

Enhancing Attachment Security Within Groups: A Group-Level Extension of the Attachment Security Enhancement Model ¹

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According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1988), the sense of attachment security or *felt security* (i.e., confidence on the availability of supportive others when needed) develops during childhood within the realm of comforting interactions with responsive and supportive caregivers, usually parents (the main *attachment figures*). As children feel more secure, they are more willing and able to explore the world and develop an authentic and healthy personality (Bowlby, 1988). When attachment figures are not reliably available and supportive, however, felt security is not attained and negative mental representations of the self and others (*inner working models*) are formed, with detrimental effects on mental health and interpersonal functioning over life. Although these insecure working models are formed during early childhood and are relatively stable over time, they can be revised and updated across the lifespan by positive (security-enhancing) relational experiences (Bowlby, 1973). For example, the formation of a stable and satisfactory romantic relationship during adolescence or adulthood or feeling valued and competent as a parent can counteract insecure working models of self and others and move insecure people toward heightened felt security (e.g., Davila et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 2003).

In the current research, we assume that this revision of insecure working models and subsequent security enhancement can also be driven by comforting and empowering interactions with a responsive and supportive group. Previous research has indicated that being part of a group can be viewed as an attachment bond and that people tend to use their group as a source of protection and support in times of need (e.g., Marmarosh et al., 2013; Smith et al., 1999). However, although there is some evidence that a cohesive group can promote felt security toward such a group (e.g., Rom & Mikulincer, 2003), no research has been conducted on the specific group-related processes that underlie this security enhancement. The current research program fill in this empirical gap. For this purpose, we first expand the Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM; Arriaga et al., 2018) that was originally developed to explain attachment process within couples to group settings. Then, we examine through the lens

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of this model the specific provisions that a group can provide that are critical for fostering felt security among attachment-insecure members.

Attachment Theory and Research

According to Bowlby (1982), human beings are born with an innate psychobiological system (the *attachment behavioral system*) that motivates them to seek proximity to supportive others (*attachment figures*) in times of need. Bowlby (1973) also claimed that individual differences in attachment-system functioning results from interactions with attachment figures, beginning with infant's interactions with parents. If an attachment figure is responsive to one's needs and effectively supplies a *safe haven* in times of need (he or she reliably provides protection, support, and relief) and a *secure base* for confident and calm exploration, learning, and goal pursuit, one can develop positive mental representation (*working models*) of the self (as valued and lovable) and others (as benevolent and kind) and a sense of attachment security. When attachment figures are not reliably available and responsive to one's needs, however, felt security is not attained, negative working models are formed, and more insecure attachment orientations (relatively stable patterns of relational feeling, cognitions, and behavior) are consolidated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Although the attachment system is most critical during infancy, Bowlby (1988) assumed that it is active over the entire life span.

In adulthood, research has consistently shown that attachment orientations are best conceptualized as regions in a two-dimensional (anxiety-by-avoidance) space (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998). A person's position on the attachment anxiety dimension indicates the degree to which he or she worries about their personal value, lovability, and competence; has serious doubts about others' responsiveness in times of need; and is afraid of being rejected or abandoned (Brennan et al., 1998). People scoring high on this dimension tend to regulate their insecurities by making insistent and even coercive attempts to obtain others' care and by becoming overdependent on others' love (*hyperactivating strategies*, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). A person's position on the avoidance dimension indicates the extent to which he or she distrusts others' goodwill and defensively strives to maintain independence and emotional distance from others (Brennan et al., 1998). Highly avoidant people tend to regulate distress by dismissing attachment needs and suppressing attachment-related worries (*deactivating strategies*, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). A person scoring low on these dimensions is assumed to hold felt security, enjoy warm interactions with others, and feel confident in their support.

Thousands of studies conducted with children, adolescents and adults have consistently shown that attachment security has many psychological benefits (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for a review). First, attachment security contributes to the development of social skills

and may improve the quality and stability of close relationships (e.g., DiTommaso et al., 2003; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Zimmermann et al., 2001). In addition, attachment security facilitates emotion regulation and psychological well-being during stressful periods (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 1998) and contributes to exploration and learning (e.g., Mikulincer, 1997). In contrast, attachment insecurities (either anxiety or avoidance, or both) are risk factors for emotional problems and psychopathology (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for a review).

