Attachment, personality, and volunteering: Placing volunteerism in an attachment-theoretical framework

Ayelet Erez a,*, Mario Mikulincer b, Marinus H. van Ijzendoorn a, Pieter M. Kroonenberg a

a Leiden University, The Netherlands
b Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Received 25 September 2006; received in revised form 10 July 2007; accepted 18 July 2007

Abstract

Recent studies have emphasized the negative impact of attachment insecurities for prosocial behavior. We examined the unique contribution of attachment insecurities to volunteerism and motives for volunteering beyond the explanatory power of high-order personality traits and assessed the potential roles of motives for volunteering in mediating and moderating the links between attachment insecurities and volunteering. One-hundred fifty-nine Dutch undergraduates completed scales tapping attachment insecurities, engagement in volunteer activities, motives for volunteering, and high-order personality traits. Findings show that attachment insecurities made a unique contribution to volunteerism beyond the explanatory power of personality traits. In addition, self-focused motives for volunteering were found to moderate the link between anxious attachment and volunteering behavior. The discussion focused on the psychological mechanisms by which attachment insecurities affect volunteerism.

Keywords: Attachment theory; Caregiving; Volunteerism; Altruism; Personality

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: erez@fsw.leidenuniv.nl (A. Erez).
1. Introduction

During the last decade, there has been a renaissance of interest in the investigation of prosocial motives and behaviors (e.g., Batson, 1991; Clary et al., 1998). Among these prosocial activities are altruistic volunteer activities, such as teaching reading to poor children, running errands for the homebound elderly, and regularly donating blood. In recent theoretical writings, Mikulincer and Shaver (2003, 2007) have emphasized the relevance of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973) for the study of prosocial behavior, and Gillath et al. (2005) found that insecure patterns of attachment counter altruistic motives for volunteering and actual engagement in philanthropic activities. The purpose of our study is to attempt to replicate these findings in a new sample while dealing with two unaddressed issues: (a) the unique explanatory power of attachment patterns beyond the potential contribution of high-order personality traits (e.g., extraversion, neuroticism) to volunteerism, and (b) the interplay between attachment patterns, motives for volunteerism, and volunteering behavior.

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), human beings are born with an innate psychobiological system (the attachment behavioral system) that motivates them to seek proximity, comfort, and support from protective others in times of need. Bowlby (1973) also proposed that the parameters of the attachment behavioral system are gradually shaped and altered by social experiences with protective others, resulting eventually in fairly stable individual differences in attachment style—a systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that results from a particular attachment history (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Research, beginning with Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) and continuing through personality and social psychology studies (reviewed by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007), indicates that attachment styles can be measured along two orthogonal dimensions, attachment-related anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). A person’s position on the attachment anxiety dimension indicates the degree to which he or she worries that a partner will not be available and supportive in times of need and strives to maximize proximity and dependence to relationship partners. A person’s position on the attachment avoidance dimension indicates the extent to which he or she distrusts relationship partners’ goodwill and strives to maintain independence and self-reliance. People who score low on these two dimensions are said to have a secure attachment style.

Variations along the dimensions of attachment avoidance and anxiety reflect both a person’s sense of attachment security and the ways in which he or she deals with distress (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007). People who score low on these dimensions hold internalized representations of comforting relationship partners, which create a continuing sense of attachment security, positive self-regard, and reliance on constructive strategies of affect regulation. Those who score high on either attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety possess internalized representations of frustrating attachment figures. These insecure individuals rely on what Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) called secondary attachment strategies, which involve either deactivating or hyperactivating the attachment system in an attempt to cope with insecurities and anxieties. Whereas high scores on attachment avoidance indicate reliance on deactivating strategies (inhibition of proximity seeking and instead trying to handle stressors alone), high scores on attachment anxiety reflect hyperactivating strategies—energetic attempts to attain greater proximity, support, and love combined with a lack of confidence that it will be provided.
According to attachment theory and research (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007; Shaver & Hazan, 1988), the functioning of the attachment system is extremely important for understanding individual differences in prosocial behaviors. Theoretically, because of the urgent need to protect oneself from imminent threats, activation of the attachment system interferes with many non-attachment activities, including caregiving and any behavior intended to improve others’ welfare. Under stressful conditions, adults generally turn to others for support rather than thinking first about providing assistance and comfort to others. Only when they feel reasonably secure themselves can people invest time and energy to deal with others’ needs and suffering.

