
Avoidant Attachment and the Experience of Parenting

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Guided by attachment theory, this research investigated connections between avoidant attachment styles and the experience of parenting after the birth of a couple's first child. One hundred and six couples completed a battery of measures approximately 6 weeks before and 6 months after the birth of their first child. As anticipated, parents with more avoidant attachment styles experienced greater stress after the birth of their child and perceived parenting as less satisfying and personally meaningful. Attachment theory maintains that adult attachment styles should affect relationships with adults and with one's children. The present findings provide some of the first evidence that self-reported adult romantic attachment styles, which have been the focus of attachment research by social and personality psychologists, are systematically associated with parent-child relationships. They also provide insight into the processes through which secure and insecure attachment styles might be transmitted from one generation to the next.

Keywords: attachment style; avoidance; transition to parenthood; stress

It requires no great insight to realize that [people with avoidant attachment styles] are deeply distrustful of close relationships and terrified of allowing themselves to rely on anyone else, in some cases in order to avoid the pain of being rejected and in others to avoid being subjected to pressure to become someone else's caretaker.

—John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (1979, p. 138)

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), evolutionary forces have created predispositions in human infants to form strong emotional bonds to their caregivers because such bonds increase infants' chances of survival. The normative states associated with this evolved "attachment" system are feelings of vulnerability

when separated from attachment figures and a sense of security when in their presence; the normative behavior produced by the system is to seek physical and psychological proximity to attachment figures when distressed. Experiences with caregivers, however, may alter the way in which the attachment system operates. If an infant's efforts to seek comfort and security from caregivers in times of distress are habitually rebuffed or if they elicit an unpredictable mixture of acceptance and rejection, insecure attachment patterns (avoidant-resistant or anxious-resistant) typically develop (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; van IJzendoorn, 1995). If comfort seeking is routinely accepted, that is, if parenting is responsive to an infant's emotional states, secure attachments typically develop (Ainsworth et al., 1978; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). When attachments are secure, the normative states and behaviors associated with attachment are readily apparent. In contrast, when attachments are avoidant, infants are reluctant to seek comfort from caregivers, and when they are anxious, caregivers have little capacity to calm distress and create feelings of security.

The social and personality research literature provides ample evidence in support of the view expressed in

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Bowlby's (1979) words above that adults with avoidant attachment styles do not want to serve as caregivers. In a study of adult friendships, for example, Wilson, Simpson, and Rholes (2000) found that more avoidant adults feel less comfortable providing support to close friends, feel less obligated to provide support, and derogate friends who seek their support by viewing them as dependent, weak, emotionally unstable, and immature. A number of behavioral studies (e.g., B. Feeney & Collins, 2004; J. Feeney, 1999; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001; Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) have shown that more avoidant people often provide less than adequate social support to their romantic partners, presumably due at least in part to the values, attitudes, and perceptions observed by Wilson et al. (2000).

If adults with avoidant attachment styles find it difficult to provide emotional support to other adults, they also may find it difficult to provide supportive care to their children. Rholes, Simpson, and Blakely (1995) found that mothers who reported more avoidant romantic attachment styles provided less support to their young children (rated by observers) when trying to teach them a new task. More avoidant mothers also reported that they felt somewhat detached from their young children emotionally. This study, therefore, indicates that patterns of supportive behavior similar to those seen in romantic couples also can be observed in certain interactions between mothers and their young children.

In a related study, Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, and Allen (1997) examined some of the attitudes, values, and beliefs about children and parenthood that may be responsible for avoidant parents' unsupportive behavior and feelings of emotional distance. One of the primary findings was that avoidant male and female college students reported less desire to become parents. Another was that more avoidant students endorsed harsher disciplinary practices for young children and expected that if they eventually became parents, their children would be more independent emotionally and less affectionate. These attitudes and beliefs may help explain why the more avoidant mothers in Rholes et al. (1995) felt more distant from their children and behaved less supportively.^{1, 2}

The present study continues the examination of cognitive and affective characteristics of more avoidant parents. In particular, it focuses on their perceptions of parenting stress and the satisfaction and personal fulfillment they derive from parenting. These aspects of parental experience were targeted because they represent commonly reported costs (stress) and benefits (satisfaction and fulfillment) associated with the transition to parenthood (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan,

2000). Stress is of particular importance because several studies indicate that stress undermines caregiving and predicts a higher incidence of insecure infant-caregiver attachments (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). The major question addressed in the current study is whether prenatally assessed avoidance and the desire to have children predict stress and meaning/satisfaction 6 months into parenthood.