According to Bowlby (1973), adult attachment orientations are rooted in early interactions with primary caregivers and the prototype working models formed during these early interactions continue to exert a shaping influence on attachment orientations across the lifespan (Fraley, 2002). However, working models can also be somewhat revised and updated across the lifespan by attachment-relevant experiences that deviate from previous experiences and existing knowledge (Simpson & Overall, 2014). At any point in life, important and long-lived changes in the quality of interactions with attachment figures can produce discontinuities in attachment orientations. These discontinuities (or destabilizing experiences) include the breaking of an attachment bond and separation or loss of an attachment figure, which have been found to reduce felt security (e.g., Ruvolo et al., 2001). However, for attachment-insecure people, the formation of a stable relationship with a responsive partner can counteract their negative models of self and others. Studies have shown that dating a responsive supportive partner might move insecure people toward heightened felt security (e.g., Davila et al., 1999).

These changes in attachment security tend to occur in relationship-specific working models (felt security toward a specific attachment figure, such as friend, spouse, therapist) pending on the responsiveness and supportiveness of the relationship partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In some cases, when the relationship is central to a person's identity, these relationship-specific changes can be generalized to other relationship partners and alter a person's global attachment orientations across relationships (Cozzarelli et al., 2000). Therefore, it is important to assess attachment orientations at both relationship-specific and global levels when examining the impact of destabilizing experiences with a specific relationship partner to a person's sense of attachment security.

Attachment to Groups

Can similar attachment-related process be observed within group interactions? Over the years, attachment theory has gradually been extended from its original focus on affectional bonds between infants and their parental caregivers (e.g., Ainsworth, 1991) to a wide variety of relational contexts, including group relationships (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003; Smith et al., 1999). This extension was based on the idea and findings that people tend to rely on a group as

a source of protection and support in times of need and as a secure base for exploration and growth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

There is evidence that responsive groups can have soothing and empowering effects on members' well-being and instrumental functioning like other security-enhancing attachment figures. For example, research on *group cohesion* (or team spirit or solidarity) -- the tendency of group members to stick together, cooperate, support each other, and remain united in pursuit of the group instrumental goals and the satisfaction of each member's needs (Carron et al., 1998) -- reveals that members of more cohesive groups feel and perform better during demanding or challenging group tasks (see Marmarosh & Sproul, 2021, for a review). From an attachment perspective, group cohesion refers to the extent to which a group is perceived as sensitive and responsive to members' needs. The greater a group is perceived as cohesive, the more its members feel protected, comforted, and supported by the group, and the more secure they are likely to feel within the group (Marmarosh & Sproul, 2021).

Research also indicates that group members can develop attachment insecurities (anxiety, avoidance) toward their group, with negative effects on group-related feelings, cognitions, and behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In 1999, Smith et al. constructed the Group Attachment Scale (GAS) to assess anxious attachment to groups (e.g., "I often worry my group will not always want me as a member") and avoidant attachment to groups (e.g. "I prefer not to depend on my group"). Smith et al. (1999) found that higher scores on group attachment anxiety or avoidance predicted lower engagement in group activities, more negative evaluations of social groups (e.g., fraternities, sororities), and lower perceived support from groups. In addition, whereas group attachment anxiety was associated with stronger negative emotions toward groups, group avoidant attachment was associated with lower levels of positive affect toward, and identification with, social groups (DeMarco & Newheiser, 2019).

Importantly, a person's attachment orientation with respect to a group tends to correspond with his or her attachment orientation in close relationships (Smith et al., 1999). Specifically, Smith et al. (1999) found that people who are attachment-anxious in close relationships are also more likely to experience attachment anxiety with respect to groups, and people who are more avoidant in close relationships are more likely to develop avoidant attachment to a group. But the correlations were only moderate in size, indicating that although group attachment insecurities may be special cases of global insecurities, they can also be influenced by other factors, such as experiences with a previous or current group.

In line with this possibility, Rom and Mikulincer (2003) found that group cohesion attenuated group-level attachment insecurities, whether anxiety or avoidance, and weakened

the generalization of attachment anxiety within close relationships to a social group. That is, a cohesive group might meet attachment-anxious people's needs for closeness, protection, and support, and allow them to feel more secure about the group and to engage more comfortably in group activities. However, we don't know whether group cohesion is enough to counteract attachment-anxious people's working models of personal inadequacy and helplessness. In fact, a cohesive group might increase attachment-anxious people's over-dependence on the group and then prevent the development of a sense of self-efficacy, competence, and autonomy. Only cohesive groups that also support, validate, and empower attachment-anxious members' feelings of personal competence and autonomy (secure-base provision) might effectively enhance not only their comfort with the specific group but also their global sense of attachment security across relationships. To date, no study has examined this possibility.

