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Toward a more nuanced conceptualization of interpersonal distancing: Differential relationships of adaptive and dysfunctional detachment to stress-based anxiety in college students

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Abstract

This study investigates the utility of a model for disambiguating the risk vs. protective features associated with detachment in moderating stress-based anxiety. The model distinguishes *adaptive detachment* (the ability to engage in flexible, goal-directed cognitive distancing accompanied by the capacity to moderate affective arousal and maintain functional levels of interpersonal connectedness) from *dysfunctional detachment* (a more generalized detached interpersonal style characterized by pervasive social isolation and negative emotionality). College students ($N = 104$, 71.4% female, mean age = 19.20 ($SD = 3.54$)) completed measures of detachment, mental health symptoms, and daily hassles; moderator hypotheses were tested by conducting a series of regression analyses. Findings indicate that individuals who report higher levels of adaptive detachment—but not dysfunctional detachment—experienced reduced anxiety in the context of elevated daily stressors. Results suggest that certain aspects of detachment may serve protective functions by reducing anxiety in the context of stressful events.

Keywords

Detachment; Personality; Coping; Stress; Anxiety

1. Introduction

A large body of literature has accrued in recent decades suggesting that detachment, typically conceptualized as pervasive interpersonal distancing, is associated with a range of negative health and mental health outcomes (Kantor, 1993). Indeed, studies have suggested that detachment is associated with social phobia (Kantor, 1993), maladaptive interpersonal relatedness (Birtchnell, 1988), complicated bereavement (Denckla, Mancini, Bornstein, & Bonanno, 2011), and increased risk for chronic illness (Bernstein, Arntz, & Travaglini, 2009). In addition to these findings, recent studies suggest that maladaptive correlates may only partially capture the range of detached behavior. For example, studies have found that detachment has been associated with reduced worry-proneness (Sugiura, 2004), reduced

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emotional exhaustion (Ying, 2008) reduced grief symptoms (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa, & Folkman, 2005), and lower odds of taking hypertension medication (Fiori, Consedine, & Magai, 2008). This apparent conflicting body of literature has yet to reconcile these findings, in part due to differences in the conceptualization of detachment as well as disagreement regarding the impact of detached behavior across different contexts. It appears that in some cases detachment may promote poor mental health outcomes, but in others it may confer protective features.

1.1. Conceptualizing detachment

One of the earliest models of detachment, based on Horney's (1950, 1975) tripartite interpersonal theory (Coolidge, Moor, Yamazaki, Stewart, & Segal, 2001) identified a 'Detached Type' of character that was defined by an avoidance of emotional involvement with others, coupled with a strong need for self-sufficiency. Similarly, Millon (1969) described the detached individual as experiencing affective deficits, indifference to interpersonal interactions, and impoverished cognitions due to shallow processing. He proposed that these deficits resulted in a lack of insight regarding internal states, as avoidant individuals have difficulty verbalizing their emotions. Similarly, according to Kantor's (1993) avoidant personality type, and more recently Clark, McEwen, Collard, and Hickok (1993) detachment is defined in terms of social isolation and emotional coldness. Experimental findings have lent some support to these descriptive characterizations of detachment, with Leising, Sporberg, and Rehbein (2006) finding that detached individuals demonstrated submissive interpersonal behavior in social contexts due to a negative self-image that interferes with assertive behavior.

While these conceptual frameworks have done much to illuminate detachment's risk factors, Birtchnell (1995) was among the first to suggest that some degree of acceptable social distance was necessary to maintain functional interpersonal relationships, with more excessive interpersonal distance linked with personality pathology. He also suggested that periodic "turning inward" to modulate the impact of excessive external stimulation was necessary for optimal nervous system functioning, but that excessive use of this strategy can result in poor reality testing and impaired interpersonal functioning. Indeed, a number of studies have confirmed that—consistent with Birtchnell's (1995) view—there are protective features associated with some forms of detachment. For example, Koenigsberg et al. (2010) reported that individuals instructed to relate to emotional interpersonal images as if they were not personally involved showed increased ability to down-regulate emotional responses, evidenced by modulated activity in the amygdala via engagement of neural networks implicated in social perception, perspective-taking, and allocation of attention. In a related study, Beauregard, Lévesque, and Bourgouin (2001) found that individuals instructed to "become a detached observer" when viewing erotic film clips demonstrated reduced activation in the limbic areas alongside increased activation of neural circuitry in the prefrontal regions, suggesting that these participants were able to influence neural activation through volitional perspective taking. Finally, a series of studies have demonstrated that the ability to take a distanced perspective following exposure to aversive stimuli is associated with adaptive outcomes (Ayduk & Kross, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). These findings suggest that taking a self-distanced perspective is associated with reduced

