

Object relations and attachment styles in adulthood

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Abstract: Attachment theory and object relations theory both describe interpersonal relationships from childhood throughout the life span. The goal of the research was to investigate the relatedness between dimensions of object relations and attachment styles in adulthood. 176 undergraduate students from University of Ljubljana filled out the Test of Object Relations (Žvelc, 1998) and Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Research results showed that there exist significant and theoretically consistent correlations between object relations and attachment styles in adulthood. The secure attachment style refers to a low expression of dependence and alienation dimensions of object relations. The preoccupied attachment style is positively correlated to the dependence dimension. The results of the research confirmed the need for differentiating avoidant attachment styles into two distinctive types. As was to be expected, the fearful-avoidant attachment style is positively correlated to the dependence and alienation dimensions. Although individuals with a fearful-avoidant attachment style long for closer relationships, they are afraid of them. On the other hand, individuals with a dismissive-avoidant attachment style deny their need for relationships and appear to be self-sufficient (correlations with the self-absorption and alienation dimensions). The author proposes that in order to measure adult attachment styles, it would be beneficial to also include the reciprocity – self-absorption dimension.

Key words: attachment theory, object relations, interpersonal relationships

Objektni odnosi in stili navezanosti v odraslosti

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Povzetek: Teorija navezanosti in teorija objektnih odnosov raziskujeta medosebne odnose od otroštva preko celotnega življenjskega ciklusa. Cilj raziskave je bil ugotoviti povezanost med dimenzijami objektnih odnosov in stili navezanosti v odraslosti. 176 študentov Univerze v Ljubljani je izpolnilo Test objektnih odnosov (Žvelc, 1998) in Vprašalnik medosebnih odnosov (Bartholomew in Horowitz, 1991). Rezultati raziskave kažejo na pomembne in teoretično konsistentne korelacije med objektnimi odnosi in stili navezanosti v odraslosti. Stil varne navezanosti se povezuje z nizko izraženostjo odvisnosti in odtujenosti. Preokupiran stil se pozitivno povezuje z dimenzijo odvisnost. Rezultati raziskave potrjujejo delitev izogibajoče navezanosti na dva različna stila. V skladu s pričakovanji se plašljivo-izogibajoči stil pozitivno povezuje z dimenzijo odvisnost in odtujenost. Čeprav posamezniki s plašljivo-izogibajočim stilom hrepenijo po tesnejših odnosih, se jih obenem bojijo. Po drugi strani pa posamezniki z odklonilno-izogibajočim stilom zanikajo potrebo po odnosih in delujejo samozadostni

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(korelacije z dimenzijo zagledanost vase in odtujenost). Avtor predlaga, da bi bilo pri merjenju stilov navezanosti koristno upoštevati še dimenzijo vzajemnost-zagledanost vase.

Ključne besede: teorija navezanosti, objektni odnosi, medosebni odnosi

CC = 3020

The attachment system motivates an infant to seek proximity and establish contact with his or her parents and other primary caretakers (Bowlby, 1969). Ainsworth et al. researched the different infant-mother attachment patterns (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978). Their *Strange Situation* experiment, which explored the characteristics of infant-mother attachment in the first year of life, played a very important role in attachment theory. The infant's reaction to being briefly separated and then reunited with the mother serves as an indicator of the infant's attachment to the mother, revealing whether the infant feels a sense of security in the relationship with the mother or not (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Consequently, researchers classified the infant's behaviour during the *Strange Situation* experiment into one of the following categories: B – secure, A – avoidant, C – ambivalent / dismissive. Samples A and C present insecurely (anxiously) attached infants.

Bowlby (1969) was the first to note that attachment relationships are not limited to childhood, but continue to be important throughout the life span; the researchers confirmed his hypothesis (Bartolomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Each of the above attachment style patterns has its equivalent in later relationships. For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized romantic love in adult life as an attachment process. They developed a questionnaire, containing descriptions of three attachment styles (secure, anxious-ambivalent and avoidant), so as to determine which attachment style is typical of an adult person. They observed that there exist important correlations between attachment styles in childhood and adulthood.