In addition, group cohesion failed to improve the functioning of avoidant members (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). As reviewed earlier, avoidant people attempt to deal alone with threats and their "compulsive self-reliance" (Bowlby, 1982) might be expressed during group interactions. Moreover, a cohesive group, which implies a high level of interdependence among group members, might be so uncomfortable for avoidant people that it might exacerbate rather than calm their attachment-related fears and defenses (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). However, a cohesive group can still soften avoidant people's worries when group members unconditionally accept and validate each other's uniqueness and autonomy and respect each other's decisions to refrain from intimate, emotion-laded disclosures. This supportive and respectful group attitude can make it less dangerous for avoidant members to engage actively in group activities; they can then gradually learn that being an active member of the group is safe and rewarding. Unfortunately, no study has tested this intriguing possibility.

In the current research, we begin to fill in these empirical gaps. Specifically, we are examining what are the specific group gestures that might enhance felt security during group interactions. For this purpose, we rely on Arriaga et al.'s (2018) model of attachment-security enhancement in romantic relationships and attempt to extend it to group relationships.

The Attachment Security Enhancement Model and its Extension to Group Relationships

The ASEM is a dual-process model of how romantic relationships can provide a platform for strengthening security among attachment-anxious and avoidant people. The first process involves managing attachment insecurities during couple interactions, and the second process involves fostering attachment security within the couple.

According to Arriaga et al. (2018), partners who are sensitive and responsive to each other's needs, fears, and defenses can effectively manage the dysfunctional manifestations of

attachment insecurities during couple interactions. In the case of attachment-anxious people, who tend to doubt their value and lovability and experience intense fears of rejection, a responsive partner can allay these concerns by providing unwavering reassurance, love, and commitment. This kind of behavior signals safety in the relationship (*safe strategies*), which can reduce attachment-anxious individuals' worries and counter their need to cling, monitor, intrude, and demand care. In the case of attachment-avoidant people, who distrust a partner's intentions and feel uncomfortable with intimacy and interdependence, a responsive partner can soften these concerns by understanding and validating the person's need for self-reliance and conveying a sense that it is possible to feel unconstrained and autonomous even during intimate interactions (*softening strategies*). Research has shown that a partner's display of affection, commitment, and love can reduce attachment-anxious people's self-focused worries and destructive relational tendencies, whereas a partner's validation of attachment-avoidant people's needs for autonomy reduce their tendency to withdraw from close and interdependent interactions (e.g., Farrell et al., 2016; Schrage et al., 2020; see Overall et al., 2022, for a review).

However, managing attachment insecurities during couple interactions might not be enough for cultivating security (Arriaga et al., 2018). In fact, moving attachment-anxious people toward security requires not only their partner's expression of affection and support but also the provision of opportunities that can disconfirm their negative models of self and replace them with a sense of competence and self-worth. That is, attachment anxiety is likely to decline as anxious people experience their partner's confidence in, and empowerment of, their competence and value. In the case of avoidant individuals, moving them toward greater security requires not only respecting their need for self-reliance but also creating comforting experiences of interdependence that can disconfirm their negative working models of others (Arriaga et al., 2018). In this way, avoidant people learn that interdependence is not as frightening as they thought (based on past relationships) and that they can trust their partner.

Recent studies confirm that relational experiences that bolster feelings of worth and competence are critical for reducing attachment anxiety within a couple (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2014, 2021; Park et al., 2019). In a study of newlywed couples, for example, participants who were more likely to perceive their partner as valuing of their personal goals reported less attachment anxiety 12 months later (Arriaga et al., 2014). There is also evidence that positive interdependent experiences contribute to a decrease in avoidant attachment (e.g., Rholes et al., 2021; Stanton et al., 2017). In a 2-year longitudinal study of couples transitioning to parenthood, for example, participants who perceived that they were receiving support from their partner exhibited a steeper decline in avoidant attachment over time (Rholes et al., 2021).

In extending the ASEM to group relationships, we hypothesize that groups can buffer the destructive manifestations of attachment insecurities during group interactions by providing unwavering signs of acceptance, reassurance, and support to attachment-anxious members (safe strategies) and by respecting and validating attachment-avoidant members' needs for self-reliance and interpersonal distance (softening strategies). I also hypothesize that group's ongoing provision of opportunities to revise of insecure working models would increase the possibility for sustained felt security in the long run. Moving an attachment-anxious member toward greater felt security requires creating group experiences that can enhance his or her model of the self as worthy and competent. Moving an attachment-avoidant member toward greater felt security requires creating smooth and joyful group interactions that can contribute to more positive models of others and relationships.

