

Associations of insecure attachment with extreme pro-group actions: The mediating role of perceived marginalisation



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ABSTRACT

Can personality traits predict willingness to fight or even die for one's heritage culture group? This study examined insecure attachment dimensions – avoidance and anxiety – as predictors of perceived rejection from heritage culture members and, in turn, greater endorsement of extreme pro-group actions. Expressing extreme commitment for the heritage culture may represent an attempt by insecure individuals to reduce their perceived marginalisation and reaffirm their heritage culture membership and identity. Participants completed measures of attachment dimensions, intragroup marginalisation, and endorsement of extreme pro-group actions. Individuals who were high in anxiety or avoidance reported heightened intragroup marginalisation from family and friends. In turn, friend intragroup marginalisation was associated with increased endorsement of pro-group actions. Our findings provide insight as to why insecurely attached bicultural individuals may be drawn to endorse extreme pro-group actions.

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"To many who knew them, all four [bombers] were described as being well integrated into British society. All four had a Westernized and unremarkable background with secular upbringings... As a teenager, Mohammad Siddique Khan shook off his Pakistani-Muslim identity and presented himself as a Westernized young man."-NYPD Intelligence Division Report, 2007, p. 26.

1. Introduction

At approximately 8:50 am on July 7th, 2005, a series of explosions in London killed 52 people and left more than 800 injured. For the first time in modern terrorism, the threat was not wholly external – all four men responsible were British citizens who had been integrated into the mainstream culture. On the surface, they did not appear excluded from the mainstream culture, as one might expect from their radicalisation (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). While there has been much speculation about their attitudes towards their British mainstream culture, comparatively little attention has been given to their interactions and identification with their heritage cultures (BBC News, 2005). By the same token, the heritage culture experiences of the estimated 3000–4000 bicultural individuals with an EU nationality who have travelled to Syria to fight with ISIS as part of their radicalisation have also received little attention (Traynor, 2014).

These examples suggest that radicalised individuals who are citizens of Western countries may be motivated in part by the struggle to find an identity (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). This struggle may stem from the extent to which one feels accepted by their mainstream and heritage cultures. Mainstream culture is defined as the dominant culture where one currently lives (Berry, 2001). Heritage culture is defined as the culture of one's birth or upbringing, or the culture that had a significant impact on previous generations of one's family. Conceptualisations of marginalisation remain focused on exclusion by members of the mainstream culture and an enforcement of culture loss (e.g., Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2005); fewer studies have examined the influence of perceived exclusion by heritage culture friends and family, in spite of its importance for maintaining one's identity. Our study aimed to address this research gap by investigating the association of perceived marginalisation from heritage culture members with extreme pro-group actions, defined as willingness to commit, fight, or even die in aid of one's heritage culture. Thus, this research may shed light on some of the reasons why Westernised bicultural individuals might be drawn to joining extremist groups as a compensatory reaction in response to perceived rejection from their heritage culture.

What role does perceived rejection play in the construction of our identity? Humans share a fundamental need to form meaningful interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Rejection from other heritage culture members – defined as intragroup marginalisation – can occur when individuals develop ties to two or more cultures, and as a result, no longer conform to the expectations of the heritage culture identity (Castillo, Conoley, Brossart, & Quiros, 2007). These detrimental impacts and experiences of intragroup marginalisation may be shaped

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by personality; those who are insecurely attached and chronically perceive rejection report increased intragroup marginalisation (Ferenczi & Marshall, 2014). A compensatory response to intragroup marginalisation may be to reaffirm one's heritage culture identity through endorsing pro-group actions. In an effort to gain acceptance and avoid rejection, do insecurely attached individuals endorse pro-group actions that are extreme?

1.1. Attachment

Attachment is conceptualised as an internal working model of self and others that informs their interactions over the course of their life (Bowlby, 1969). Views of self and other are essential for constructing bicultural identity and perceived rejection from in-group members. Secure attachment is typified by an internalised positive model of the self; that is, one feels worthy of love, and also a positive model of 'other', as significant others are thought of as being available and trustworthy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Secure attachment is conceptualised as low anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid, & Avihou-Kanza, 2009).

Anxious individuals have a negative model of self, and tend to be preoccupied with winning affection from others (Mikulincer, 1998). They endorse positive models of other, which results in the individual feeling unworthy of love (Mikulincer, 1995). For those high in anxiety, the attachment system is hyper-activated in response to perceived rejection threats (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). Anxious individuals are sensitive to rejection, recalling emotionally painful memories with ease whilst unable to repress the resulting negative effects (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). Their difficulty in recovering from past experiences of rejection (Marshall, Bejanyan, & Ferenczi, 2013) may generalise to intragroup marginalisation.