The current study rectifies certain limitations of the samples and designs of past research in this area. One advantage of working with a college student sample as Rholes et al. (1997) did is that findings cannot be influenced by experiences with children. A primary disadvantage is that data from a childless, college student sample provide no information about people who either have children or are on the verge of having them. Such studies, for instance, cannot discern whether more avoidant people who are about to become parents remain uncertain about whether they want to be parents. Another limitation of previous studies is that they have not examined parent-infant relationships. Attachment relationships during infancy are considered particularly important by attachment theorists because these relationships constitute the first social bond and, therefore, may exert more influence than subsequent relationships on psychological development. The present study is the first to use romantic attachment style measures to investigate parents' experiences of caring for an infant. Thus, it fills in an age gap between studies involving people who do not yet have children (Rholes et al., 1997) and studies of the parents of preschoolers (Rholes et al., 1995). A final limitation of previous studies is that their designs have been concurrent. The present study's prospective design should allow for stronger inferences about direction of causality.

In the current study, married couples provided information about their attachment styles and their desire to have children approximately 6 weeks prior to the birth of their first child. When their infant was approximately 6 months old, they reported on their experiences of stress and the satisfaction and fulfillment (or meaning) they derived from parenting. We hypothesized that more avoidant people would perceive parenting to be more stressful than would less avoidant people. We reasoned that the desire to avoid caregiving roles and the absence of a strong desire to become a parent would magnify the impact of the stressors (e.g., fatigue, financial strain) that new parents routinely face. In addition, more avoidant parents might find parenting more stressful because they lack experience with children and child care and, thus, lack confidence in their abilities to parent successfully (Rholes et al., 1997). We also hypothesized that the value that highly avoidant individuals place

on emotional independence, their desire to avoid caretaking roles, and especially their relatively low interest in becoming a parent would undermine the potential for fulfillment and satisfaction associated with infant care.

Previous research has confirmed that after avoidance has been statistically controlled, less desire to become a parent predicts feelings of greater uncertainty about one's ability to relate to children, endorsement of harsher discipline practices, and expectations that children will be more independent and less affectionate (Rholes et al., 1995; Rholes et al., 1997). Accordingly, we hypothesized that people who expressed less desire to become a parent would experience parenting as both more stressful and less meaningful and satisfying. We also hypothesized that the association between attachment avoidance and meaning/satisfaction and stress should be at least partially mediated by the desire to become a parent.³

In some research, two types of avoidance, fearful and dismissive, are distinguished and examined separately (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990). The difference between dismissive and fearful avoidance is not a function of an individual's avoidance score per se. Rather, it is a function of the relationship between avoidance and attachment anxiety. Individuals classified as dismissive score high on avoidance and low on anxiety, whereas those classified as fearful score high on both avoidance and anxiety (Bartholomew, 1990). Most recent research on adult attachment has treated avoidance as a unitary construct (see Rholes & Simpson, 2004a), and there is no evidence to suggest that fearful and dismissive avoidance might have different relationships to the parenting variables addressed in this study. Consequently, the hypotheses tested in this research do not distinguish between fearful and avoidant attachment. Both types of avoidant people should express less desire to become parents and should find parenting more stressful and less meaningful/rewarding. For exploratory purposes, however, we examined the interactive effects of avoidance and anxiety to test whether any of the effects involving avoidance and the parenting variables were qualified by levels of attachment anxiety.

In all of our analyses, we controlled for two potential confounds. Past research has found that avoidance is associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (e.g., Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997) and lower marital satisfaction (e.g., J. Feeney, 1999). Thus, we assessed these variables during the prenatal period to test whether avoidance relates to stress and parenting meaning/satisfaction when these possible confounds are controlled.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred six couples residing in a southwestern U.S. city completed both the prenatal (Time 1) and the postnatal (Time 2) sessions. Seven additional couples completed the prenatal testing session but did not complete the postnatal session. Six of these couples moved away and one separated between the two sessions. Couples were recruited from childbirth preparation classes offered by a local hospital and were paid \$50 to participate. All of the couples who took part in the study were having their first child. Approximately 45% of the couples approached agreed to participate. The participants were 90% Euro-American, 6% Hispanic American, and 4% from a variety of international backgrounds. The mean ages of women and men were 28.0 ($SD = 4.3$) and 29.0 ($SD = 5.5$) years, respectively. The mean length of the marriages was 3.8 years ($SD = 2.5$).

