



## FlashReport

## Looking a gift horse in the mouth as a defense against increasing intimacy

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 October 2009

Revised 6 February 2010

Available online 25 February 2010

## Keyword:

Close relationships

## ABSTRACT

The authors hypothesize that people who fear dependence evidence a particular defensive bias by perceiving benefits received to have been less voluntarily given, which justifies not depending upon their partner. In Study 1, both members of married couples completed daily diaries regarding benefits they gave and received and the extent to which each was given involuntarily versus voluntarily. Avoidant attachment measured before marriage predicted perceiving one's spouse to have given benefits less voluntarily, controlling for that spouse's reports of how voluntarily benefits had been given. In Study 2, participants identified three specific benefits received from a friend. Days later, participants were primed with avoidant feelings or not before reporting the extent to which the benefits identified earlier had been given voluntarily. Participants primed to feel avoidant perceived their friend to have given them benefits less voluntarily than did the remaining participants.

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## Introduction

The nature of close communal relationships requires partners to be voluntarily responsive to one another and to depend upon one another for such responsiveness (Clark & Mills, *in press*; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Yet, risking dependency is not easy (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Partners may not come to one's aid when needed, which can be painful. Dependency leaves one open to exploitation, which may be even more painful. Extant literature suggests that many people—for example, those high in attachment-related avoidance or low in self-esteem—are risk averse in this regard. They avoid dependency behaviorally by seeking less help (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), expressing less emotion indicative of their needs (Feeney, 1995; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007), avoiding social situations that provide information about others' interest in them (Beck & Clark, 2009), and acting in unpleasant ways that push partners away (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). They avoid dependency cognitively by misperceiving partners as caring for and liking them less than those partners truly do (Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998).

In the present work we investigate whether people low in trust of others (conceptualized by chronic or temporary attachment avoidance) might evidence another self-protective strategy. We hypothesized that avoidant people, relative to non-avoidant people, would perceive benefits received as *less voluntarily* given. If a partner voluntarily promotes one's welfare, it signals that one should strengthen communal ties with that person by increasing dependence. Yet movement in this direction may threaten avoidant indi-

viduals. If such individuals defensively view benefits as non-voluntarily given by a partner, they can justify not increasing dependence. After all, an involuntarily given benefit does not suggest that the partner is caring and that dependency should be increased. This is why, we propose, avoidance will be associated with biases to perceive benefits as less voluntarily given.

We tested our hypothesis in two studies. The first was a diary study of 100 married couples. Spouses completed measures of attachment avoidance and anxiety before marriage. Months later, spouses independently completed diaries for 5 days reporting benefits given and received from their partner and the extent to which each benefit (whether given or received) was voluntarily given. We expected that spouses high in attachment avoidance would perceive benefits received as less voluntarily given, even while controlling for partners' own reports of how voluntarily benefits were given.

Study 2 was experimental. Participants identified benefits received from a friend, subsequently were primed to feel avoidant (or not), and finally rated how voluntarily each previously identified benefit was given. We hypothesized that participants primed with avoidance would be more likely than others to report that benefits were non-voluntarily given.

## Study 1

## Methods

## Participants

One-hundred and eight soon-to-be married couples (108 males; 108 females; mean age for males = 27.0 years; mean age for females = 26.0 years) were recruited through bridal fairs, bridal registries, newsletter advertisements, flyers, and electronic bulletin

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boards for a longitudinal study of marriage. Couples were eligible if they had never been married and were childless. Of the couples participating in the longitudinal study, 100 completed a daily-diary component and participated in the present work.

#### Procedure

All 108 original couples completed consent forms and questionnaires approximately 6 weeks before marriage. Approximately 5 months after their wedding day, 100 of the couples independently completed the daily-diary component over 5 days. To reinforce daily completion, participants sealed records in envelopes at the end of each day and signed and dated each envelope.

#### Questionnaire measures

**Attachment-related avoidance and anxiety.** Attachment-related avoidance and anxiety were assessed using items developed by Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips (1996). The avoidance subscale assessed discomfort with closeness (e.g., “I’m not very comfortable having others depend on me”;  $\alpha = .80$ ). The anxiety subscale assessed anxiety about others’ acceptance (e.g., “I usually want more closeness and intimacy than others do”;  $\alpha = .80$ ). Items were answered on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The correlation between subscales was .14.

#### Daily-diary measures

At the end of each day, daily-diary participants reported every benefit given and received from their partner that day. Participants answered the question, “Did you give the benefit voluntarily or because you felt you had to?” for each benefit given using 5-point response scales (1 = *Voluntarily*, 5 = *Because I felt I had to*). Participants also answered the question, “Do you believe your spouse gave the benefit voluntarily or because s/he felt s/he had to?” for each benefit received using 5-point response scales (1 = *Voluntarily*, 5 = *Because s/he felt s/he had to*).

