Attachment – beyond interpersonal relationships

Antigonos Sochos considers whether a familiar concept can be extended to social groups, ideological systems and social institutions

This article presents some preliminary ideas on how attachment theory could provide an integrative framework that brings together different psychosocial domains – individual, interpersonal, collective. Attachment to the social group is considered as a particular type of attachment bond while the function of group beliefs and social institutions as attachment objects are discussed.

question

What are the challenges in attempting to conceptually link different psychological domains?

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In the past decades attachment theory has emerged as one of the most important psychological paradigms, addressing a range of phenomena from child development to adult relationships and mental health. Although it has essentially been an interpersonal theory, recent studies suggest that the attachment framework could be extended beyond the domains of interpersonal relationships and individual regulation and contribute to our understanding of wider sociocultural phenomena. Do human beings need the protection and security offered by the social group in a similar way to the child needing the protection of the caregiver, and the human adult the commitment and recognition of intimate peers?

Attachment to social groups

At the turn of the millennium, a ground-breaking study exploring the relationship university students form with their student societies provided empirical evidence in support of the claim that human beings form attachment relationships not only with other individuals but also with social groups (Smith et al., 1999). Those researchers were the first to gather empirical evidence for an argument originally made by John Bowlby himself.

Bowlby (1982) suggested that attachment to social groups starts to develop in adolescence, as young persons shift their focus from caregivers to the wider social world. Understanding social groups as attachment objects is not as implausible as it perhaps initially sounds,

considering the critical role social groups have played in the evolution of the human species. Cooperation between individuals that enabled early humans to hunt effectively, protect their settlements against intruders and, later, sustain efficient agricultural and industrial economies occurred in the context of common membership of a social group. It is this common membership and sense of belonging to a greater human whole that has provided the essential glue holding together individuals dedicated to the same goals and sharing the same world views.

Based on their findings, Smith et al. (1999) argue that although person-to-group bonds differ from close interpersonal relationships in many ways, the human need to remain emotionally close and to depend on social groups implicate the same subsystems and functions that regulate person-to-person attachment. For example, both types of bond include support seeking, responsiveness and emotional disclosure as central relational processes, processes affected by past experience and also affecting future relationships. The empirical evidence the authors present also confirm their claim that group attachment and group identification are distinct phenomena.

Support for the idea that social groups can function as attachment objects also comes from studies in group therapy. Clinicians claim that therapeutic groups function like attachment figures – they constitute secure relational spaces within which the potential for attunement increases, early attachment failures are explored and internal working models are modified (McCluskey, 2002). Gantt and Agazarian (2011) argue that the group's ability to act as a security provider affects individuals at the very level of neural integration – for example, supportive group experience improves the regulation of the limbic circuit by the middle prefrontal and enhances the capability of the left hemisphere to provide a new, more functional narrative.

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In recent years a small number of studies have investigated non-clinical social groups from an attachment perspective, and their findings seem to support three main propositions. Firstly, these studies suggest that the individual's emotional bonds with their social group as a whole are underpinned by the same fundamental dimensions that underlie interpersonal attachment – that is, anxiety and avoidance (Smith et al., 1999; Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). Group members who are anxiously attached to their groups seem to behave in ways similar to those in which anxiously attached individuals respond in interpersonal relationships: they tend to worry that their groups would not want them as members and often exhibit extreme affect, positive or negative, towards them. On the other hand, individuals who are avoidantly attached to their groups tend to feel uncomfortable with the idea of developing a dependence on them and often make plans to leave them.

The second main point made by that literature is that individual differences in the way human beings relate towards their groups correspond to individual differences in interpersonal attachment style. Rom and Mikulincer (2003) report that individuals with anxious interpersonal attachment are more likely to perceive interactions with other group members as threatening and tend to endorse group goals relating to love and security. On the other hand, those high in interpersonal attachment avoidance are more likely to evaluate other group members negatively and endorse group goals that emphasise self-reliance and interpersonal distance. The authors also note an interesting link between interpersonal attachment style and group cohesion: less cohesive groups tend to include more interpersonally insecure individuals, while greater group cohesion makes it less likely for individuals with an anxious interpersonal style to also develop an anxious attachment style towards the group.

The third main proposition of that literature suggests that perception of attachment security relates to attitudes towards members of the outgroup. In an exciting series of experiments, Mikulincer and Shaver (2001) investigated the hypothesis that the outgroup may be perceived as a threat and therefore activate the attachment system. At a basic, evolutionary level outgroups may be seen as competitors over resources, while another group's culture may be experienced as a threat to a group's identity. The authors found that participants who were experimentally exposed to a control prime (i.e. words unrelated to attachment) evaluated a hypothetical outgroup member more negatively than a hypothetical ingroup member and perceived the outgroup member as a threat. Yet when participants were exposed to a secure-base prime (i.e. words indicating closeness or support), evaluations of out- and ingroup members were equally positive and the outgroup was perceived less as a threat. These very important findings suggest that the experience of attachment security can substantially reduce or eradicate fear, negativity and prejudice towards social groups different from one's own.