Procedure

Couples were first contacted during an early meeting of a childbirth course. An experimenter explained the study and couples were enrolled. Approximately 6 weeks before their due date (at Time 1), both members of each couple completed several self-report scales after a class, privately and without consulting one another. Approximately 6 months after childbirth (at Time 2), both partners completed a second set of self-report measures that were mailed to their homes. They were instructed to complete the inventories without consulting each other. Each spouse then mailed his or her questionnaire packet back to the study coordinator in a separate envelope. At both the prenatal and postnatal assessments, packets contained scales that assessed participants' attachment orientations (toward romantic partners *in general*), marital satisfaction, and depressive symptoms. Participants' desire to become a parent was assessed only during the prenatal testing session. Parenting meaning/satisfaction and stress were assessed only postnatally.⁴

Measures

Attachment dimensions. Attachment anxiety and avoidance were measured by the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Participants responded to this measure based on their thoughts and feelings about romantic partners *in general*, including (but not limited to) their spouse. Sample items from the Avoidance subscale are as follows: "I don't like people getting too close to me" and "I'm nervous whenever anyone gets too close to me." Sample items from the Anxiety subscale are as follows: "Others are often reluctant to get as close as I would like" and "I am

confident that my partner(s) love me just as much as I love them" (reverse-scored). These items were answered on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). There are eight avoidance and nine ambivalence items on the AAQ; thus, scores can range from 8 to 56 for avoidance and from 9 to 63 for ambivalence. Each dimension correlates very highly (greater than .90) with the relevant avoidance and anxiety dimensions used in other attachment research (see Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Cronbach's alphas for the Avoidance scale were .79 and .82, respectively, for men and women at Time 1 and .78 and .82 for men and women at Time 2. Alphas for the Ambivalence scale were .74 and .81, respectively, for men and women at Time 1 and .80 and .86 for men and women at Time 2.

Desire to become a parent. The Desire to Become a Parent Scale (Rholes et al., 1997) contains 12 items. Sample items include "I have a strong desire to have children," "If I could not have children, I would definitely want to adopt," and "I would not marry someone who did not want to have children." Respondents answered each statement on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Scores could range from 12 to 84. The alpha for this scale was .80 for both men and women.

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed by the Satisfaction subscale of Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). Example items from this 10-item subscale are as follows: "Do you regret that you ever married?" and "How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?" These items were answered on 6-point scales ranging from 1 (*all the time*) to 6 (*never*). Thus, scores could range from 6 to 60. The alphas for this scale were .78 and .84, respectively, for men and women at Time 1 and .87 and .90 for men and women at Time 2.

Depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies–Depression Scale, which was developed for use with nonclinical populations (Radloff & Teri, 1986). Participants indicated the frequency of depressive symptoms *within the past week*. Sample items include "I was bothered by things that usually didn't bother me," "I had crying spells," and "I felt hopeful about the future" (reverse-scored). Items were measured on 4-point scales from 1 (*rarely or none of the time [less than 1 day]*) to 4 (*most or all of the time [5-7 days]*). Scores could range from 20 to 80. The alphas were .79 for men and .83 for women at Time 1 and .83 for men and .78 for women at Time 2.

Parental meaning and satisfaction. Parental meaning/satisfaction was measured by Pistrang's (1984) Parental Satisfaction Scale. Representative items are as follows: "Caring for my baby gives me a feeling of self-fulfillment,"

"Caring for my baby makes me feel good about myself," "Caring for my baby gives me a feeling of self-worth," and "Caring for my baby makes me feel useful." Scores on this scale could range from 12 to 60. The scale's alpha was .80 for men and .90 for women.

Parental stress. Parenting stress was measured by Abidin's (1983) Parenting Stress Index. Example items are as follows: "My baby is so demanding that it exhausts me," "I find that getting my baby to do something or stop doing something is much harder than I expected," "After having this baby, I feel that I am almost never able to do the things I like to do," and "My baby rarely does things that make me feel good." Scores on this 32-item instrument could range from 0 to 92. Because this measure is an inventory of parenting problems, coefficient alpha was not computed.

Statistical Analysis

We analyzed our data through regression techniques using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) (Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996). The APIM is relevant when the dyad (i.e., the marital couple) is the unit of analysis and tests need to be performed both between and within dyads (Kenny, 1996). Variables are measured with respect to both the actor and his or her relationship partner. As a result, the APIM can test not only whether an actor's own attributes predict his or her responses and behaviors but also whether the attributes of the actor's partner also predict the actor's responses and behaviors, controlling for the actor's own attributes. More traditional types of data analyses (e.g., ANOVA or ordinary least squares regression) cannot properly model the covariation and statistical dependency that naturally exist when individuals are nested within certain dyads. In marriages, for example, spousal partners tend to be more similar to one another than they are to individuals in other marriages, and spouses in a given marriage are likely to exert unique influences on each other. This interdependence must be taken into account and modeled when dyads are the focus of investigation.