#### Results

Multilevel models (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Nezlek, 2001) were tested using the Linear Mixed Models procedure in SPSS 15.0. Analyses modeled individuals (Level 1) as nested within couples (Level 2). Given the limited degrees of freedom at Level 1 (two individuals per couple), slopes were modeled as fixed across couples; intercepts were modeled as randomly varying (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). Variables were standardized across the entire sample to facilitate comparison of the effects of predictor variables on outcome variables across measures.

To test the hypothesis that participants’ attachment avoidance would predict perceiving their partner as giving benefits less voluntarily, we regressed participants’ perceptions of whether benefits were given voluntarily onto participants’ own attachment avoidance and their partner’s reports of whether he or she gave benefits voluntarily.<sup>1</sup> Participants’ own attachment avoidance significantly predicted perceiving their partner as giving benefits less

voluntarily,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $t(171.36) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .008$  (two-tailed); their partner’s actual reports of whether he or she had given benefits voluntarily was not a significant predictor.

#### Discussion

Study 1’s results support our hypothesis. Higher attachment avoidance significantly predicted perceptions of benefits as given less voluntarily, controlling for donors’ self-reports of how voluntarily benefits were given. Perhaps biased perceptions of how voluntarily partners gave benefits subserve motives to keep partners at “arm’s length” and protect the self (for individuals high in avoidance) and/or encourage approach and dependence upon partners (for individuals low in avoidance).

To further test our hypothesis, we conducted an experimental study: an important step for several reasons. First, Study 1 left open the possibility that partners who feel forced to give benefits and convey that to their spouse might *cause* their spouse to feel avoidant. Second, whereas Study 1—by measuring the predictor variable months before the daily-diary component and collecting diary data across 5 days—counters some arguments that the observed links might be spurious, we cannot discount all arguments to that effect. For instance, although Study 1’s methodology eliminates the possibility that a negative mood on one day might influence both self-reported avoidance and perceptions that the partner gave benefits non-voluntarily on that day, the possibility remains that people’s chronic levels of neuroticism might have driven both ratings of avoidance and of how voluntarily benefits were given. Also, the nature of benefits reported could not be controlled for across participants high versus low in avoidance. Finally, the results of Study 1 might be due to avoidant people misperceiving benefits as having been non-voluntarily given, to non-avoidant people misperceiving benefits as voluntarily given, or to both effects. In Study 2, we could better assess the relationship between perceptions of how voluntarily benefits were given and attachment avoidance by experimentally increasing feelings of avoidance among some participants and including a control group of participants, then measuring relative perceptions of how voluntarily benefits were given.

## Study 2

#### Methods

##### Participants

Thirty undergraduate and graduate students (12 males; 18 females; mean age = 20.25 years) participated for payment. Data from two participants were excluded due to their suspicion that the avoidance prime was related to the laboratory questionnaire.

##### Procedure

Forty-eight hours before the experiment, participants listed three recent benefits received from a friend. Upon arrival at the laboratory, each participant was assigned randomly to respond to a written prompt either *before* (experimental condition;  $N = 13$ ) or *after* (control condition;  $N = 15$ ) answering questions about each benefit their friend gave them. The prompt was designed to prime attachment avoidance by asking participants to write about a specific person with whom their relationship fit an avoidant attachment style. The prime read, “Please think of a person you are uncomfortable being close to. Describe a time when you did not trust him or her and did not allow yourself to depend on him or her.” The prime was based on Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) description of adult avoidant attachment style and from items on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The experimenter remained unaware of whether participants were in-

<sup>1</sup> We utilized participants’ average perceptions of whether benefits were given voluntarily as a predictor instead of individual benefit ratings and how they matched or did not match partner’s ratings of each specific benefit. First, partners typically reported different numbers of benefits. Second, partners typically reported some overlapping and some unique benefits. Third, the level of abstraction on which partners described particular benefits varied (e.g., one might report giving affection; the other receiving a massage). Therefore, it was impossible to match each benefit reported as given with each benefit reported as received. Results from a traditional three-level model revealed an effect of participants’ own attachment avoidance that was nearly identical to that described in the text,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $t(137.49) = 3.04$ ,  $p = .003$  (two-tailed); again, partner’s actual reports of whether he or she had given benefits voluntarily was not a significant predictor. (In this model, the 2468 daily observations of benefits were nested within 200 individuals, who were, in turn, nested within 100 couples. Slopes were modeled as fixed for partners within couples and as randomly varying for benefits within partners; intercepts were modeled as randomly varying.)

duced to feel avoidant before or after answering questions about the benefits their friends gave them.