Drawing on descriptions of attachment styles in adulthood as presented by Hazan and Shaver (1987), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) went on to develop a new model which incorporated Bowlby's concept on internal working models. They discovered that an attachment style can be defined by two basic dimensions (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a):

- Self-model (which can be positive, i.e. 'I am worthy of love', or negative, i.e. 'I am not worthy of love'),
- Other-model (which can be positive, i.e. 'Other people are trustworthy', or negative, i.e. 'Other people are untrustworthy').

According to Bartholomew (1990), these two dimensions can also be conceptualised as dependence and avoidance. The self-model can be positive (low dependence) or negative (high dependence on others). The other-model, too, can be negative (high avoidance) or positive (low avoidance).

Based on these two basic dimensions, they described four attachment styles in adulthood. A specific combination of dimensions of self-image and other-image is characteristic for each attachment style. In their *Relationship Questionnaire*, Bartholomew and Horowitz included descriptions of all four attachment styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b).

Securely attached individuals have no difficulties in becoming emotionally close to other people (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). They feel pleasant and secure if they can rely on other people and vice versa. They are not worried about being left alone, or that people might not accept them. It is typical of the securely attached people that they have a positive self-image and a positive image of others; no serious interpersonal problems can be observed (Bartholomew, 1990).

Individuals with preoccupied attachment style are preoccupied with seeking emotional closeness to others. Such people do not feel well unless they have close contact with other people. They feel a sense of unworthiness, yet value other people positively (i.e. negative self-model combined with a positive other-model). This pattern corresponds to ambivalent attachment style in childhood (Hazan and Shaver, 1987).

According to Bartholomew (1990), avoiding attachment can refer either to a fear of intimacy, or to a lack of interest and motivation to enter into intimate relationships. Consequently, she distinguishes between two attachment styles which refer to avoidance in adulthood:

- Fearful-avoidant attachment style (typical fear of attachment)
- Dismissive-avoidant attachment style (typical emphasis on independence and self-reliance; downplaying of the importance of close relationships).

People with a fearful-avoidant attachment style are not relaxed when entering into close contact with other people. Although they desire to have close relationships, they distrust other people and show substantial difficulties in relying on them. The fearful –avoidant attachment style is typical of people who had been rejected in childhood by their parents. As a consequence, they concluded that other people are untrustworthy and uncaring, and that they too are untrustworthy. Thus, they develop both a negative self-model and a negative other-model. Despite wanting social contact and intimacy, they are unable to shake off their feeling of distrust and fear of rejection. High sensitivity to social acceptance is a typical feature of this attachment style. Such individuals avoid social situations in order to avoid the possibility of being rejected.

On the other hand, people with a dismissive-avoidant attachment style feel well without close relationships with other people. For these individuals, it is very important that they feel independent and self-sufficient. They have a positive self-regard, yet value other people negatively. They protect themselves from

disappointment by avoiding relationships which demand closeness and intimacy, and by preserving a feeling that they are independent and invulnerable. These strategies relate to defences which serve to protect an individual from being aware of his or her attachment needs, as well as from experiencing negative feelings (Žvelc and Žvelc, 2006). This attachment pattern corresponds to the avoidant type of children which was observed in the *Strange Situation* experiment.

Integrative Model of Interpersonal Relationships

The integrative model of interpersonal relationships was developed as an attempt to integrate attachment theory and object relations in adulthood (Žvelc, 2007, in press). This model describes three basic bipolar dimensions of interpersonal relationships:

- 1) independence – dependence
- 2) connectedness – alienation
- 3) reciprocity – self-absorption.

