

Avoidant Attachment Mediates the Relationship Between Parental Attachment and Short-Term Mating Desire

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Buss and Schmitt (1993) proposed that there are evolved differences in male and female mating preferences. Specifically, women's reproductive successes have been in part a function of the amount and quality of external resources available for them, and men's reproductive successes have been in part a function of how many fertile women they could impregnate. Consistent with this, Buss and Schmitt found that men were more likely than women to seek short-term sexual relationships.

More recent research has linked these evolutionary-based sex differences with attachment patterns. There are two underlying dimensions of attachment on which human relationships can be evaluated: anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxious attachment refers to the degree to which individuals worry about the availability of their partners, as well as their worth to their partners. Avoidant attachment refers to individuals' desire for self-reliance and emotional distance from others.

Del Giudice (2009) has developed a model proposing that secure attachment is associated with *future* reproductive efforts and insecure attachment, especially avoidant attachment, is associated with *current* reproductive efforts. The model further specifies that the adult attachment relationships that affect reproductive efforts stem in part from infant and childhood attachment patterns. The present research examines the relationship between short-term mating desire and both parental and adult attachment, and focuses specifically on the predicted mediation of parent attachment and mating desire by adult attachment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 193 women and 110 men from a Midwest liberal arts college who received course credit in a psychology course for taking part in the study.

Participants completed a number of questionnaires in this study. Two of these questionnaires were related to attachment and one asked about participants' personal sexual attitudes. In order to encourage candor in responses to such a personal topic, we assured participants both verbally and in the informed consent that their responses would be anonymous. To further assure participants of anonymity, participants were instructed to place their completed packets in a large box with a slit in the top to prevent researchers from being able to identify which packet belonged to any given participant.

Materials

The first questionnaire participants completed was a measure of adult romantic attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships—Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The two subscales of the ECR-R, anxiety and attachment, each contain 18 items and are responded to on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. The items on the anxiety subscale (e.g., "I worry a lot about my relationships") had an internal consistency reliability in this study of .91, while the avoidance subscale items (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down") had a reliability of .93.

The second questionnaire was the 55-item Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1987). The PAQ, which is designed to assess adults' views of attachment with their parents, has three subscales, the questions of which are asked about each parent. The first subscale, affective quality of relationship (e.g., "In general, my mother/father is someone I can count on to listen to me when I feel upset") had internal consistency reliabilities for mother/ father of .92 and .94, respectively. The second subscale, parents as facilitators of independence (e.g., "In general, my mother/father respect my decisions, even if they don't agree") had internal consistency reliabilities for mother/father versions of .87 and .84, respectively. The final PAQ subscale, parents as a source of social support (e.g., "During time spent together, my mother/father was someone to whom I told my most personal thoughts and feelings") had internal consistency reliability for mother/father versions of .78 and .83, respectively.

Finally, participants were asked a series of questions based on the research presented by Buss and Schmitt (1993). Among these questions were a pair of items asking participants the degree to which they were seeking a short-term mate, defined as a 1-night stand (on a 1 (not at all currently seeking) to 7 (strongly currently seeking) scale) and the degree to which they were seeking a long-term mate, defined as a marriage partner (on the same 1-7 scale).

Results

Sex Differences

Consistent with Buss and Schmitt (1993), men were more likely than women to indicate that they were seeking a short-term mate (2.9 vs. 1.8 on a 1-7 scale; $t(301) = 5.42, p < .001, d = .62$). Also consistent with Buss and Schmitt, we found no significant sex differences on long-term mate seeking (4.6 vs. 4.8; $t(301) = -.97, p = .33$). Independent samples *t*-tests revealed that there were no sex differences on either of the ECR-R scales or on 5 of the 6 PAQ subscales. For one PAQ subscale, the degree to which subjects reported that their mothers were a source of social support, women had a higher scale score than men (45.8 vs. 43.6, $t(209) = -2.21, p = .029, d = .30$).

Correlational Analyses

Table 1 presents correlations between each of the attachment subscales and short-term and long-term mate seeking for males and females. ECR-R attachment anxiety and avoidance were both positively correlated with short-term mate seeking in male participants ($r(108) = .23, p = .014$ and $r(108) = .39, p < .001$, respectively). Both ECR-R scales were also positively correlated for female subjects (anxiety: $r(191) = .18, p = .012$; avoidance: $r(191) = .21, p = .004$).

Affective quality of attachment to the mother was negatively related to short-term mate interest for males ($r(108) = -.26, p = .007$), as was mother as facilitator of independence ($r(107) = -.23, p = .018$). Additionally, two subscales approached traditional levels of significance for male subjects: affective quality of attachment to the father was negatively correlated with short-term mating interest ($r(104) = -.18, p = .066$), as was father as a facilitator of independence ($r(106) = -.19, p = .052$).