The APIM also allows researchers to assess the effects of the partner on the dependent measure values of the actor. Between-dyad and within-dyad standard errors are pooled to develop a standard error that can be used to test for actor and partner effects separately (using a *t* test). The degrees of freedom for each test is a function of the individual and pooled standard errors, with the resulting degrees of freedom being greater than or equal to the usual degrees of freedom that would be used based on the between-dyad and within-dyad standard errors (see Kashy & Kenny, 2000).

In the APIM, therefore, one effect (for the dyad) is really two effects (actor and partner), and properly testing interactions between them becomes possible

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics: Means, Standard Deviations, and Matched-Pair *t* Tests

	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Desire to become a parent (T1)	62.77	1.01	67.17	1.01	3.57**
Parent meaning/satisfaction (T2)	46.12	8.28	50.25	7.11	4.17***
Marital satisfaction (T1)	41.83	4.15	41.93	4.70	0.29
Marital satisfaction (T2)	40.17	5.60	39.52	6.70	1.33
Depression (T1)	29.27	7.78	31.37	7.66	2.32*
Depression (T2)	29.11	8.31	30.42	8.47	1.38
Parenting stress (T2)	31.00	17.70	36.00	16.94	3.41**
Avoidance (T1)	27.94	8.00	25.34	7.97	2.77**
Avoidance (T2)	26.85	7.97	24.26	8.36	2.70**
Ambivalence (T1)	23.64	7.46	23.71	8.44	0.07
Ambivalence (T2)	23.52	8.66	23.10	10.39	0.33

NOTE: T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.**TABLE 2: Correlations Among Predictor Variables Assessed Prenatally and the Parental Experience Variables Assessed Postnatally**

	<i>Avoidance</i>	<i>Anxiety</i>	<i>Desire to Become a Parent</i>	<i>Depressive Symptoms</i>	<i>Marital Satisfaction</i>	<i>Parenting Stress</i>
Avoidance						
Anxiety	.26***					
Desire to become a parent	-.24***	-.11				
Depressive symptoms	.33***	.35***	-.14*			
Marital satisfaction	-.32***	-.35***	.19**	-.42***		
Parenting stress	.33***	.28***	-.21***	.35***	-.33***	
Parenting meaning/ satisfaction	-.17**	-.08	.33***	-.10	.16*	-.27***

NOTE: $N = 212$. All variables were assessed in the prenatal period, except stress and meaning.* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(Kenny, 1996). PROC MIXED in SAS allows for such interaction terms to be included. Although other statistical estimation methods are possible, PROC MIXED, which fits multilevel models well, is one of the easiest to use. Campbell and Kashy (2002) provide a "how to" guide for using the APIM within the PROC MIXED program.

In the current study, an "actor effect" for avoidance would be evident if an individual's score on avoidant attachment predicted his or her perceptions of parenting, controlling for his or her partner's (i.e., the spouse's) avoidance. A "partner effect" would be evident if an individual's partner's avoidance score predicted an actor's perceptions of parenting, controlling for the actor's own avoidance.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for each scale and tests for gender differences, which were found for the Desire to Become a Parent Scale (women

expressed stronger desires than men), the Parental Meaning/Satisfaction Scale (women expressed greater meaning/satisfaction), the Depressive Symptoms Scale (women reported more symptoms), the Parenting Stress Inventory (men reported less stress), and both the prenatal and postnatal Avoidance Scales (men were more avoidant).

Correlations

Within-dyad correlations revealed that wives' and husbands' scale scores were significantly correlated ($p < .05$) for five measures: avoidance ($r = .22$), desire to have children ($r = .32$), stress ($r = .55$), marital satisfaction ($r = .68$), and depression ($r = .22$). Husbands' and wives' attachment anxiety and feelings of meaning/satisfaction were not significantly related, $r_s = .00$ and $.13$, respectively.