The independence – dependence dimension refers to the process of separation and individuation, which involves the development from complete dependence on another person to independence and autonomy (Žvelc, in press). Individuation enables one to develop a stable sense of self which is differentiated from other people. The goal of this developmental task is for an individual to become his or her own person – individuated and separate. This developmental process was most thoroughly described by different object relations theorists (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Fairbairn, 1986/1941, 1986/1943; Kernberg, 1976; Winnicott, 1986/1960; Akhtar, 1994).

The connectedness – alienation dimension describes the development of the capacity to connect with other people. This includes an ability to form and maintain stable intimate relationships. The goal of this task of development is to create intimate attachments to other people. Theorists of attachment such as Bowlby (1969) and Stern (1985) repeatedly stressed the importance of this developmental task.

However, in psychoanalytic theory a third line of development can be found. The reciprocity – self-absorption dimension is extremely important for establishing reciprocity and intersubjectivity, as it leads from grandiose and omnipotent experience of the self to reciprocal relationships. Kohut (1971, 1977) and Winnicott (1986/1960) laid great emphasis on this developmental task. A child is assumed to move from a narcissistic experience of self, which includes a feeling of grandiosity, egocentrism and omnipotence, to reciprocal relationships with other people. This line of development is central to the development of intersubjectivity (Aron, 2000; Benjamin, 1995; Stern, 2004), which paves the way for empathy and reciprocity in interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal relationships in adulthood can be divided into subject and object relations (Žvelc, 2007, in press). The term object relation describes those relationships in which one person is perceived as an object which serves to satisfy the needs of the other person. In terms of interpersonal relationships, this can present the right pole of any of the three basic dimensions (dependence, alienation or self-absorption). I propose the term subject relations as a counter-pole to the term object relations. The term subject relation describes relationships with other people when these are experienced as subjects with their own wishes, interests and needs. Individuals who establish subject relationships recognize the subjective world of another person. They are capable of forming partnerships which are based on equality and adapting to each other. A subject relation can thus be represented as the left pole of the basic dimensions (independence, connectedness and reciprocity).

Attachment Styles and Dimensions of Object Relations

Attachment theory and theory of object relations describe similar relational phenomena in adulthood; only each of them describes different aspects of interpersonal relationships (Fishler, Sperling, and Carr, 1990). We may therefore ask ourselves to what extent do the basic attachment styles coincide with the dimensions of the integrative model of interpersonal relations.

The independence-dependence and connectedness-alienation dimensions have been extensively explored in literature on adult attachment. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) term the independence – dependence dimension as dependence, and the connectedness – alienation dimension as avoidance. Attachment theory in adulthood explains the different attachment styles by means of these two dimensions, integrating both of them in its conceptualization of attachment styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994).

A strongly expressed dependence dimension corresponds to the preoccupied attachment style, while the alienation dimension corresponds to the avoidant style of attachment. Therefore, I consider that the secure attachment style coincides with subject relations (expression of independence, connectedness and reciprocity). However, there are specific differences. Secure attachment style is most often defined as the ability to experience intimacy and a sense of security in a relationship (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). With regard to my model (Žvelc, 2007, in press), it mostly includes the dimensions of connectedness and independence. Conceptually speaking, I can say that secure attachment style also includes reciprocity in relationships. However, the instruments which measure attachment styles in adulthood do not include reciprocity as a separate dimension. In questionnaires on attachment styles in adulthood, it is possible for certain people to classify themselves as securely attached, although non-reciprocity and self-absorption are typical of them.

The goal of this research is to investigate the relatedness between dimensions

of object relations and adult attachment styles. My basic hypothesis is that adult attachment styles and dimensions of object relations are significantly related according to the described theoretical model.

Method

Participants

176 students from different faculties of the University of Ljubljana participated in the research, of which 94 (53.4%) were male students and 82 (46.67%) were female students. They ranged in age from 19 to 27; the average age of participants was 22.3 years ($SD = 1.4$).