Following this reasoning, Mikulincer and Shaver (2003, 2007) concluded that securely attached people would be more likely than relatively insecure people to empathize with and provide care for others. In addition, different psychological mechanisms would underlie the responses of attachment-anxious and attachment-avoidant people to others’ suffering. In a number of studies, Batson (1991) has shown that lack of empathy or compassion can be due either to lack of prosocial motivation or to the arousal of what he calls “personal distress”, a form of self-focused discomfort that is not translated into effective helping. Mikulincer and Shaver (2003, 2007) reasoned that avoidant people would distance themselves from others’ suffering, resulting in sharply decreased prosocial motivation. In contrast, attachment-anxious people can be easily distressed in a self-focused manner (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for an extensive review) and then can react to others’ suffering with personal distress.

These theoretical ideas have received extensive support in correlational studies examining caregiving patterns within dating and married couples (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Hohaus, 2001; Kunce & Shaver, 1994) as well as experimental studies examining compassion and helping towards needy strangers in laboratory settings (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2001; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). Overall, findings indicate that attachment avoidance interferes with sensitive and responsive caregiving responses and attachment anxiety is associated with personal distress and ineffective patterns of caregiving.

Gillath et al. (2005) recently assessed attachment-style differences in engagement in voluntary altruistic activities. This study was conducted at three different locations (Israel; The Netherlands, US) and participants were asked to complete a scale tapping the number of volunteer philanthropic activities they volunteered for and the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al., 1998), measuring the extent to which they volunteered for either selfish, egoistic reasons (self-protection, career promotion, social approval) or more altruistic reasons (other-focused values). The results were highly similar in all three countries. Avoidant attachment was consistently associated with engaging in fewer volunteer activities and being involved for less altruistic reasons. Attachment anxiety was not directly related to engaging in volunteer activities, but it was associated with more egoistic reasons for volunteering.

Although Gillath et al. (2005) study supported the link between attachment and volunteering behavior, it did not address two important issues that leave the findings open to alternative interpretations. First, the observed link between attachment avoidance and inhibited volunteering can still reflect the underlying action of third-factor variables, such as high-order personality traits of extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness, rather than unique effects of attachment dimensions. Previous studies have shown that attachment insecurities are associated with lower levels of extraversion and agreeableness and higher levels of neuroticism (e.g., Carver, 1997; Noftle & Shaver, 2006; Shaver & Brennan, 1992) and that variations in these traits are related to prosocial
behavior and volunteerism (e.g., Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; McCrae & Costa, 1999). Unfortunately, Gillath et al. (2005) did not assess high-order personality traits and then could not empirically examine the extent to which their findings are unique for attachment dimensions or are a mere reflection of these traits. This is the first goal of the current study.

A second interpretational problem of Gillath et al. (2005) study deals with the interplay between attachment dimensions, motives for volunteering, and volunteering behaviors. Theoretically, lack of altruistic motives for volunteering should mediate the observed link between attachment avoidance and inhibited volunteering. Highly avoidant people hold negative models of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and then may not give any priority to improvement of others’ welfare among their values and goals, which, in turn, would directly inhibit volunteering behavior. In addition, motives for volunteering can moderate the possible effects of attachment anxiety on volunteering behavior. Although attachment anxiety was not associated with this kind of behavior, it is still possible that attachment-anxious people, who constantly search for others’ approval and love, would be particularly prone to engage in volunteering activities when these self-focused benefits (e.g., self-protection, social admiration) underlie their reasons for volunteering. Unfortunately, Gillath et al. (2005) did not examine whether motives can mediate or moderate the effects of attachment dimensions on volunteering behaviors. This is the second goal of the current study.

In order to deal with the two main goals of the study, we replicated Gillath et al. (2005) study in a new Dutch sample while adding a measurement of personality traits and conducting more sophisticated data analyses. Specifically, participants completed a battery of self-report scales tapping attachment dimensions (Experience in Close Relationships, Brennan et al., 1998), high-order personality traits (NEO Five Factor Inventory, Costa & McCrae, 1992), engagement in volunteering activities (the Volunteering questionnaire, Gillath et al., 2005), and motives for volunteering (VFI, Clary et al., 1998).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 159 Dutch undergraduates from Leiden University (84 women and 75 men, ranging in age from 19 to 33 years, Mdn = 22), who volunteered to participate in the study without any monetary reward. One-hundred and forty-two participants were single. Statistical analyses revealed no significant gender differences in any of the measured variables or any significant interactions involving gender.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants received a battery of four questionnaires in Dutch. The questionnaire battery included scales assessing attachment dimensions, volunteerism, reasons for volunteering, and the big five personality traits. These Dutch versions of all the scales were found to be reliable and valid in previous studies (e.g., Claes, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 2004; Gillath et al., 2005). Par-
Participants completed the battery in small groups of 5–15 participants. The order of the questionnaires was randomized across participants.