Three PAQ subscales were significantly related to short-term mate seeking in female participants. Affective quality of attachment to mother was negatively correlated with short-term mate seeking ($r(179) = -.18, p = .016$), as was mother as a facilitator of independence ($r(187) = -.20, p = .006$) and mother as a source of social support ($r(140) = -.20, p = .02$).

Long-term mate seeking was not significantly correlated with either ECR-R subscale or with any of the PAQ subscales.

Mediation Analyses

Mediation hypotheses were tested using the multiple-step procedure outlined by Kenny (2012). First, desire for short-term mating was regressed on the independent (predictor) variable—in this case the PAQ subscales. Second, the hypothesized mediator (ECR-R anxiety or avoidance) was regressed on the predictor variable. Finally, desire for short-term mating was regressed on both the mediator and predictor simultaneously. If the mediator (the ECR-R scale) is significantly related to the outcome variable (short-term mating desire) and the relationship between the PAQ scale and short-term mating is not significant in the simultaneous regression, the model is considered “fully mediated.” If the relationship between the mediator and outcome variable is significant while the relationship between the predictor and outcome variable is attenuated but still significant, then the model is considered “partially mediated.”

As indicated in Figure 1, for male subjects adult attachment avoidance fully mediated the relationship between three PAQ subscales and short-term mating desire. Adult attachment avoidance mediated the relationship between short-term mating desire and 1) father as a facilitator of independence (Sobel $z = -2.87, p = .004$); 2) mother as a facilitator of independence (Sobel $z = -2.78, p = .005$); and 3) affective quality of attachment to mother (Sobel $z = -2.41, p = .016$).

As indicated in Figure 2, for female subjects ECR avoidance fully mediated the relationship between mother as a source of social support and desire for a short-term mate (though this mediation only approached traditional levels of statistical significance: Sobel $z = -1.93, p = .054$).

Adult anxious attachment did not mediate—partially or fully—the relationship between short-term mate desire and any of the PAQ subscales for either male or female subjects.

Discussion

Our results suggest two broad conclusions. First, consistent with previous research, there is evidence for a relationship between attachment and short-term mating desire: adult attachment anxiety and avoidance were both positively related to participants' desire for a short-term mate, and several subscales of parental attachment were negatively correlated with short-term mate desire.

Second, our data provide evidence for Del Giudice's (2009) model of the development of reproductive strategies. Adult avoidant attachment—but not anxious attachment—fully mediates the relationship between parental attachment and short-term mating desire for a number of the parental attachment scales, especially for males.

There is ample evidence for Buss and Schmitt's (1993) hypothesis of evolved sex differences in desire for a short-term mate (see Schmitt, 2003, for example). The current data provide evidence for individual differences in short-term mating desire that stem from differences in the attachment system, differences related to both adult and parental attachment, and which are themselves hypothesized to be part of an evolved behavioral system.

References

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Table 1. Correlations Between Attachment Scales and Desire for Short-Term and Long-Term Mate-Seeking

	<u>Short-Term</u>		<u>Long-Term</u>	
	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
<u>ECR-R Anxiety</u>	.18*	.23***	.09	-.057
<u>ECR-R Avoidance</u>	.21**	.39***	-.05	-.16
<u>PAQ Subscales</u>				
Affect Qual. Father	-.04	-.18†	-.06	.07
Affect Qual. Mother	-.18*	-.26**	-.05	.04
Facilitate Indep. Father	-.09	-.19†	-.06	.00
Facilitate Indep. Mother	-.20**	-.23*	.00	.04
Social Support Father	-.05	-.02	-.06	.11
Social Support Mother	-.20*	-.06	-.03	.10