Instruments

The Test of Object Relations (TOR) (Žvelc, 1998, 2007, 2008) was developed to measure dimensions of object relations in adulthood. The test was developed through three main phases of validation: theoretical-substantive, internal-structural and external-criterion (Žvelc, 1998, 2007). It measures three main dimensions of object relations: dependence, alienation and self-absorption, as well as the corresponding six sub-dimensions.

The dependence dimension includes two sub-dimensions which represent two perspectives on dependent, non-autonomous functioning. Symbiotic merging refers to undifferentiated states and merging with another person, while separation anxiety refers to fears of separation and being separate.

The alienation dimension refers to avoidance, lack of contact with other people and withdrawal into one's own world. Other characteristics include a feeling of alienation, absence of intimate relationships, distrust and self-sufficiency. The basic fear, typical of this dimension, is the fear of engulfment – a fear of being dependent and trapped in an interpersonal relationship (sub-dimension fear of engulfment). Individuals with these issues typically have major difficulties in establishing close interpersonal relationships (sub-dimension social isolation).

The self-absorption dimension includes sub-dimensions narcissism and egocentrism which refer to the different aspects of self-absorption. Narcissism describes an individual's grandiose and omnipotent experience of the self, while egocentrism refers to using and exploiting other people for one's own needs. A person with a strongly expressed self-absorption dimension has not managed to develop the capacity for reciprocity.

The test has satisfactory internal consistency and construct validity (Žvelc, 2008). In a sample of 442 students, the author obtained the following α -coefficients

of reliability (symbiotic merging: .75; separation anxiety: .83; narcissism: .82; egocentrism: .83; fear of engulfment: .85; social isolation: .85) (Žvelc, 2008). The confirmatory factor analysis of the sample confirmed the appropriate linking of sub-dimensions of object relations into higher rank dimensions (Žvelc, 2007).

Over the last ten years, the test has been used in many cases of research (Barkhuizen, 2005; Kopal 2002, 2008; Pahole, 2006; Pavšič-Mrevlje, 2006; Rogič Ožek 2004; Štirn 2002; Žvelc, 2000, 2007). The test was translated into the English, Croatian and Spanish language. In addition, it was validated on a sample of Croatian students (Petrović, 2007).

Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Slovene adaptation Žvelc, 2003; Žvelc & Žvelc, 2006). The questionnaire is aimed at measuring the four attachment styles in adulthood.

- 1) STYLE A: securely attached
- 2) STYLE B: fearful-avoidant
- 3) STYLE C: preoccupied
- 4) STYLE D: dismissive-avoidant

The questionnaire contains the four descriptions of attachments styles which refer to close relationships of an individual with other people. To illustrate this, here is an example of a description of secure attachment: 'I have no difficulties in becoming emotionally close to other people. I feel pleasant and secure if I can rely on them and vice versa. I am not at all worried about staying alone, or not being accepted by people.'

Firstly, participants choose the attachment style which best describes them. Secondly, they assess on a 7-point scale to what extent does a particular attachment style correspond to their personality (1 – *not at all typical of me*; 7 – *very typical of me*). In this research we used only this scale. The theoretical model of attachment styles in adulthood is presented more in detail in the introductory part of this article. Validation research shows important correlations between a questionnaire on attachment styles with other instruments for measuring attachment (e.g. Hazan-Shaver Attachment Questionnaire), and interviews for determining attachment styles in adulthood (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Griffin and Bartholomew, 1994a, 1994b).