Attachment orientation was assessed with the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), a 36-item self-report instrument tapping attachment anxiety and avoidance. Participants were asked to think about their close relationships, without focusing on a specific partner, and rate the extent to which each item accurately described their feelings in close relationships, using a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (7). Eighteen items tapped attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry about being abandoned”) and 18 items tapped avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”). The reliability and validity of the ECR have been demonstrated in a wide variety of samples (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998). In our samples, Cronbach alphas were acceptable for the 18 anxiety items (.87) and the 18 avoidance items (.90). Two scores were computed by averaging items on each subscale after appropriately reverse-scoring some of the items. The anxiety and avoidance scores were not significantly associated (r(157) = .11), supporting Brennan et al. (1998) claims about the orthogonality of these dimensions.

Volunteerism was assessed with the 26-item scale Volunteerism questionnaire (Gillath et al., 2005). Each item named a particular volunteer activity (e.g., teaching reading, counseling troubled people, providing health care to the sick), and participants indicated whether or not they had engaged in it during the past year, and if so, how much time they had devoted to it. The time assessments were made on a 7-point scale ranging from “once a year” (1) to “almost every day” (7). For each participant, we computed two total scores: (a) Number of Volunteer Activities – the number of activities a participant marked in the list, and (b) Time Devoted to Volunteer Activities – the averaged time assessments across all the activities a participant marked. Since these two scores were highly correlated, r(157) = .69, p < .01, we computed a total volunteerism score by averaging the two scores (after being transformed into Z scores). Similar findings were revealed when analyses were conducted separately on each of the two volunteerism scores.1

To assess motives for volunteering, participants completed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al., 1998), which consists of 30 items tapping six motives for volunteering (five items per motive). One scale taps altruistic reasons: Values – expressing values related to altruistic and humanitarian concern for others (e.g., “I feel compassion toward people in need”). Another scale taps exploration-related reasons for volunteering and is called Understanding (e.g., “Volunteering lets me learn things through direct, hands-on experience”). The other scales assess more self-serving motives: Career – enhancing one’s own career opportunities (e.g., “I can make new contacts that might help my business or career”); Self-enhancement (e.g., “Volunteering makes me feel important”); Social (e.g., “People I’m close to want me to volunteer”); and Self-protection (e.g., “Volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles”).

Participants were asked to think about their volunteer activities and then to read each VFI item and rate how important this reason for volunteering generally was to them. Ratings were made on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all an important/accurate reason” (1) to “a very important/
accurate reason” (7). Previous studies (e.g., Clary et al., 1998) have shown that the VFI is reliable and have corroborated its six-factor structure. In our sample, Cronbach alphas for the VFI scales were high, ranging from .84 to .90. We therefore computed six scores for each participant by averaging items on each of the six motive scales.

Participants also completed the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, Costa & McCrae, 1992), which consists of 60 items tapping neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (12 items per trait). Participants rated the self-descriptiveness of each item on a 5-point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (5). In our sample, Cronbach alphas for the big five traits scales were adequately high, ranging from .81 to .88. We therefore computed five scores for each participant by averaging items on each of the big five traits scales.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Pearson correlations replicated previous findings concerning associations between attachment dimensions and the big five traits. Attachment anxiety was significantly associated with higher neuroticism, $r(157) = .49$, $p < .01$, and lower conscientiousness, $r(157) = -.25$, $p < .01$. Avoidance was significantly associated with lower extraversion, $r(157) = -.22$, $p < .01$, lower agreeableness, $r(157) = -.42$, $p < .01$, and lower conscientiousness, $r(157) = -.23$, $p < .01$.