Conversely, individuals who are avoidant perceive others as untrustworthy and unreliable, and hold positive views of their self, resulting in exaggerated self-reliance (Li & Chan, 2012). Avoidant individuals engage in deactivating strategies in response to threat, such as moving away from attachment figures and suppressing emotions to preempt the frustration and pain arising from rejection (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Although they may appear to have high self-esteem (Mikulincer, 1998), it may be little more stable than a house of cards. Highly distressing events can unearth anxiety (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995) and result in difficulties coping with rejection (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997). Although they may be adept at suppressing negative impacts of mild threats, they nonetheless experience heightened psychological distress in response to stress (Stanton & Campbell, 2013). Despite their defences, they report a need to belong to close others (Carvalho & Gabriel, 2006). We argue that perceiving rejection from close others qualify as severe threats. Thus, we expected that individuals high in avoidance would also perceive greater intragroup marginalisation from close others such as family and friends.

1.2. Intragroup marginalisation

Social rejection can be conceptualised as a social death (Williams & Nida, 2011). The negative effects of rejection remain even if it is merely perceived (Smith & Williams, 2004). Individuals who perceive rejection in the form of intragroup marginalisation may face accusations of betraying their heritage culture, such as by assimilating into the mainstream culture (Castillo, Zahn, & Cano, 2012). They may perceive that family and heritage cultural friends view them as threatening the distinctiveness of the cultural group through deviating from the prescribed social identity (Castillo et al., 2007). Thus, no longer meeting the expectations of the heritage culture, individuals may feel rejected, regardless of their own wishes to maintain their heritage culture identity (Ferenczi & Marshall, 2014). We hypothesised that those individuals high in anxiety or avoidance, who have a heightened sensitivity to rejection

(Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002), would report greater intragroup marginalisation (Ferenczi & Marshall, 2014). In turn, what compensatory actions would they endorse in striving for acceptance and positive perceptions of their self from their heritage culture in-group?

1.3. Extreme pro-group actions

Individuals strive for others to perceive them as they do themselves (Swann, 1983). In fact, we engage in a continuous construction of ourselves that draws the feedback from close others (Swann & Brooks, 2012). Reflected appraisals – perceptions of how others perceive oneself – play an important role in constructing identity, in particular for individuals who may experience ambiguity resulting from a dual identity (Khanna, 2004). If there is an indirect threat to one's opportunity to self-verify, then they may engage in compensatory self-verification to re-establish coherence (Swann & Brooks, 2012). Self-verification can occur at the level of the collective self – the evaluation of the self in relation to one's in-group (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004). In the context of the current study, if a British Asian woman perceives herself as Punjabi, yet finds her family criticising her Punjabi language skills, then she might come to question her knowledge of herself. To avoid threats to the very foundation of her identity, what can she do? We hypothesised that those who experience intragroup marginalisation will self-verify by endorsing extreme pro-group actions, in the hope of reaffirming their heritage culture identity. Thus, by supporting attitudes which are extreme, individuals can demonstrate their loyalty and commitment. Our study is, to our knowledge, the first to link attachment, intragroup marginalisation, and extreme pro-group actions. We hypothesised that insecure attachment would be linked with intragroup marginalisation, and, in turn, with greater endorsement of extreme pro-group actions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

208 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.29$, $SD = 11.74$; female: 105, male: 100; missing: 2, transgender: 1) completed the measures. Inclusion criteria for the study required each participant to have a different heritage and mainstream culture (i.e., they were a first- or later-generation migrant). 49% of participants reported that they were first-generation migrants ($M_{\text{years residing in mainstream culture}} = 11.27$, $SD = 8.47$); 51% were born and raised in a mainstream culture that was different to their heritage culture (second- or later-generation migrants). Participants reported the following heritage cultures: European (23%), Latin American (18%), East Asian (17%), South Asian (9%), Southeast Asian (9%), Middle Eastern/North African (8%), African (7%), Jewish (3%), Native American/First Nations (3%), Caribbean (1%), Mixed (1%), and North American (1%). The majority of participants reported living in a North American mainstream culture (83%); they also reported living in Europe (15%), East Asia (1%), and the Middle East (1%). The majority of participants reported being in a relationship (65%). Participants were recruited online via Amazon MTurk (paid \$0.30), or through the Social Psychology Network (no reward). As an attention-check measure, we asked participants to report the date, and compared this with their timestamp. All materials were in English.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Berkeley personality profile