Data Analysis

Data was processed by means of SPSS 13.0 statistical software for Windows. The correlations were calculated by means of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

Results and discussion

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for Relationship Questionnaire*

RQ	Securely Attached	Fearful avoidant	Preoccupied	Dismissive – avoidant
<i>M</i>	4,69	3,82	3,22	2,95
<i>SD</i>	1,70	1,79	1,76	1,70
Minimum	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Maximum	7,00	7,00	7,00	7,00

Note. RQ = Relationship questionnaire.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for Test of object relations*

TOR	Dependence	SM	SA	Self-absorption	NARC	EGC	Alienation	FE	SI
<i>M</i>	80,86	42,33	38,18	72,09	36,58	35,16	60,44	32,56	28,16
<i>SD</i>	15,92	7,63	9,77	14,88	8,80	8,12	14,10	8,59	8,17
Minimum	45,00	21,00	18,00	41,00	18,00	20,00	35,00	16,00	15,00
Maximum	123,00	67,00	75,00	134,00	71,00	72,00	97,00	71,00	53,00

Note. TOR = Test of object relations; SM = Symbiotical Merging; SA = Separation Anxiety; NARC = Narcissism; EGC = Egocentrism; FE = Fear of Engulfment; SI = Social Isolation.

Table 3. *Correlations between dimensions of object relations and attachments styles in adulthood*

	Object relations dimensions and sub-dimensions								
	Attachment styles			Attachment styles					
	Dep.	SM	SA	SAb	NARC	EGC	A	FE	SI
Securely attached	-.12	-.04	-.16*	.26**	.34**	.11	-.24**	-.07	-.34**
Fearful-avoidant	.24**	.25**	.21**	-.05	-.10	.07	.36**	.27**	.34**
Preoccupied	.37**	.39**	.28**	.03	-.03	.12	.17*	.12	.17*
Dismissive - avoidant	-.15	-.10	-.16*	.18*	.20*	.15	.30**	.27**	.28**

Note. Dep. = Dependence; SM = Symbiotical Merging; SA = Separation Anxiety; SAb = Self-absorption; NARC = Narcissism; EGC = Egocentrism; A = Alienation; FE = Fear of Engulfment; SI = Social Isolation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

As we can see in Table 3, significant (and theoretically expected) correlations exist between object relations and attachment styles in adulthood. Secure attachment style is correlated negatively with all dimensions of object relations, except the self-absorption dimension and sub-dimension narcissism. Furthermore, significant correlations are between the dimensions of social isolation and separation anxiety; this means that individuals with a more pronounced secure attachment style experience less separation anxiety, as well as less social isolation, in their relations. Negative correlations with the dimensions of object relations were to be expected, since I made an assumption in the theoretical model that the secure attachment style coincides with subject relations, which implies low expression of dimensions of object relations. Secure attachment in adulthood includes a low expression of dependence and avoidance dimensions (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which is consistent with my research results.

Secure attachment style is importantly and positively correlated with the sub-dimension of narcissism. This means that a more pronounced expression of secure attachment style also points to a more pronounced grandiose and omnipotent experiencing of the self. However, this important correlation with narcissism may also reflect that the questionnaire on adult attachment styles does not differentiate between securely attached individuals and individuals with pronounced narcissistic character traits. Individuals with a pronounced sub-dimension of narcissism feel that they are something more than other people; they are aloof and have feelings of grandiosity and omnipotence. It is expected such individuals will chose that attachment style in the questionnaire which appears to be the least problematic and is harmonious with their image of themselves. The description of a secure attachment style appears to be the most functional, whereas other attachment styles imply the more negative aspects of relations.

The obtained results are consistent with the research from Kobal (2004), who found that self-assessment questionnaires on attachment styles do not distinguish clearly enough between the secure attachment style and the dismissive – avoidant attachment style which is, among other things, associated with denial of problems and conflicts, as well as with having an exaggerated self-image.

Fearful – avoidant attachment style correlates positively, and in a statistically significant manner, with the dependence and alienation dimensions, but not with the self-absorption dimension. This is fully in line with my model (Žvelc, 2007, in press), as well as with attachment theory in adulthood. A more pronounced expression of dependence and avoidance dimensions is typical of the fearful-avoidant attachment style (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Such individuals want to be close to other people, yet they fear their rejection. Consequently, they prefer to avoid relations with others. The expression of dependence and alienation dimensions points to a very distinctive ambivalence in relationships. Such individuals want to enter into a dependent relationship so as to merge with others, yet are simultaneously afraid of

losing themselves and their independence in doing so. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found that a negative self-model and a negative other-model are typical of these individuals, which coincides with the obtained irrelevant correlation with the self-absorption dimension.