Table 2 presents zero-order correlations among attachment avoidance and anxiety, the desire to become a parent, depressive symptoms, and marital satisfaction (all measured before the baby was born) and parenting stress and meaning/satisfaction (measured after the

TABLE 3: Summary of APIM Analyses

Predictors	Actor Desire			Actor Parenting Stress			Actor Meaning/Satisfaction		
	b	t	df	b	t	df	b	t	df
Actor avoid.	-.20*	2.05	213	.35**	2.43	172	-.05	.66	200
Partner avoid.	-.15	1.51	213	.20	1.42	172	.02	.30	200
Actor anxiety	-.03	.34	197	.25	1.65	156	-.01	.15	194
Partner anxiety	-.12	1.14	197	-.06	.42	156	.07	1.01	194
Actor desire	—	—	—	-.16	1.59	187	.20***	4.11	196
Partner desire	—	—	—	.05	.55	187	-.05	1.00	196
Actor MS	.03	.15	191	-.19	.62	199	.05	.28	167
Partner MS	.30	1.35	191	-.38	1.24	199	.26	1.60	167
Actor dep.	-.05	.43	213	.37*	2.34	173	-.003	.05	200
Partner dep.	.07	.67	213	.10	.63	173	.03	.37	200
Actor sex	.12	.19	108	.41	.52	100	.10	.20	100

NOTE: *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient; APIM = Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; Dep. = depression; Desire = desire to become a parent; Avoid. = avoidance; MS = marital satisfaction.

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

baby's arrival). Because none of the correlations computed for women and men were significantly different, the correlations in Table 2 were computed for men and women combined.

As hypothesized, avoidance correlated significantly with both postnatal measures of parental experience. Specifically, higher prenatal levels of avoidance were associated with greater postnatal stress and less postnatal parental meaning/satisfaction. Corroborating past research (Rholes et al., 1997), more avoidant people also expressed less desire to become parents. People who reported less desire to be parents found parenting more stressful and less meaningful/satisfying 6 months after childbirth. They also reported more depressive symptoms and lower satisfaction in their marriages. Attachment anxiety was not significantly correlated with either the desire to have children or parental meaning/satisfaction. It was, however, significantly associated with higher parenting stress and with less marital satisfaction and more depressive symptoms (see also J. Feeney, 1999; Mickelson et al., 1997).

APIM Analyses

The first APIM analysis examined the relation between avoidance and the desire to become a parent. The purpose of the analysis was to determine whether avoidance is reliably associated with the desire to become a parent among people who are expecting a child, as it is among persons not undergoing the transition to parenthood. The primary independent variable in these analyses was actors' avoidance. The other predictor variables, which were included primarily for control purposes, were partners' avoidance, actors' and partners' attachment anxiety, actors' and partners' marital satisfaction, actors' and partners' depressive symptoms, and actors' gender.

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant interactions between gender of the actor and any predictor variables in either the present analysis or any of the other analyses reported below. These interaction terms, therefore, were dropped from the present analysis and all subsequent ones. Preliminary analyses also revealed no significant interactions between actors' avoidance and anxiety in the present analysis or any of the analyses reported below. In other words, fearful and dismissive avoidance did not have significantly different relations with the parenting experience variables in this study. Consequently, this interaction also was excluded from the present and subsequent analyses.

Consistent with prior research, our first APIM analysis confirmed that more avoidant people expressed less desire to have children than less avoidant people, $t(202) = 2.15$, $p < .05$, $b = -.20$.⁵ Partners' avoidance, actors' and partners' attachment anxiety, actors' and partners' marital satisfaction, actors' and partners' depressive symptoms, and actors' gender did not account for significant variance over and above actors' avoidance⁶ (see Table 3).

The next analyses tested for the hypothesized relations between prenatal avoidance and the postnatal parental experience variables, controlling for the prenatal measures of partner avoidance, actor and partner anxiety, actor and partner depressive symptoms, actor and partner marital satisfaction, and actor and partner desire to become a parent. The results of the first of these two analyses, in which the Parenting Stress Index was the dependent measure, revealed that higher prenatal actor avoidance predicted greater postnatal stress when all of the other predictors were partialled, $t(175) = 2.43$, $p < .01$, $b = .35$. Moreover, individuals who reported more prenatal depressive symptoms also reported greater postnatal stress when all of the other predictors

were controlled, $t(173) = 2.34$, $p < .05$, $b = .37$. No other variables significantly predicted stress (see Table 3).

The results of the second analysis, in which the Parental Meaning/Satisfaction Scale was the dependent variable, revealed that individuals who expressed a stronger desire to have children before their child was born found parenting more meaningful and satisfying when all of the other predictors were partialled, $t(196) = 4.11$, $p < .001$, $b = .20$. No other variable significantly predicted postnatal meaning/satisfaction (see Table 3). Avoidance, therefore, did *not* explain significant variance in meaning/satisfaction independent of desire to become a parent, despite its significant zero-order correlation with this variable (see Table 2). This suggests that the association between avoidance and meaning/satisfaction might be mediated by the desire to become a parent.