Neuroticism refers to emotional instability and correlates with increased insecure attachment (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). We included seven items from the neuroticism subscale (Harary & Donahue, 1994; $\alpha = .82$; e.g., "I worry a lot"; 1 = Disagree strongly, 5 = Agree strongly) to establish that the association of insecure attachment with intragroup marginalisation could not be attributed to neuroticism.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations for variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age								
2. Gender (−1 = male; 1 = female)	−.05							
3. Neuroticism	−.21**	.16*						
4. Anxious attachment	−.25**	.04	.47**					
5. Avoidant attachment	−.12	−.10	.23**	.14*				
6. Family intragroup marginalisation	−.25**	.02	.26**	.28**	.31**			
7. Friend intragroup marginalisation	−.19**	−.11	.15*	.27**	.33**	.74**		
8. Extreme pro-group actions	−.23**	−.12	−.02	.21**	.16*	.18*	.32**	
Mean (SD)	30.29 (11.74)		18.67 (5.82)	16.59 (4.86)	13.54 (5.04)	34.15 (13.10)	45.03 (19.18)	31.08 (14.24)

Note: total means are reported.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .005$.

2.2.2. Experiences in close-relationships – short form (ECR-S)

The ECR-S (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) is a twelve-item scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree) that measures general attachment style to a partner. It is composed of two subscales: anxious ($\alpha = .69$; “My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away”) and avoidant attachment ($\alpha = .80$; “I am nervous when partners get too close to me”).

2.2.3. Intragroup marginalisation inventory (IMI)

We included two subscales from the IMI (Castillo et al., 2007): one focused on rejection from family members (11 items, $\alpha = .84$; “Family members laugh at me when I try to speak my heritage/ethnic culture group’s language”), and one focused on rejection from heritage culture friends (16 items, $\alpha = .91$; “Friends of my heritage culture group tell me that I am a ‘sell-out’”; 1 = Never/Does not apply, 7 = Extremely often). Perceived rejection can be in the form of criticism, mocking, or perceived differences between the self and family/friends on dimensions that are important to heritage identity.

2.2.4. Extreme pro-group actions

Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, and Huici (2009) developed this scale to investigate participants’ willingness to endorse extreme pro-group actions, using it as a proxy for extreme pro-group behaviour (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). By measuring the level to which individuals endorse such actions, we could highlight one of the ways in which individuals may choose to self-verify in the face of rejection. The subscale measuring willingness to fight for the group was composed of five items (e.g., “I would fight someone insulting or making fun of my heritage country as a whole”). A two-item subscale centred on participants’ willingness to die for their heritage culture (e.g., “I would sacrifice my life if it gave the heritage culture group status or monetary reward”). We created three items to extend the range of pro-group actions to include increased commitment to the heritage culture (“The needs of my heritage culture group come before my own”, “I would be willing to attend a protest if my heritage culture group were threatened”, and “I would be willing to donate money to organisations promoting interests of my heritage culture group if need be”). We collapsed the ten items into one overall measure of extreme pro-group actions ($\alpha = .91$; 1 = Totally disagree, 7 = Totally agree).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics and Pearson’s correlations are reported in Table 1. We ran preliminary hierarchical regressions controlling for gender (−1 = male, 1 = female), age, cultural background (−1 = 2nd/+ generation migrants, 1 = 1st generation migrants), and neuroticism. Results revealed that neuroticism was positively correlated with

marginalisation from family, $\beta = .28$, $p < .005$. Over and above the control variables, avoidant and anxious attachment were linked with increased marginalisation from friends ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .19$, $p < .05$, respectively) and family ($\beta = .23$, $p < .005$, and $\beta = .15$, $p = .05$, respectively). Anxious and avoidant attachment were correlated with greater endorsement of extreme pro-group actions, ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$ and $\beta = .19$, $p = .05$, respectively). Friend intragroup marginalisation positively correlated with extreme pro-group actions, $\beta = .35$, $p < .005$. We then used structural equation modelling to investigate the pathways between anxious and avoidant attachment, family and friend intragroup marginalisation, and endorsement of extreme pro-group actions.¹ Hu and Bentler (1999) recommended that for an acceptable model fit, the following requirements must be met: the chi-square statistic should be non-significant, the comparative fit index (CFI) should be .95 or greater, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be .06 or less.