While the above studies are of great significance, the literature on attachment and social groups seems to present a conceptual ambiguity: it remains unclear what it is exactly that human beings attach to when they form a bond with a social group. The fact that individuals form close ties with other group members is well-established both in everyday experience and relevant research. It is reasonable therefore to assume that social groups become attachment objects as they provide a space in which individuals can form close interpersonal relationships with others. However, although all group members have close relationships with each other in small, high-entitativity

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groups (e.g. families, a close circle of friends), this is not true in larger social formations, such as large organisations or national and religious groups. In such groups, individuals form emotional bonds only with a very limited number of fellow group members while in many cases they never personally meet most of the group. Yet, as we all know, human beings develop very strong relationships with such large groups.

Authors have argued that individuals develop their bonds with social groups through emotion-laden relationships they form with the group leaders, who are regarded to be the best 'ambassadors' of the group. Bowlby (1982) suggests that from adolescence leaders function as emotional caregivers, as the family loses its exclusivity and individuals start seeking protection and security from extra-familial social groups. Nonetheless, Bowlby (1982, p.207) uses the words 'initially', 'probable' and 'for many', implicitly suggesting that the link between leader and group is a facilitating, rather than a necessary element of the individual's attachment to the group.

Although there is no doubt that in many instances group members develop close interpersonal relationships with their leaders, this again is only possible in small close-knit groups. In larger social units direct interaction with the leader is the privilege of the very few. Nonetheless, lack of direct interpersonal contact does not prevent group members experiencing a 'deep connection' with their leaders, even to feel that they 'love' or are being 'loved' by them. How many times in history have ordinary soldiers fought and died 'for their King'? Although in such cases many of the characteristics of an attachment relationship are present (strong emotion, a sense of protection and security derived by a powerful other, a sense of duty to reciprocate support, a sense of despair when the relationship is lost), it is clear that what group members become attached to is not a person. Since group members have no 'real' interpersonal experience with the

leader, what group members seem to form a bond with is an image that symbolises the group. This takes us back to my initial question – what is exactly the property of the group that needs to be symbolised by the group leader, and perhaps also in other ways, so that individuals can become attached to it?

In addition to considering leaders and social groups as objects of the attachment system, Bowlby (1982) proposed that social institutions could also have a similar function, an idea revisited more recently by Mayseless and Popper (2007). These authors appear to refer to social groups and social institutions interchangeably, a fact that perhaps both feeds into and helps resolve the conceptual ambiguity I am discussing. On the one hand, social groups and social institutions are not the same thing. Social institutions are frameworks of belief (what reality is and what reality should be) translated into arrangements of practice and interaction. On the other hand, social groups cannot exist without institutions. A number of authors claim that it is group beliefs and their systematised practical applications, group institutions, that constitute the essence of the social group.

According to Bar-Tal (2000), shared group beliefs is what defines the identity of a group and what formally specifies group membership. Shared beliefs 'define the essence of the group and supply the rationale for the sense of belonging to the group. [They] provide the epistemic basis that unites group members into one entity, serve as a foundation for group formation, and form a bond for the group's continuous existence' (p.35).

Similar views are also supported by other thinkers who emphasise the centrality of shared cognition in social life (Echterhoff & Semin, 2011; Swaab et al., 2007). If systems of belief and institution are what holds a group together then such systems also define the protective and security-providing capacity of the group – they define the social group as an attachment object. If without systems of belief and institution the existence of the group is impossible, so is the survival of the human species. It is therefore reasonable to assume that what individuals become attached to when they bond with the social group as a whole is the beliefs and institutions that define the identity of the group.

Although so far no empirical research has explored whether and how the

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Participants moved towards supporting tougher and less tolerant American foreign policy in Iraq and North Korea when put under mortality salience

endorsement of beliefs is linked to group attachment (e.g. by using measures assessing attachment to groups), a number of studies provide clear empirical evidence for a link between such endorsement and style of interpersonal attachment.

Attachment and systems of belief

In an interesting experimental study that took place during the 2004 American presidential campaign, Weise and colleagues (2008) found no association between attachment style and preferred candidate (Bush or Kerry). However, when participants were put under a condition of mortality salience (that is, when they were asked to imagine their own death and write down their thoughts and feelings) the relatively insecure individuals tended to move their preference towards the most conservative candidate (Bush), while the relatively secure tended to move towards Kerry. Mortality salience also influenced the type of response that participants advocated in relation to the 9/11 attacks: thoughts of mortality made the relatively insecure favour a stronger military response while no such an effect was observed among the secure. Furthermore, when experimenters introduced a security prime after the

mortality salience prime, the insecure individuals' support for military action was reduced.