Research Objectives

The main goal of the current research is to examine the specific group-related processes that underlie security enhancement within group relationships. For this purpose, we extend Arriaga et al.'s (2018) model, which was originally developed to explain revision of insecure working models within romantic relationships, to group relationships. In particular, our research provides novel findings about whether and how social groups can fulfill a transformative function and move insecure members toward heightened security. Moreover, the research enables a better understanding of how a social group can destabilize anxious and avoidant working models and enhance attachment security in each kind of insecure members. In addition, findings from our research would assist the development of more effective group-level interventions (e.g., group counseling) aimed at fostering security, wellbeing, and functioning.

The Research Program

The research program includes six studies examining the extent to which the four group provisions envisioned in our extension of the ASEM lead to positive changes in members' attachment orientations. Specifically, we examine whether a group that displays *safe strategies* and offers opportunities to feel competent would mitigate attachment-anxious members' fears and maladaptive responses and heighten their felt security. We also examine whether a group that displays *softening strategies* and offers opportunities to enjoy interdependence would mitigate attachment-avoidant members' fears and defenses and move them toward heightened felt security.

In Study 1, a cross-sectional correlational study, we are checking the psychometric properties of a new self-report scale we constructed to assess perceptions of the four security-

enhancing group provisions (display of safe and softening responses, provision of opportunities to feel competent and to enjoy interdependence). Then, we examine associations between participants' perceptions of these four provisions in a group they nominate and their attachment orientations (anxiety, avoidance) and felt security toward this group, while taking into account their dominant attachment orientation in close relationships.

In four subsequent laboratory experiments (Studies 2-5), we randomly assign participants to either a condition that makes salient one of the four security-enhancing group provisions or to a condition that makes salient a positive, but attachment-irrelevant, group experience (control condition). Then, we examine the extent to which this manipulation enhances state-like felt security and reduces cognitive and behavioral correlates of attachment anxiety (i.e., reassurance seeking, intolerance of novelty) or attachment avoidance (i.e., discomfort with self-disclosure, distrust of others' intentions), while taking into account participants' dominant attachment orientation in close relationships.

In Study 6, we examine the security-enhancing impact of the four group provisions in a 4-month prospective study among adolescents undergoing group therapy for emotional-behavioral problems. Specifically, we ask whether clients' perceptions of security-enhancing provisions within group interactions during therapy are associated with stronger felt security to the therapeutic group during therapy and more pre-to-post-therapy positive changes in global felt security in close relationships and emotional/behavioral problems.

Working Hypotheses

1. Perceptions of a group as displaying safe responses or offering opportunities to feel competent would be associated with less attachment anxiety and more felt security toward the group. These associations would be mainly observed among people who score relatively high on global attachment anxiety in close relationships (Study 1).
2. Perceptions of a group as displaying softening responses or offering opportunities to enjoy interdependence would be associated with less attachment avoidance and more felt security toward the group. These associations would be mainly observed among people who score relatively high on global attachment avoidance in close relationships (Study 1).
3. As compared to a positive, but attachment-irrelevant, group experience, experiencing that a group behaves in a safe manner or offers an opportunity to feel competent would increase felt security toward the group and reduce cognitive and behavioral manifestations of attachment anxiety (e.g., reassurance seeking, novelty intolerance). These effects would be mainly observed among people who score relatively high on global attachment anxiety in close relationships (Studies 2 and 3).

4. As compared to a positive, but attachment-irrelevant, group experience, experiencing that a group behaves in a softening manner or offers an opportunity to enjoy interdependence would increase felt security toward the group and reduce cognitive and behavioral manifestations of avoidant attachment (e.g., discomfort with self-disclosure, distrust of others' intentions). These effects would be mainly observed among people who score relatively high on global attachment avoidance in close relationships (Studies 4 and 5).
5. Perceptions of a therapeutic group as displaying safe strategies or offering opportunities to feel competent during therapy would be associated with more felt security about the therapeutic group during therapy and more pre-to-post positive changes in attachment orientations in close relationships and emotional/behavioral problems following a 4-month therapy. These effects would be mainly observed among clients who score relatively high on attachment anxiety in close relationships before therapy (Study 6).
6. Perceptions of a therapeutic group as displaying softening strategies or offering opportunities to enjoy interdependence during therapy would be associated with more felt security to the group during therapy and more pre-to-post positive changes in attachment orientations in close relationships and emotional/behavioral problems following a 4-month therapy. These effects would be mainly observed among clients who score relatively high on attachment avoidance in close relationships before therapy (Study 6).

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