Before (or after) the prime, participants used 5-point scales to answer the following questions about each of the three benefits they identified previously: “Do you think that the other person did this for you because s/he wanted to or because s/he felt like s/he had to?” (1 = *Voluntarily*, 5 = *Because s/he felt s/he had to*); “How much did you appreciate the thing that s/he did for you?” (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Very much*); “How much did you enjoy the thing that s/he did for you?” (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Very much*). The first question assessed participants’ perceptions of whether benefits were given voluntarily; the latter questions were filler items.

Finally, participants reported whether the person who gave them benefits was *also* the person they described as someone to whom they were uncomfortable being close. No participant reported this was the case. The experimenter checked participants for suspicion and debriefed them.

## Results

We computed participants’ average perception of whether benefits were given voluntarily and their average appreciation and average enjoyment of benefits. We used an independent-samples *t*-test to test whether participants in the experimental condition (primed before answering our questions) would report that their friend gave them benefits less voluntarily compared to participants in the control condition. On the basis of our firm theoretical predictions and the clear results of Study 1, we conducted a one-tailed test. As predicted, experimental participants ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) reported that benefits were given less voluntarily compared to control participants ( $M = 1.82$ ,  $SD = .53$ ),  $t(26) = -1.86$ ,  $p = .037$  (one-tailed),  $d = .70$ . An analysis of covariance was conducted with gender as a covariate; gender was not statistically significant. Independent-samples *t*-tests and analyses of covariance for participants’ appreciation and enjoyment of benefits (analogous to those described above) revealed no significant effects.

## Discussion

In Study 2, an avoidance prime caused participants to perceive benefits received from a friend as less voluntarily given. These results offer stronger support for the causal nature of a link between feeling avoidant and perceiving benefits as less voluntarily given. Study 2 also extends evidence to the domain of friendships.

## General discussion

Having low trust in a partner is associated with reluctance to risk dependency on that partner (Murray et al., 2006). Extant literature suggests that, as a consequence, people low in trust—captured by a variety of constructs—take steps to keep partners at a distance. They are reluctant to seek help (Simpson et al., 1992), to express emotion indicating their needs (Feeney, 1995; Simpson et al., 2007), and to enter situations that provide socially diagnostic information regarding another’s liking for them (Beck & Clark, 2009). They perceive partners as liking and caring for them less than partners report (Lemay & Clark, 2008; Lemay et al., 2007; Murray et al., 1998, 2001).

What happens when a partner bestows benefits upon them? One might think it would be difficult to deny the partner’s care. However, if benefits are perceived as having been given non-voluntarily, recipients can infer that the partner is not especially caring, and consequently justify not risking increased dependence on that partner.

Our findings and theorizing provide a new perspective on earlier research on attributions in marriage. Extensive literature (see

Bradbury and Fincham (1990), for a review) has shown that dissatisfied spouses make attributions for partners’ good behavior that minimize the impact of that behavior and attributions for partners’ bad behavior that enhance the impact of that behavior; satisfied spouses do the reverse. Our work addresses *why* this pattern may occur. Perhaps dissatisfied spouses have been hurt by past partner behavior. They may not want to see their partner as caring, lest they be tempted to trust that partner again. Satisfied spouses may be willing or wish to increase dependency, and attributions enhancing good behavior and diminishing bad behavior may subserve that motive. It also is important to note how our work is distinct from prior work. We examine the impact of feelings of avoidance, *not* satisfaction, on attributions for benefits received, and we suggest that a defensive strategy to justify *not* risking dependence underlies our observations.

In this research we assume that chronic attachment avoidance and priming thoughts about relationships characterized by avoidance captures motivated defensiveness against intimacy. It is important to more firmly investigate these claims through new work in which such motivations are directly manipulated and shown to drive perceptions that benefits have been non-voluntarily given, as well as work in which avoidant individuals are shown to perceive benefits *they* receive—but not those that *others* receive—as non-voluntarily given.

Our research adds another strategy to a host of strategies avoidant and low self-esteem individuals may use to evade dependency or increases in dependency. Whereas people normatively are advised not to “look a gift horse in the mouth,” perhaps doing so serves an understandable purpose for avoidant individuals. Perceiving benefits to be non-voluntary may protect them from temptations to increase dependency on a partner. Sadly, if such perceptions are conveyed to partners, partners may become frustrated, decrease true caring, and set a self-fulfilling prophecy into motion.

## Acknowledgments

Study 1 was supported by National Science Foundation Grant BNS 9983417, Award I.D. 0639712. The opinions and conclusions expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the National Science Foundation.

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