We used item parcelling as it requires estimation of fewer parameters and thus results in a more parsimonious and stable model (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Items were assigned to one of two parcels at random for each latent variable (Little et al., 2002); this method provides a superior model fit in comparison to others (Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000).

3.2. Measurement model

We conducted a Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedure in AMOS to include partially missing data. The measurement model provided a good fit to the data [$\chi^2(25) = 33.41$, $p > .05$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04 (CI = .00, .07)]. All of the indicators loaded significantly onto their respective latent variables (all β s $\geq .58$, $p < .001$).

3.3. Structural model

A fully saturated structural model was tested initially; we included structural covariances between anxious and avoidant attachment, and family and friend intragroup marginalisation. Two structural coefficient pathways were non-significant: the pathway between avoidant attachment and extreme pro-group actions, and the pathway from family intragroup marginalisation to extreme pro-group actions. To create a more parsimonious model, we removed these pathways in order of lowest standardised regression weights. Chi-square difference tests

¹ We also investigated intragroup marginalisation as a moderator of the associations of insecure attachment with extreme pro-group actions. Only avoidant attachment \times family marginalisation was significant, $\beta = .26$, $p < .01$. Simple slope analysis indicated a positive association between avoidant attachment and increased endorsement of extreme pro-group actions for individuals who perceived more rejection from their family (1 SD above the mean), $\beta = .79$, $p < .001$, but not those who perceived less rejection (1 SD below mean), $\beta = -.38$, $p = .23$. We focused on intragroup marginalisation as a mediator rather than a moderator because the results were more consistent with our theoretical model (see Fig. 1).

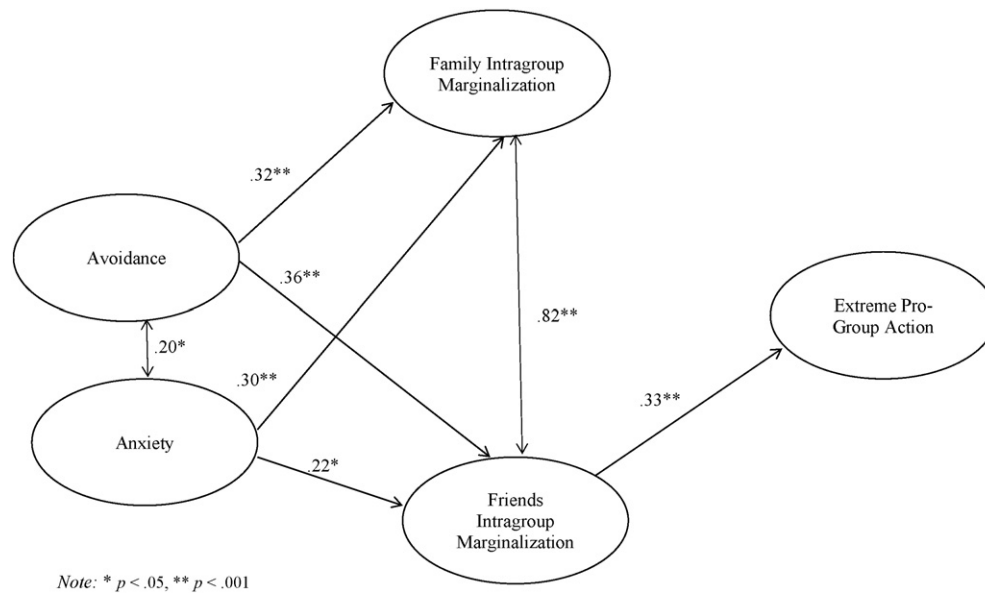


Fig. 1. Modified structural equation model of the associations between insecure attachment, intragroup marginalisation, and endorsement of extreme pro-group actions. Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

did not yield significant differences in model fit, respectively: [$\chi^2 D(1) = .09, p > .05$], and [$\chi^2 D(2) = .65, p > .05$]. The final model (see Fig. 1) provided a good fit [$\chi^2(27) = 34.06, p > .05$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04 (CI = .00, .07)].²

3.4. Tests of indirect effects

Bootstrap procedures in AMOS³ were used to test the indirect effects of anxious and avoidant attachment on endorsement of extreme pro-group actions via friend intragroup marginalisation. Inspection of 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) from 1000 bootstrap samples found support for the indirect effects of anxious [$\beta = .09, p < .005$ (CI: .03, .15)] and avoidant [$\beta = .14, p < .005$ (CI: .18, .25)] attachment on endorsement of extreme pro-group actions via increased friend intragroup marginalisation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Attachment and intragroup marginalisation