depressive affect, both immediately and at two-week follow up (Kross & Ayduk, 2008). In summary, studies suggest certain adaptive benefits in detaching from aversive stimuli and hint at a more complex picture of interpersonal detachment.

1.2. The cognitive/interactionist model of detachment

As evidence indicating that detachment is associated with both risk and protective factors grows, studies that disambiguate dysfunctional and adaptive detachment appear warranted. With respect to a related personality type—interpersonal dependency—some progress has been made in disentangling the adaptive vs. maladaptive features of dependency using Bornstein's (2011) cognitive/interactionist (C/I) framework. Following a four component model including cognitive, motivational, affective, and behavioral markers, dependency is conceptualized as a core motivational quality driving behaviors that are reflective of core self-beliefs (in the case of dependency, the belief that one is ineffectual and powerless). Crucially, this model suggests that while the behaviors of the dependent person vary from situation to situation, core beliefs about the self remain stable.

This paper extends Bornstein's (2011) C/I model of dependency to the domain of detachment, using the C/I conceptual framework to understand the nuanced features associated with interpersonal distancing. The C/I model of detachment conceptualizes detachment-related responding as reflective of core beliefs about the self as independent and self-sufficient (Birtchnell, 1995; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). This core sense of self, which is stable over time and across situations, motivates behaviors which may vary across contexts because the detached individual's perception of risks and rewards relative to this core sense of self differ from situation to situation (e.g., the detached person may regard distancing as an adaptive interpersonal strategy with friends, but not with a supervisor at work). This framework therefore suggests—as is the case with dependency—that in some contexts detached individuals may demonstrate behaviors that reflect mindful, goal driven interpersonal distancing (e.g., deliberately not responding to requests or demands), whereas in other contexts they may passively accede to the expectations of others or withdraw when overwhelmed with affect, depending on the contingencies of the particular situation as the detached person perceives them.

To facilitate the conceptualization of detachment within the C/I framework, we distinguish two hypothesized forms: the generalized detached personality style, associated with an inability to rely on others or seek assistance even under duress which is termed *dysfunctional detachment* (see Bornstein et al., 2003). A second, more adaptive variant of detachment, defined as the ability to engage in flexible, goal-directed cognitive distancing accompanied by the capacity to moderate affective arousal and maintain functional levels of interpersonal connectedness, is termed *adaptive detachment* (Denckla, Ruggerio, & Bornstein, 2013). Given previous research that has suggested adaptive detachment may confer protective features in stressful conditions (Roger, Jarvis, & Najarian, 1993; Sugiura, 2004; Ying, 2008), we hypothesized that adaptive detachment in college students would be associated with fewer anxiety symptoms in the context of elevated daily stressors. Secondly, we hypothesized that dysfunctional detachment would be associated with elevated levels of anxiety regardless of the level of daily stressors, given extant research suggesting its