Mediation Analyses

We hypothesized that more avoidant parents would experience less meaning/satisfaction, at least in part, because they enter parenthood with less desire to be parents. To test for mediation, we conducted a series of analyses following procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). Because the APIM framework is not designed to test for mediation effects, conventional regression-based analyses were conducted for wives and husbands separately. The first analysis examined the association between avoidance and meaning/satisfaction among women. In the first step of this analysis, we found that more avoidant women reported less meaning/satisfaction, $t(104) = 1.96$, $p = .05$, $\beta = -.19$. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), two preliminary conditions must be met to establish that desire to become a parent mediates the link between women's avoidance and their levels of meaning/satisfaction. First, one must establish that the predictor, avoidance, is significantly related to the proposed mediator, the desire to become a parent. This condition was met; more avoidant women reported significantly less desire to become mothers, $t(104) = 3.54$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.32$. Second, it must be established that the proposed mediator is significantly related to the dependent variable, parental meaning/satisfaction, with avoidance scores partialled. This condition also was met, $t(103) = 4.26$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .40$. With these conditions met, mediation would be evident if the relation between the avoidance and parental meaning/satisfaction dropped to nonsignificance when desire to become a parent was partialled and if Sobel's z test suggested significant mediation. Indeed, the relation between avoidance and meaning/satisfaction became nonsignificant when desire to have children was partialled, $t(102) < 1.0$, $\beta = -.06$, and Sobel's test, $z = 2.72$, $p < .01$, confirmed significant mediation. Parallel analyses using the men's data were not conducted because the zero-order effect between

the predictor variable (avoidance) and dependent variable (parental meaning/satisfaction) was not significant in the sample of men, $t < 1.0$, $\beta = -.09$.

We also conducted analyses to test whether the relation between avoidance and parenting stress was mediated by the desire to become a parent. The association between prenatal avoidance and postnatal stress was significant for both men, $t(104) = 4.19$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.38$, and women, $t(104) = 3.11$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.29$. In neither case, however, was there evidence of mediation. Among women, the required preliminary condition that desire significantly predicted stress with avoidance partialled was not met, $t(103) = 1.34$, $\beta = -.13$. Thus, a mediation analysis could not be performed. Among men, neither of the required preliminary conditions was met. Avoidance did not significantly predict desire to have children, $t(104) = 1.31$, $\beta = -.12$, and desire did not significantly predict stress with avoidance partialled, $t(103) = 1.87$, $\beta = -.13$. Thus, neither the men's nor the women's data provided evidence for mediation.

DISCUSSION

The principal findings of this study are that avoidance and the desire to become a parent are significantly related in a sample of people undergoing the transition to parenthood, that prenatal avoidance forecasts the degree to which parenting is perceived as stressful 6 months after birth, and that the desire to become a parent predicts the degree to which parenting is perceived as meaningful and satisfying at 6 months postpartum. Additional results indicate that the ability of these predictor variables to forecast actors' perceptions of stress and feelings of meaning/satisfaction is independent of marital satisfaction and depressive symptoms and that partner variables had little bearing on actors' perceptions of stress or feelings of meaning/satisfaction.

In the primary APIM analyses, avoidance did not predict parental meaning/satisfaction independently of the desire to become a parent. The zero-order correlations, however, indicated that avoidance was significantly correlated with meaning/satisfaction when desire was not controlled. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that the link between avoidance and feelings of meaning/satisfaction could be partially mediated by the tendency for highly avoidant people to be less desirous of becoming parents. Indeed, mediation tests revealed that avoidant women's feelings of lower parental meaning/satisfaction were mediated by their weaker desire to become parents.

Although the zero-order correlation between avoidance and parental meaning/satisfaction was not significantly different for women and men, the relation between these two variables was not significantly different from zero among the men in our sample. The slightly

stronger ties between avoidance and parental meaning/satisfaction among women may be attributable to their more extensive involvement in child care, especially during the first months after birth (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Many of the items on the parental meaning/satisfaction measure inquire about feelings associated with providing emotional and instrumental child care. For those men who were not heavily involved in caretaking, this measure may not have fully assessed their experience of parental meaning/satisfaction, which might have stemmed more from playful involvement with their child rather than child care responsibilities (Parke, 2002).