The above findings seem to suggest that the perception of threat induced by mortality salience activated the participants' attachment system and led them to increase their proximity to a political leader, who now functioned as an attachment figure. However, it is important to note that the political leader did not acquire his protective and security-enhancing qualities through a warm and supportive interpersonal relationship with the participants – no such relationship existed. Potential voters came closer to political leaders in the presence of a threat on the basis of the ideas and values each leader represented. The relatively insecurely attached were attracted to ideas that created the impression of an unchallenged certainty and lack of critical doubt while the relatively secure were attracted to ideas that perhaps recognised greater complexity in the human world and provided fewer easy solutions. Nonetheless, the ideas represented by the two candidates were not simply their own personal views. They had been drawn from wider systems of political belief – in this case, republicanism and liberalism – systems that had been collectively and historically constructed. What functioned as an attachment 'figure' was not simply a person but a symbol of shared beliefs, a collectively created symbol of the group.

Similar findings are reported by Gillath and Hart (2010) in a study suggesting that participants moved towards supporting tougher and less tolerant American foreign policy in Iraq and North Korea when put under mortality salience, while such effects were buffered by the introduction of security primes. These findings are also consistent with most empirical evidence indicating that relatively secure individuals tend to hold more liberal political views while the relatively insecure favour more conservative views (Weber & Federico, 2007).

In addition, attachment research provides strong support for the implication of the attachment system in another crucial ideological domain – religion. Authors suggest that God is treated as an all-powerful attachment figure providing protection when ordinary human bonds fail to do so (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1998). They argue that human beings form with God an attachment-like relationship as that fulfils the main criteria of attachment proposed by Ainsworth et al. (1978): it provides a safe haven in times of difficulty, it functions as a secure base to which one regularly returns to re-establish a sense of connection and receive guidance, it requires a minimum degree of emotional and physical proximity for a person to feel secure, and it results in separation distress when threatened by distance.

Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) present empirical evidence supporting the compensation hypothesis – that is, the idea that individuals turn to God when they feel unsupported and unloved by their caregivers in childhood. In a meta-analytic review these authors found that adults reporting an insecure relationship with parents in childhood were more likely to go through a sudden religious conversion, compared with those who reported a secure relationship. According to their findings, sudden conversions are typically preceded by a personal crisis, such as the loss of an important relationship, the experience of failure, or the loss of direction in life. In addition, Granqvist et al. (2012) report that individuals with an unresolved state of mind in relation to attachment, a state very often linked with childhood trauma, tended to have metaphysical experiences and be predisposed to absorption, or the experience of altered states of consciousness. The authors claim that mystical experiences provide vulnerable individuals with an unchallenged sense of security as they create feelings of oneness between the self and the world and offer revelations of an ultimate reality. Nonetheless, other researchers suggest that in addition to the insecure pathway to religion characterised by problematic parent–child relationships and sudden conversions, there is also a secure pathway followed by securely attached offspring typically adopting the religious traditions of their parents and their cultural groups in a process of gradual socialisation (Granqvist et al., 2007).

As is the case with political leaders, God also is a collective and historical construction. Although some humans may have very personal experiences with God, whom they perceive as a source of existential certainty and guidance, those experiences always take place within particular sociocultural contexts in which the divine is defined and understood in particular ways. Despite being typically anthropomorphised, God is an idea at the centre of particular collectively constructed and historically situated systems of belief called religions. Although for attachment deactivation to take place the deactivator may need to be perceived as having human qualities – thus the anthropomorphic God – it is in fact the systems of religious belief and institution that individuals turn to for protection and security when they turn to God. As religions are created by social groups and define the identity of such groups, by developing a bond with God human beings develop a bond with the religious group as a whole, therefore, with the religious group as an attachment object.

Important implications

So, studies suggest that in addition to the system of dyadic attachment there is an evolution-based system that predisposes humans to look for security and form emotional bonds with social groups. Although these two systems are different in many ways, they also have important similarities so that we could say that they represent two different but related attachment domains. In order to understand attachment to groups, it is essential to understand what it is that individuals bond with when they relate with a group as whole. I argue that although individuals often bond with social groups as wholes through an experience of emotional closeness with human or human-like figures that symbolise the group's identity, what individuals in fact get attached to is the ideological and institutional systems that define that identity.

The above research has important implications. It reveals the potential of attachment theory to provide informative links between individual, interpersonal and macro-sociocultural processes, contributing towards a theoretical integration across psychology and other social sciences. Attachment concepts utilised in that psychosocial domain may advance our insight into important phenomena such as the desperate quest for protection and irrefutable certainty that is so often evident in religious fanaticism and totalitarian political ideology.

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