association with pervasive interpersonal and psychological distance (see also Kantor, 1993, for a discussion of links between dysfunctional detachment and anxiety). Finally, given previous research suggesting gender differences in dependency–detachment (Bornstein et al., 2004) and coping (Matud, 2004) we sought to control for these effects in our analyses.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Study recruitment proceeded by advertising on an internal college website; students received course credit for participating. The study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After consenting to take part, participants completed a set of paper and pencil self-report measures in our laboratory. The final sample included 104 participants with a mean age of 19.26 ($SD = 3.58$), ranging from 18 to 43. Thirty participants were male (28%) and 75 were female (71%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Detached coping—Adaptive detachment, defined as intra- and inter-personal strategies employed to retain distance from aversive stimuli, was assessed using the detached coping subscale of the Coping Styles Questionnaire (CSQ; Roger et al., 1993). The CSQ assesses detached coping (DETCOP) using 15 items, defined as “the feeling of being independent of the event and the emotion associated with it” (Roger et al., 1993, p. 623). Sample items from the DETCOP subscale include “*Just take nothing personally*”, and “*See the problem as something separate from myself so I can deal with it.*” Respondents rate items on a four point scale ranging from “*Always*” to “*Never*.” In the current study sample Cronbach's α for the DETCOP scale was .81.

2.2.2. Dysfunctional detachment—The measure of dysfunctional detachment used in this study was the dysfunctional detachment (DD) subscale of the Relationship Profile Test (RPT; Bornstein et al., 2003). The DD subscale of the RPT includes 10 items, with each item rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at All True of Me*) to 5 (*Very True of Me*). Sample items include “*When someone gets too close to me, I tend to withdraw*” and “*I need to escape from it all every once in a while.*” RPT subscale scores show acceptable levels of internal consistency (Bornstein et al., 2003); in the present sample, Cronbach's α for DD was .74.

2.2.3. Daily stressors—This study employed a revised version of the daily hassles and uplifts scale as described in DeLongis, Folkman, and Lazarus (1998). Participants rate each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*none at all or not applicable*) to 3 (*a great deal*) corresponding to how much of a hassle and/or an uplift that particular item was for them. The scale consists of 53 items and taps a range of everyday experiences related to health, work, family, and environmental stressors; examples include “*Time spent with family*”; “*Your friends*”; and “*Amount of free time.*” In the present study, mean scores were calculated for both hassles and uplifts; reliability coefficients for daily hassles measured .88, and for uplifts measured .92.

2.2.4. Mental health symptoms—Anxiety was assessed using selected items from the Symptom Checklist (SCL-90; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974). From among the 90 items sampling a range of psychiatric and mental health complaints in the full scale, the present study employed three items corresponding to the core anxiety cluster (Bech, Bille, Møller, Hellström, & Østergaard, 2014). Items included “*nervousness or shakiness inside*”; “*worrying too much about things*”; and “*feeling so restless you couldn’t sit still*.” Validation studies have confirmed that the SCL-90 anxiety subscale items demonstrate expected associations with related measures of anxiety, as well as expected low co-variance with core depression and interpersonal sensitivity (Bech et al., 2014). Item reliability in the present study was .65.

3. Results

After assessing the reliability of each study measure (see Table 1), we examined the zero-order correlations among adaptive detachment (detached coping), dysfunctional detachment, daily hassles and uplifts, and anxiety symptoms. As Table 1 shows, daily hassles and anxiety scores were significantly correlated, $r(104) = .33, p = .001$, whereas daily uplifts and anxiety scores were not, $r(104) = -.09, p = .36$. Adaptive detachment was negatively correlated with daily uplifts, $r(104) = -.37, p = .000$, yet revealed no significant correlation with either daily hassles $r(104) = -.15$ or anxiety symptoms $r(104) = .17$. Finally, dysfunctional detachment was positively correlated with daily hassles $r(86) = .35, p = .001$, but not with anxiety symptoms $r(85) = .19$.

Next, we sought to test our moderator hypotheses by conducting regression analyses to examine the hypothesized effect of adaptive and dysfunctional detachment on anxiety. First, we mean centered our variables prior to computing interaction terms. Given the known gender differences in detachment and coping (Matud, 2004), we first examined zero order correlations among gender and our variables; as gender correlated significantly with one predictor variable (adaptive detachment) and well as with the criterion variable (anxiety), we introduced it into the regression. Results are presented in Table 2. The first model involved a single step in which anxiety was regressed on gender, daily hassles, adaptive detachment, and the interaction of hassles and adaptive detachment. The model was significant $F(4, 99) = 8.62, p < .001$, and explained 26% of the anxiety variance. Whereas gender and hassles predicted higher levels of anxiety, adaptive detachment did not. However, a significant two-way interaction between hassles and adaptive detachment was associated with lower levels of anxiety. A simple slope analysis showed that for individuals who were highly adaptively detached (i.e., 1 *SD* or more above the mean), daily hassles were not significantly associated with levels of anxiety, $B = -.70, t(103) = -.96, p = .34$. In contrast, for less adaptively detached individuals, (i.e., 1 *SD* or more below the mean), daily hassles were positively associated with anxiety, $B = 2.08, t(103) = 3.27, p = .001$ (see Fig. 1).