3.2. The unique contribution of attachment orientations to volunteerism

To determine the unique contributions of attachment dimensions to the volunteerism variables, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses. The volunteerism score and the six VFI scores were the dependent variables. In the first step of each regression, we entered attachment anxiety and avoidance as predictors. In the second step, we added the big five traits scores as other predictors (see Table 1 for Pearson correlations between volunteerism variables and the big five traits). In this way, we compared whether the significant contributions of attachment orientations

| Table 1 | Pearson correlations between volunteerism variables and big five traits |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Volunteerism | Neuroticism | Extraversion | Openness | Conscientiousness | Agreeableness |
| Total score | -.15 | .11 | -.04 | .11 | .07 |
| VFI scores | | | | | |
| Values | .03 | .13 | .16* | .12 | .31** |
| Understanding | .19* | .24** | .14 | .06 | .17* |
| Self-protection | .36** | -.15 | .06 | -.14 | -.10 |
| Self-enhancement | .25** | .01 | -.03 | -.04 | .11 |
| Social | .19* | .12 | -.06 | -.04 | -.03 |
| Career | .17* | .22** | -.02 | .03 | .01 |

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. 
to volunteerism variables observed in Step 1 still remained significant after controlling for the big five traits (see Table 2).

Findings from the first step of the regressions replicated Gillath et al. (2005) findings. Avoidance was significantly associated with lower participation in volunteer activities, and weaker endorsement of altruistic values and understanding as reasons for volunteering. Attachment anxiety was significantly associated with higher endorsement of self-enhancement, self-protection, social-approval, and career-promotion reasons.

The introduction of the big five traits in the second step did not notably change the contributions of attachment orientations. That is after controlling for the big five traits, avoidance still made a significant contribution to participation in volunteer activities and endorsement of altruistic values and understanding as reasons for volunteering. Attachment anxiety was significantly associated with higher endorsement of self-enhancement, self-protection, social-approval, and career-promotion reasons.

The regressions also revealed significant contributions for the big five traits. Higher neuroticism was associated with higher endorsement of understanding, self-protection, self-enhancement, social-approval, and career-promotion reasons (see Table 2). Higher extraversion was associated with higher endorsement of understanding, social-approval, and career-promotion reasons (see Table 2). Additional regressions in which the big five traits were introduced as predictors in the first step and attachment dimensions were added in the second step revealed that the inclusion of attachment dimensions significantly increased the explained variance of most of the volunteerism variables (with the exception of career-promotion and social-approval reasons), $R^2$ changes from .07 to .26, all $p < .05$.

### 3.3. Testing the mediation hypothesis of the link between avoidance and volunteerism

In this section, we tested the hypothesis that more avoidant participants are less engaged in volunteer activities because they are less likely to endorse altruistic reasons for volunteering. In Bar-
on and Kenny (1986) terms, a variable functions as a mediator if (a) variations in the independent variable account for variations in the dependent variable (path a), (b) variations in the independent variable account for variations in the mediator (path b), (c) variations in the mediator significantly account for variations in the dependent variable (path c), and (d) when paths b and c are controlled, path a is no longer significant. In our data, the three first criteria for mediation were fulfilled: “path a” going from avoidance to volunteerism was significant, \( r(157) = -0.36, p < 0.01; \) “path b” going from avoidance to the Value VFI score was also significant, \( r(157) = -0.47, p < 0.01; \) and “path c” going from the Value VFI score to volunteerism was also significant, \( r(157) = 0.31, p < 0.01. \) Importantly, the associations between the other VFI scores and the volunteerism score were not significant, \( r \) ranging from .07 to .15.

On this basis, we examined whether the fourth criterion for mediation was also fulfilled by conducting a multiple regression with attachment avoidance and the Value VFI score as simultaneous predictors of volunteerism. Findings indicated that the significant unique contribution of avoidance to volunteerism was still significant after controlling for the Value VFI score, \( \beta = -0.27, p < 0.01 \) (the Value score also made a significant unique contribution to volunteerism, \( \beta = 0.18, p < 0.05 \)). In addition, Sobel (1982) test for mediation revealed that the difference in the contributions of avoidance to volunteerism before and after the control for the Value VFI score was not significant, \( Z = 1.06. \) That is, avoidance had a direct effect on volunteerism without the mediation of altruistic motives.