Our findings contribute to understanding the wide-reaching impact of attachment dimensions on chronic tendencies of perceiving rejection from others. Anxious individuals may perceive greater intragroup marginalisation because they are sensitive to rejection (Campbell & Marshall, 2011) and perceive themselves as having poor capabilities (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995) in their heritage culture. For example, they may feel that they are not proficient in their heritage culture language. The parallel findings for individuals high in avoidance provide further support for the fragility of their positive self-view (Mikulincer,

1995). Although avoidant individuals claim to be highly self-reliant, they still experience the need to belong (Carvalho & Gabriel, 2006). They too may perceive pressure and rejection from those in their closest social circle on the basis of their heritage culture identity. The current findings provide a link between the rejection-sensitivity of insecurely attached individuals to endorsement of extreme pro-group actions, partially through experiences of friend intragroup marginalisation.

4.2. Intragroup marginalisation and extreme pro-group actions

One reason why only rejection from friends was linked to greater endorsement of pro-group actions may be because of the more fragile nature of friendships compared to family bonds (Allan, 2008). Whilst individuals may feel rejected from their family on the basis of their heritage cultural identity, they may nonetheless perceive acceptance on binding cultural conceptions of 'blood'. As friendships are largely voluntary and based on equality (Hays, 1988), intragroup marginalisation may be more detrimental for their maintenance. Close friendships are often considered a 'chosen' family, fulfilling an individual's needs for belonging and closeness (Wrzus, Wagner, & Neyer, 2012). Thus, individuals may endorse extreme pro-group actions to reaffirm their heritage cultural identity, and in doing so, realign balance in the friendship after perceiving rejection.

Through measuring endorsement of, as opposed to actual pro-group actions, we could investigate the responses of individuals who have ostensibly not engaged in extreme actions. Indeed, many of the EU citizens who joined ISIS are young, often well-educated, bicultural individuals with no prior history of criminal offences. Research needs to shift from conceptualising terrorism as a result of personality disorders or irrationality removed from the general populace (Crenshaw, 2000; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006). Our findings indicate that individuals sampled from a broad demographic may indeed endorse actions that appear extreme. Individuals are more likely to identify with radical groups when they perceive uncertainty in the form of threat to their values and behavioural practises (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010). We posit that individuals who report intragroup marginalisation experience uncertainty in terms of their heritage culture identity. Thus, they may shift to endorse more radical ideas as a method of alleviating uncertainty and re-establishing their membership within the heritage culture group.

² An alternative model was tested which combined family and friend marginalisation into a single latent variable. The AIC fit index was inspected to compare this non-nested model (Burnham & Anderson, 1998). Lower (relative to the other tested models) AIC values indicate better fit. The AIC for the proposed model with one latent variable representing intragroup marginalisation was 192.36. The AIC value for the model with separate latent variables for family and friend marginalisation was 110.06, indicating that this model provided a better fit.

³ As SEM can run bootstrap procedures only on complete data, 190 participants were included in the indirect effects testing. This model did not differ from the measurement model using all data.

4.3. Limitations and further research

Future research should seek to further validate these relationships in several ways. First, additional research should focus on priming rejection from one's heritage culture. Second, research should investigate whether the process outlined here is unique to bicultural individuals, or whether monocultural individuals may also perceive generalised rejection from the mainstream culture and, in turn, endorse extreme pro-group actions. However, this process would be different to intragroup marginalisation as monocultural individuals would not experience a tension between two cultural identities. Third, other antecedents of intragroup marginalisation should be measured, such as general negativity towards others. Fourth, future research should investigate the direct association of intragroup marginalisation with attitudes towards militant organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, as well as with overt pro-group behaviours. Finally, although we measured endorsement of extreme behaviour, in part because of the ethical difficulties of measuring actual extreme behaviour, attitudes can predict intentions and behaviour according to the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

4.4. Concluding remarks

Malik (2015) reports that the Westernised individuals who join ISIS are as removed from Muslim communities as from the mainstream cultures in which they live. Our findings provide support that measures which encourage biculturalism are crucial on both the parts of mainstream cultures and of heritage cultural communities to prevent individuals who are struggling to find an identity in perceiving rejection from their heritage culture. Clinical and community interventions which focus on individuals' heritage identities alongside their integration to the mainstream society could ameliorate experiences of rejection which may lead to detrimental attitudes and, ultimately, to tragedies similar to the London bombings.

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