body of attachment research suggesting that coherence in the way people narrate their relationship experiences is reflective of the degree to which they are psychologically resolved regarding these experiences [21]. Generating a narrative that is coherent requires the flexibility of attention to be able to examine and describe emotional experiences with sufficient detail so as to make them understandable to a naïve listener, and without emotional absorption [21]. Although assessed at the level of the narrative, coherence is thought to reflect the degree to which emotion regulatory efforts are successful during reflection on attachment experiences [22,23].

Attachment Anxiety and Avoidance Shape Normative Reorganization

Implicit in Figure 1 is the idea that normative attachment reorganization—driven in large part through the creation of narrative coherence and improved self-concept clarity—unfolds

differently for each person, and an explicit feature of the figure is that this variability in reorganization is shaped by individual differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance [**24]. Briefly, anxiety and avoidance represent the two relatively stable individual differences in the beliefs and expectations people hold with respect to attachment relationships, and they are frequently understood as the schemata that shape our emotion regulatory tendencies in the context of real or perceived attachment-related threats. People high in attachment avoidance often use deactivating strategies—behaviors designed to create emotional distance from a partner [25]—to minimize threats to their felt security following romantic separation. These deactivating strategies operate largely through emotion-regulatory suppression [26]. In contrast, people high in anxiety tend to engage in hyperactivating emotion regulatory strategies [9], including efforts to maintain and/or regain a sense of felt security by re-engaging with their former partner or relationship. In response to a breakup, these behaviors often focus on reconnecting to a former partner and can intensify and sustain emotional distress [25]. In its extreme form, this preoccupation can include a sense of excessive, obsessive, and confused behavior towards particular relationships or experiences [see 27]. Although most of the literature in this area focuses on the *potentially* maladaptive coping strategies used by people high in either avoidance and/or anxiety, the opposite is also true: People low on both of these domains are characterized as being relatively secure with respect to their attachment orientations and security appears to confer emotion regulatory benefits. Attachment security, we argue, is not simply the absence of maladaptive coping but instead enables regulatory flexibility via and the tendency to see relationships and oneself in relationships as positive, even in the face of a difficult separation experience [25,28].

In the immediate aftermath of a separation, high levels of attachment anxiety appear particularly maladaptive [**24]. Studying a sample of adults following a recent separation, for example, Lee and colleagues [29] reported that the association between attachment anxiety and blood pressure reactivity during a separation-related mental imagery task depended on the extent to which adults discussed their separation in overinvolved way (using high levels of first-person pronouns and present tense words). The authors suggested that this overinvolved style might reflect emotion-regulatory hyperactivation as it unfolded in real time; in other words, the trait-like features of attachment anxiety were most strongly associated with heightened blood pressure reactivity when the participants engaged this style of overinvolved discourse [**30].

Relative to the focus on attachment anxiety, far fewer studies focus on attachment avoidance. Sbarra and Borelli [31] found that people high in avoidance who evidenced increases in HRV (during a divorce-related mental recall task) reported greater decreases in self-concept disturbance across the subsequent three months. The authors interpreted this finding to suggest that when more highly avoidant adults are relatively more successful at emotion regulatory suppression, they show improved outcomes in the short term, reflective of successful attachment-related deactivation. Recent findings, however, raise the intriguing possibility that avoidance—but not anxiety—may be associated with greater separation-related distress over the long-term. Bourassa and colleagues [**19] found that higher levels of attachment avoidance were positively associated with self-reported separation-related psychological distress *over four years after* participants' initial separation, and this

association remained significant when accounting for attachment anxiety [32; also see Mikulincer and Shaver, this issue].

Attachment and Divorce: Future Directions

Our focus on normative attachment reorganization and the ways in which individual differences may shape this processes in the wake of a separation and divorce raises many questions that are ripe for future research. In Figure 1, we included two elements of normative attachment reorganization—narrative coherences and self-concept clarity. Are these psychological processes outgrowths of successful adaptation to separation and divorce, or are these key mechanisms of change that may spur (or, fail to spur) attachment-related reorganization? What other candidate processes are central to reorganization? When it comes to anxiety and avoidance, we still know relatively little about how the background factors (shaping these emotion regulatory tendencies) may condition people's response to separation events. For instance, it is likely the case that people with an extensive history of loss or adverse childhood experiences will struggle more following a marital separation, but we know little about how these background experiences interact with adults' present attachment styles to predict adjustment. Finally, the broader attachment literature is beginning to recognize that anxiety and avoidance have adaptive value. When it comes to a breakup, the short-term benefit of avoidance, when successful, seems relatively clear, but is it really the case that this strategy is associated with worsened outcomes, as some of the newer evidence reported above might suggest? With respect to anxiety, which is often characterized as maladaptive after a separation [25], what are the boundary conditions for successful adaptation? In cases where there is no association between, say, anxiety and separation-related distress, it may well be the case that a small amount of anxiety is adaptive but there is a certain tipping point at which hyperactivating strategies become inflexible and maladaptive. How can this process be studied going forward? Taken together, the questions raised here hold considerable promise to advancing our understanding of adjustment to divorce and, perhaps, attachment theory more broadly.

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Highlights

- Attachment theory is a useful framework for studying how adults cope with divorce.
- Narrative coherence and self-concept clarity are central to post-divorce adaptation.
- Individual differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance shape emotional recovery.
- Emotional recovery hinges on both normative processes and individual differences.

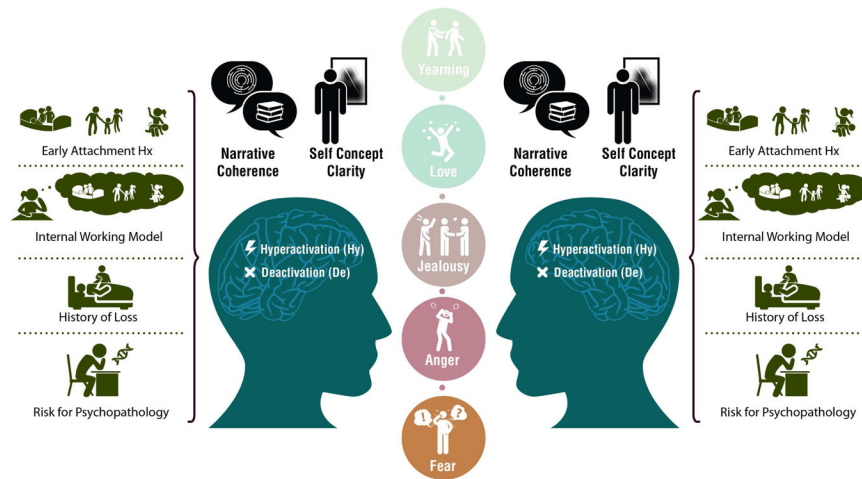


Figure 1.

Illustration of the attachment-related themes that unfold in the context of marital separation and divorce. Between the two members of the dyad are common emotions that are experienced by adults when marriage comes to an end. The emotional experiences within and between people are shaped by individual differences in the emotion regulatory hyperactivation and deactivation; these attachment-related emotion regulatory tendencies are shaped, in turn, by a series of background life events and individual differences, which are illustrated on the left- and rightmost panels in the figure. Above each person, we have illustrated two of the central dynamics—narrative coherence and self-concept clarity—that are characteristic of attachment-related psychological reorganization after an interpersonal loss.