We then proceeded to examine our second moderator hypotheses by regressing anxiety on gender, daily hassles, dysfunctional detachment, and the interaction of hassles and dysfunctional detachment. The model was also significant $F(4, 80) = 5.28, p < .01$, and explained 21% of the anxiety variance. Whereas gender and daily hassles were positively and significantly associated with anxiety, neither dysfunctional detachment nor the

interaction between dysfunctional detachment and daily hassles were significantly associated with anxiety levels (see Table 2).

4. Discussion

Our results provide initial support for the hypothesized moderating effect of adaptive detachment on psychological symptoms. Among individuals who endorsed lower levels of adaptive detachment, we found elevated levels of anxiety in the context of high daily stressors. However, we did not find a similar association for dysfunctional detachment, suggesting that this particular type of detachment does not buffer against the effects of daily stressors. Results are consistent with a conceptualization of detachment as a more complex construct than researchers initially believed, with certain expressions of interpersonal distancing having more positive effects on adjustment and coping than other forms of distancing in the presence of negative life events. These patterns are consistent with the C/I model's conceptualization of detachment as characterized by a stable core sense of self as independent and self-sufficient, coupled with behavioral flexibility that may lead to contrasting outcomes in different situations and contexts. Finally, results are also consistent with empirical literature suggesting that self-distancing strategies can reduce negative mental health outcomes, including depressive affect (Kross & Ayduk, 2008), chronic grief (Bonanno et al., 2005), worry-proneness (Sugiura, 2004), emotional exhaustion (Ying, 2008), and occupational burnout (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010).

As a number of researchers have noted, coping styles can be conceptualized as context dependent strategies for managing stressful states that nonetheless manifest some continuity over time. In other words, individuals exhibit individual differences in their preferred coping strategy, but these differences may be best conceptualized in terms of "if-then" (situation by disposition) interactions (Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002). Our results are also consistent with a body of literature suggesting that many coping strategies are neither universally beneficial nor harmful, but rather depend on the context in which they are employed and the intra and interpersonal characteristics of any situation (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). For example, trait self-enhancement can buffer against negative consequences of potentially traumatic events (Gupta & Bonanno, 2010), suggesting that while there may be social costs to excessive self-enhancement, there are also benefits associated with this strategy. Our results suggest a similar pattern: only in the context of high daily stressors did adaptive detachment confer protective benefits.

Though outside the primary focus of this study, we found an unexpected negative association between adaptive detachment and daily uplifts (positive life events), suggesting that higher levels of adaptive detachment may be associated with fewer uplifting events in daily life. One plausible interpretation of this result is that while detached coping buffers against the negative effects of stressful conditions, it may not facilitate an increase in pleasant daily experiences. Alternatively, adaptively detached college students may have a different criterion for what constitutes an "uplift", so that they perceive and report fewer uplifts even if the actual number experienced does not differ than that for less adaptively detached individuals. Such patterns point to the complexity of detachment—and other dispositional response styles—and the need to develop more nuanced conceptual frameworks that

incorporate dispositional variables, situational elements, and the nature of the challenge (or opportunity) being assessed.