Dismissive-avoidant attachment style correlates in a statistically significant manner with the self-absorption and alienation dimensions. What is more, the correlation with alienation is more pronounced than the correlation with self-absorption. This fully coincides with the description of the dismissive-avoidant attachment style, as this kind of individuals feel themselves to be self-sufficient and do not actively seek relations with others. In comparison with the fearful-avoidant attachment style, individuals with the dismissive-avoidant attachment style maintain a positive self-model and a negative other-model (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). The positive self-model is reflected in the correlation with self-absorption and significant negative correlation with sub-dimension separation anxiety. Since dismissing individuals prefer to be alone and experience themselves as not needing relations with other people, it makes perfect sense that they do not feel separation anxiety. The research results showed that fear of engulfment is typical of them, for it is this fear that drives them into seeking independence and developing self-sufficiency. In close relations, they are afraid of losing themselves.

The obtained research results support the differentiation of avoidant attachment styles into two distinctive types (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Both avoidant attachment styles are importantly correlated with the alienation dimension. Where they differ is that the fearful attachment style positively, and in a statistically important manner, correlates with the dependence dimension. With the dismissive attachment style, we find a negative correlation with the dependence dimension and a positive correlation with the self-absorption dimension. To sum up, the fearful attachment style wants relations and yearns for merging with another person, whereas the dismissive attachment style denies his or her wish for intimate relations.

Preoccupied attachment style refers to reaching out to other people so as to merge with them and become one with them (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Such individuals feel that other people do not want to be as close to them as they themselves wish. In the theoretical model, I assumed a positive correlation with the dependence dimension, which coincides with the obtained research results. Preoccupied attachment style is associated with a more pronounced expression of symbiotic-merging and separation anxiety sub-dimensions. What may surprise us at first is the positive and significant correlation with the social isolation sub-dimension. Individuals with a more pronounced preoccupied attachment style experience more social isolation. I believe the obtained correlation is congruent with the description of the preoccupied attachment style. Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style tend to get over-involved in close relationships, excessively seeking merging and

dependence, which drives other people away (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Simultaneously, the more pronounced social isolation coincides with their feeling that other people do not want to be as close to them as they themselves want. Thus, despite being included in relationships, they experience feelings of loneliness and deficient connectedness.

The correlations between attachment styles in adulthood and dimensions of object relations are congruent with the integrative model of interpersonal relationships (Žvelc, 2007, in press). Attachment theory in adulthood describes attachment only from the perspective of independence – dependence and connectedness – alienation dimensions. The results of the research indicate that it is useful to include also the reciprocity – self-absorption dimension into conceptualisation of attachment styles. This dimension is extremely important for establishing reciprocity and intersubjectivity (Žvelc, in press). The individual does not use other people to fulfill his/her own needs, but perceives them as subjects with their own interests and needs. This line of development is central to the development of intersubjectivity (Aron, 2000; Benjamin, 1995) which enables empathy and reciprocity in interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

The obtained research results present contribution to understanding of two similar constructs: object relations and attachment styles in adulthood. Research results showed that there exist significant correlations between object relations and attachment styles in adulthood. The correlations between attachment styles in adulthood and dimensions of object relations coincide with the assumptions of adult attachment theory (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991) and integrative model of interpersonal relationships (Žvelc, 2007, in press). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) describe attachment styles by means of two dimensions (dependence and avoidance), yet the results of this research showed that, in order to define attachment styles more accurately, it would be beneficial to include the third dimension: reciprocity – self-absorption. Further research is necessary on the relation between adult attachment styles and object relations. It might be interesting to employ other questionnaires on attachment styles and compare the results of different cases of research.

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Prispelo 29.03.2010
Sprejeto 10.06.2010