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research (e.g., Rholes et al., 1995; Rholes et al., 1997), and they contribute to a growing body of evidence that adult attachment styles are associated with parenting in ways that may foster the intergenerational transmission of secure versus insecure attachment orientations. Previous research has shown that more avoidant college students, who are yet to become parents, are less interested in becoming parents, anticipate having more difficulty relating to their children, expect them to be more emotionally independent and less affectionate, and endorse harsher methods of discipline (Rholes et al., 1997). The present study shows that more avoidant parents of infants have less desire to become parents and find parenting more stressful and less meaningful and satisfying. Finally, a study of mothers and their preschoolers found that more avoidant mothers acted in a less warm and supportive manner toward their young children and felt more emotionally detached from them (Rholes et al., 1995).

Explaining Associations With Avoidance

Why is avoidance associated with the experience of parenting? People who have avoidant tendencies typically have experienced less sensitive and more rejecting care in childhood and adolescence (Belsky, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Levy, Blatt, & Shaver, 1998). The caregivers of highly avoidant children are particularly unresponsive when their children are distressed and need comfort (Crockenberg, 1981; Del Carmen, Pederson, Huffman, & Bryan, 1993). The repeated experience of rejection, particularly rejection that occurs when the attachment system is activated by distress, should motivate highly avoidant people to habitually control or "deactivate" their attachment systems (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). Because deactivation often is accomplished by maintaining psychological distance from others, this could lead avoidant adults to behave in ways similar to their own rejecting caregivers.

Avoidant adults do provide care to others, including their children, at times, but they often do so to meet social obligations or to receive favors and benefits rather

than due to feelings of love or concern, and the help they provide is often given from a safe emotional distance (Feeney & Collins, 2004). For example, studies have shown that the more upset their romantic partners are, the less likely avoidant partners are to offer comfort and support (Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson et al., 1992). These two studies and others (e.g., Wilson et al., 2000) imply that more avoidant people are uncomfortable with the distress of others and may fail to recognize distress or respond to it empathically because doing so makes it more difficult for them to keep their own attachment systems deactivated (Simpson et al., 1992).

Infants are completely dependent on their caregivers, and they frequently signal their distress. Within our culture, the parental role usually stipulates sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of young children. Highly avoidant parents can, therefore, be caught in a difficult approach/avoidance conflict. Continually responding in a sensitive and caring manner will keep their own attachment systems unpleasantly activated, but failing to do so would be inconsistent with their new role as parents. For this reason, highly avoidant parents may find parenting especially stressful because these conflicting pressures make the ordinary stressors of parenting a young child (e.g., lack of sleep, work overload) all the more taxing.

In addition to experiencing greater stress, more avoidant people also derive less meaning and satisfaction from child care at 6 months postpartum. Some of the factors that make parenting stressful also may prevent avoidant people from experiencing greater meaning and satisfaction in the early stages of parenthood. The mediation analysis reported above indicates that avoidant mothers' lower desire to become a parent, in particular, undermines the satisfaction and meaning they derive from parenting. An additional reason why avoidance is linked to the satisfaction/meaning variable is suggested by Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszynski, 1997). Research guided by this theory indicates that close relationships serve as a defense against existential anxiety for people with secure attachment styles (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2004). Of interest, increasing the salience of mortality, which heightens the need to defend against existential anxiety, also increases the desire to become a parent (Yaacovi, 2003; cited in Mikulincer et al., 2004). It does so, however, primarily among people who have secure attachment styles. This finding suggests that parenting may not counteract anxiety about mortality for more avoidant people. Thus, avoidant parents may derive less satisfaction and fulfillment from child care because caring for infants does not satisfy deeper psychological needs.

Partner Effects and Marital Satisfaction

Research on parenting and marriage indicates that supportive relationships may facilitate the type of parenting that encourages secure attachments in infancy and childhood (see Belsky, 1990, 1999). It also shows that children are more likely to be securely attached if their parents have stronger marriages (e.g., Crnic, Greenberg, & Slough, 1986). Thus, there are good reasons to anticipate that people who are more satisfied with their marriages should find parenting less stressful or more meaningful/satisfying. The APIM results, however, did not reveal systematic connections between marital satisfaction and the parenting variables that we assessed. One critical difference between the current study and previous research is that earlier studies examined actual parenting behavior or the outcomes of parenting behavior (such as infants' attachment security), whereas the current study examined parents' subjective perceptions of stress and the meaning of parenting. It is conceivable that greater marital satisfaction may help parents enact better or more appropriate parenting behaviors under adverse conditions (e.g., when a "difficult" child induces high levels of stress). However, the subjective experience of parenting may be determined primarily by internal factors such as one's desire to be a parent and one's attachment style.