4.1. Clinical implications

A growing number of clinical interventions incorporate detachment-focused strategies for coping with anxiety and stress. For example, some distress tolerance skills in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993a) aim to generate psychological distance from painful or aversive events. One such skill is called “blocking”, which engages the conscious effort to inhibit aversive emotional stimuli associated with negative emotions (Linehan, 1993b). Similarly, the ability to take a more distanced perspective on negative life events has been associated with reduced depressive affect (Kross, Gard, Deldin, Clifton, & Ayduk, 2012). Other approaches have employed the Buddhist notion of “nonattachment”, which entails a release from mental fixations, to facilitate psychological and social adaptation (Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010). As these interventions make clear a key element of adaptive detachment is the level of volition (or mindfulness) associated with distancing, such that only employment of the strategy with some degree of deliberate control or conscious effort yields measurable benefits. Taken together with studies suggesting that interventions which focus on expression of negative affect may impede recovery (Sbarra, Boals, Mason, Larson, & Mehl, 2013), it is clear that more research is required to distinguish between the costs and benefits of detachment (vs. expressiveness) for individuals experiencing aversive life events (see Range & Jenkins, 2010, for a review of the parameters moderating the beneficial effects of expressive writing following negative life events). The beneficial or harmful effects of detachment may not only be moderated by the degree of conscious volition associated with the coping behavior (Bonanno, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), but also by the nature of an individual’s context-driven variability (i.e., situational flexibility) in personality-driven responding (Bornstein, Ng, Gallagher, Kloss, & Regier, 2005; Mischel et al., 2002).

4.2. Limitations and future directions

All studies have certain limitations, and this one is no exception. Most important, the correlational, cross-sectional nature of our study design makes it impossible to infer causality. For example, it may be that experiencing a lot of daily hassles causes greater detachment, which predicts lower anxiety. Given the correlational nature of the study design, it is impossible to rule this explanation out even though extant research suggests that distancing and detachment tends to result in reduced anxiety (Kalisch et al., 2005; Koenigsberg et al., 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2008). Experimental or longitudinal methodologies would be required to address this question definitively, and further research in this area is warranted. Secondly, while we did control for gender in our regression modeling, our sample size was underpowered to test for the possibility of gender moderation in the association between hassles and adaptive detachment. Given the previous research which suggests gender differences in coping (Matud, 2004) this effect would be important to examine in future research.

Although few previous investigations have compared short term, context specific detachment (adaptive detachment) and pervasive, long-term detachment (dysfunctional detachment), our findings provide initial support for a distinction between these two forms of detached

coping, paralleling earlier findings that documented contrasting effects of healthy and unhealthy dependency in a broad array of situations and settings (Bornstein, 1998). Given the potential clinical utility of utilizing detachment-focused interventions to reduce anxiety and other negative conditions (e.g., pain and discomfort) in short-term contexts, studies that elucidate the underlying mechanisms of adaptive and dysfunctional detachment are indicated.

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Fig. 1.
The interaction effect between adaptive detachment and daily hassles on anxiety symptoms.
Note: AD = adaptive detachment.

Table 1Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliabilities among study variables ($N = 105$).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Gender								
2. Adaptive detachment	3.27	.62	.36**	.74				
3. Dysfunctional detachment	2.85	.43	.14	-.09	.88			
4. Daily hassles	.71	.38	.15	-.15	.35**	.92		
5. Daily Uplifts	1.11	.52	-.07	-.37**	-.19	.28**	.92	
6. Anxiety symptoms	1.62	.96	.36**	.17	.19	.33**	-.09	.65

Note: Scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) are noted on the diagonal.

**
 $p < .01$.

Table 2

Summary table of multiple regression of factors predicting anxiety symptoms.

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
<i>Model 1</i>				
Gender	.69	.22	.33	3.22**
Daily hassles	.62	.29	.24	2.11*
Dysfunctional detachment	.11	.17	.08	.69
Dysfunctional detachment * hassles	.30	.46	.07	.66
<i>Model 2</i>				
Gender	.66	.20	.31	3.26**
Daily hassles	.69	.24	.27	2.92**
Adaptive detachment	.30	.22	.14	1.43
Adaptive detachment * hassles	-1.39	.65	-.20	-2.16*

Note: *B* = unstandardized coefficients, β = standardized coefficients. Gender coded 1 = male, 2 = female.

*
 $p < .05$.

**
 $p < .01$.