### 3.4. Testing the moderation hypothesis of the link between anxiety and volunteerism

In this section, we tested the hypothesis that attachment anxiety contributes to volunteerism in interaction with the endorsement of self-centered reasons for volunteering (self-protection, self-enhancement, social approval, career promotion.) We examined this hypothesis by carrying out a series of hierarchical regressions separately for each of the six VFI scores. In the first step, attachment anxiety and one of the six VFI scores were entered as predictors (after centering these variables) of the volunteerism score. In the second step, we added the interaction between anxiety and the relevant VFI score (the product term) as another predictor.

For the value, understanding, and social VFI scores, interactions with attachment anxiety were not significant. However, attachment anxiety significantly interacted with self-protection, \( \beta = 0.20, p < 0.05, \) self-enhancement, \( \beta = 0.18, p < 0.05, \) and career, \( \beta = 0.17, p < 0.05, \) VFI scores. Simple slope tests (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that higher attachment anxiety was significantly associated with higher participation in volunteer activities when the endorsement of self-protection, self-enhancement, or career-promotion reasons was 1 SD above the mean, \( \beta \) of .27, .25, and .25, respectively, all \( p < 0.05, \) but not when the endorsement of these self-centered reasons was 1 SD below the mean, \( \beta < -0.13. \) In addition, higher endorsement of self-protection, self-enhancement, and career-promotion reasons was associated with higher participation in volunteer activities when attachment anxiety was relatively high (1 SD above the mean), \( \beta \) of .26, .23, and .20, all \( p < 0.05, \) but not when anxiety was 1 SD below the mean, \( \beta < -0.12. \) That is, highly attachment-anxious participants were more likely to engage in volunteer activities than their less anxious counterparts when they endorsed self-centered motives.

The introduction of the interaction between avoidance and each of the VFI scores as an additional predictor of volunteerism did not notably change the already reported effects for attach-
ment anxiety. More important, avoidance had a significant main effect on volunteerism but did not significantly interact with any of the VFI scores, all $\beta < .10$.

4. Discussion

This study follows Gillath et al. (2005) findings regarding the contribution of attachment to volunteerism. Our findings replicated those of Gillath et al. (2005): avoidant attachment was associated with engaging in fewer volunteer activities and being less motivated by altruistic reasons. Attachment anxiety was not associated with volunteerism, but it was associated with the endorsement of more self-focused reasons for volunteering. The current findings also reveal that attachment orientations made a significant unique contribution to volunteerism beyond the contribution of high-order personality traits. Although these traits were associated with both attachment orientations and volunteerism, they failed to explain the link between attachment and volunteerism.

Did motives for volunteerism mediate the association between attachment avoidance and engagement in volunteering activities? Our findings revealed that, although avoidance was associated with low endorsement of other-focused reasons and these reasons were positively associated with volunteering, the unique contribution of avoidance to volunteerism was still statistically significant after controlling for other-focused reasons. This finding implies that avoidance had a direct effect on engagement in philanthropic activities without the mediation of altruistic reasons. It is possible that the link between avoidance and inhibited volunteering can be explained by avoidant people’s heightened hostility toward others, disrespect of human nature, and appraisals of others as unworthy for help (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007, for a review). In addition, avoidant people may hold individualistic ideologies rather than collective-communal ideologies that inhibit volunteering. In any case, future studies should examine these possible mediators.

Although previous research has found no significant correlation between anxious attachment and volunteerism (Gillath et al., 2005), our findings indicate that highly anxious people actually do volunteer when egoistic motivations for volunteering are involved (i.e., self-protection, self-enhancement, social approval, career promotion). Specifically, we found that attachment anxiety contributed to volunteerism in interaction with the endorsement of self-focused reasons for volunteering. Highly anxiously attached people were more likely to engage in volunteer activities than their less anxious counterparts mainly when they endorsed self-focused reasons for volunteering. These findings imply that egoistic motives can actually encourage highly attachment-anxious people to volunteer.

To summarize, beyond replicating Gillath et al. (2005) findings, we have found that attachment dimensions make a unique contribution to volunteerism beyond the explanatory power of high-order personality traits. In addition, we found that highly attachment-anxious people did volunteer when egoistic motivations for volunteering were involved, whereas attachment avoidance had a direct negative effect on participation in volunteer activities without the mediation of endorsement of other-focused reasons for volunteering. Nevertheless, one should take with caution these conclusions due to the correlational, cross-sectional design of our study and the exclusive reliance on self-report measures. Further studies using interview-based measures and assessing actual volunteering are necessary for increasing our confidence on the validity and generalizability of the observed links between attachment and volunteerism.
References