† $p < .07$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

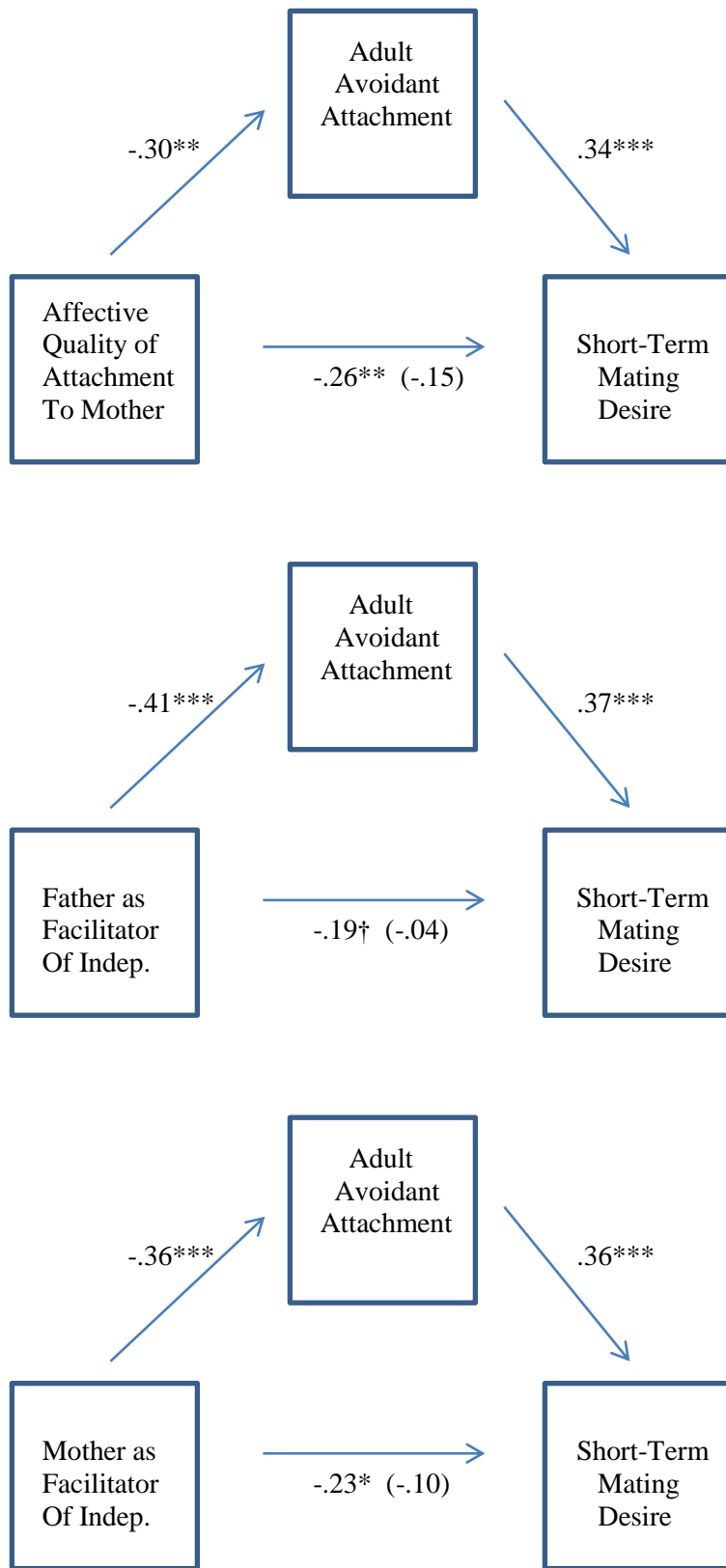


Figure 1. Mediation models for male subjects: standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between PAQ subscales and short-term mating desire as mediated by adult avoidant attachment. The standardized coefficient for the relationship between PAQ and short-term mating controlling for avoidant attachment is in parentheses.

$\dagger p = .052$ $* p < .05$ $** p < .01$ $*** p < .001$

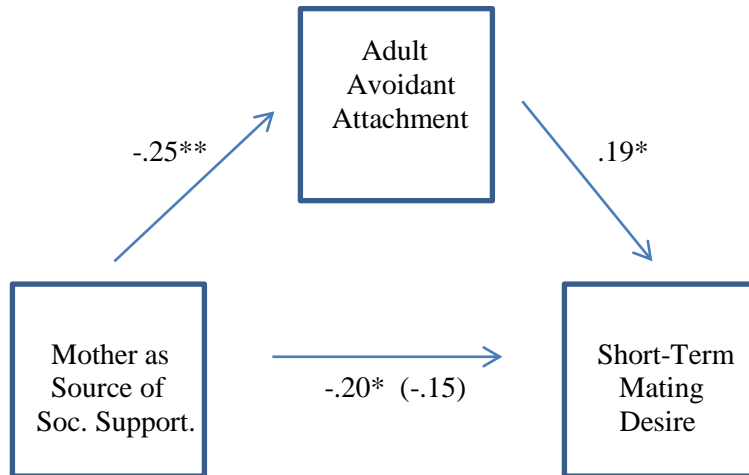


Figure 2. Mediation model for female subjects: standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between PAQ subscales and short-term mating desire as mediated by adult avoidant attachment. The standardized coefficient for the relationship between PAQ and short-term mating controlling for avoidant attachment is in parentheses.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$