Significance of the Present Findings for Attachment Theory

Why is it important for attachment theory to demonstrate that adult attachment styles are associated with parenthood? Two of the fundamental propositions of attachment theory are the "prototype" and the "intergenerational transmission" hypotheses (Rholes & Simpson, 2004b). The prototype hypothesis argues that relationships with attachment figures during infancy, childhood, and adolescence create general predispositions to form either secure, well-functioning relationships or insecure, problem-filled relationships in adulthood. The intergenerational transmission hypothesis argues that parents tend to transmit their own attachment security or insecurity to their children through the kind of care they provide (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; George & Solomon, 1999; Main et al., 1985). The prototype hypothesis has been the primary focus of research on adult attachment styles in social and personality psychology, and a great deal of evidence supports it (J. Feeney, 1999). Evidence that attachment styles are related to parenting and intergenerational transmission is surprisingly rare. Thus, the present study is important because it provides novel evidence about how and why the intergenerational transmission of insecure attachment patterns could occur and begins to redress an imbalance in the empirical literature.

The present findings also are important for attachment theory because they shed light on whether adult attachment styles are related to intimate relationships other than romantic ones. As described by Bowlby (1969, 1988), attachment styles are generalized constructs that influence a range of close relationships, with parent-child and marital relationships being the most prototypical. Based on Bowlby's theoretical analysis, many attachment researchers operate under the assumption that attachment styles are relatively generalized. According to contemporary attachment theorists, working models contain both generalized and more relationship-specific components. Collins and Read (1994) have proposed a three-level, hierarchical structure for working models, with a domain-general model at the top, domain-specific models (e.g., for friends, romantic partners, children) in the middle, and models of relationships with specific people (e.g., one's current dating partner, one's best friend) nested within each domain. Overall, Fletcher, and Friesen (2003) have recently found evidence supporting this three-level, hierarchical structure.

In the present study, attachment styles were measured at the middle level by questions that asked about views of romantic partners and relationships in general. The attachment styles revealed by these questions, however, also should be meaningfully related to attachment relationships in other domains because they tap into a higher level, more generalized, attachment style; that is, the standard adult attachment measures should assess both domain-specific *and* domain-general working models. As a result, domain-specific measures of romantic attachment styles should predict behavior and affect beyond the specific domain of romantic relationships. To our knowledge, only the current study and our previous studies (e.g., Rholes et al., 1995; Rholes et al., 1997) have confirmed that domain-specific attachment measures systematically predict attachment-relevant attitudes, behavior, and affect *outside* of their domain. This evidence is important. If attachment styles measured within specific domains did not relate in predictable ways to attachment relationships in other domains, questions would arise about whether attachment measures assess attachment styles as they are understood in Bowlby's theory.

Summary

In conclusion, this study reveals that highly avoidant people enter parenthood with less of a desire to become parents, more depressive symptoms, and less satisfying marriages, and at 6 months postpartum perceive child care as comparatively stressful and as less satisfying and personally meaningful. The present findings provide some of the first evidence on the generality of romantic

attachment styles and thus help confirm an important assumption of attachment theory. The findings complement past research on attachment and parenting (Rholes et al., 1995; Rholes et al., 1997) and strengthen the argument that avoidance, as measured with regard to romantic relationships, may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of attachment security and insecurity.

NOTES

1. Independent of avoidance, participants who revealed less desire to become parents also endorsed harsher discipline practices and expected their children to be more emotionally independent and less affectionate. Less desire to become a parent could emanate from childhood experiences that involve harsher discipline and less affection and support, which in turn might shape prospective parents' views of their own children.

2. At first glance, it may seem that only people with a strong interest in becoming a parent would actually do so. Even with planned pregnancies, however, several additional factors, including societal expectations and the wishes of romantic partners, are likely to influence these decisions.

3. Because there is no theoretical or empirical evidence linking attachment anxiety with an aversion to providing care in intimate relationships, we did not hypothesize that attachment anxiety would predict either parenting stress or parental meaning/satisfaction.

4. Participants also responded to other measures not relevant to this investigation. Portions of this data set testing prenatal-to-postnatal changes in marital satisfaction (Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001), changes in attachment orientations (Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, & Wilson, 2003), and depressive symptoms (Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, & Wilson, 2003) have been reported in previous articles. This is the first article, however, to examine the desire to have children, postnatal perceptions of parenting, and how these constructs are systematically related to adult attachment orientations.

5. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) analyses generate unstandardized regression coefficients.

6. The endpoints of the Desire to Become a Parent Scale range from *having a strong desire* to have children and become a parent to *not having a strong desire*. Consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen, 1997), very few individuals scored below the scale midpoint. Low desire scores in this sample, therefore, do not signify that individuals harbor an intense aversion to becoming a parent.

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