An Attachment Perspective on Morality: 

Strengthening Authentic Forms of Moral Decision-Making

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In recent years, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982), which was originally designed to characterize infant-parent emotional bonding, has been applied, first, to the study of adolescent and adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and then to the study of prosocial behavior and other-regarding virtues (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). In this chapter, we expand our consideration of links between attachment patterns and prosocial motives into the realm of morality and propose that dispositional patterns of attachment can help us to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic (defensive) moral choices.

We begin by presenting our now familiar theoretical model of the activation and psychodynamics of the attachment behavioral system in adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a) and describe the intrapsychic and interpersonal manifestations of attachment security, anxiety, and avoidance. We then review studies showing (a) that the two major forms of attachment
insecurity, anxiety and avoidance, interfere with and distort prosocial motives, emotions, and behavior and (b) that experimental enhancement of attachment security increases empathic concern, compassion, altruistic behavior, gratitude, and forgiveness. We then describe recent studies from our laboratories that extend our previous findings into the realm of morality. Specifically, we show that attachment insecurities, especially attachment anxiety, encourage the use of moral choices to defend against threats to the self. We also show that experimentally enhanced security counteracts attachment-anxious individuals’ defensive use of morality, allowing them to make more authentically prosocial moral choices.

Attachment Theory: Basic Concepts

In his classic trilogy on attachment, separation, and loss, Bowlby (1973, 1980, 1982) conceptualized what he called the “attachment behavioral system” – an innate psychobiological system that motivates human beings, from infancy through adulthood, to seek proximity to significant others (attachment figures) in times of need as a means of attaining safety and security. According to Bowlby (1982), the goal of the system is to attain a subjective sense of protection or security (called “felt security” in an influential paper by Sroufe & Waters, 1977), which normally terminates the system’s activation. The goal of attaining security is made salient by perceived threats and dangers, which drive people to seek actual or symbolic proximity to attachment figures (Bowlby, 1982). During infancy, attachment-system activation includes nonverbal expressions of need and desire for proximity as well as observable behavior aimed at restoring and maintaining actual proximity or contact (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In adulthood, however, the primary attachment strategies do not necessarily involve actual proximity-seeking behavior; they can be measured indirectly in the form of soothing, reassuring mental
representations of past experiences with supportive attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004).

An abiding inner sense of attachment security (based on actual experiences) promotes a general faith in other people’s good will; a sense of being loved, esteemed, understood, and accepted by relationship partners; and optimistic beliefs about one’s ability to handle frustration and distress. Bowlby (1988) considered attachment security to be a mainstay of mental health and social adjustment. A host of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies support his theoretical claims (see J. Feeney, 2008, and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a, for reviews).

However, when attachment figures are not reliably available, responsive, and supportive, a sense of attachment security is not attained, negative working models of self and others are constructed, worries about self-protection and lovability are heightened, and strategies of affect regulation other than appropriate proximity seeking (defensive maneuvers that Cassidy & Kobak, 1988, called secondary attachment strategies) are adopted. Attachment theorists (e.g., Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a) emphasize two such secondary strategies: hyperactivation and deactivation of the attachment system. Hyperactivation is manifested in energetic attempts to gain greater proximity, support, and protection, combined with a lack of confidence that these benefits will be provided. Deactivation of the system involves inhibition of proximity-seeking tendencies, denial of attachment needs, maintenance of emotional and cognitive distance from others, and compulsive reliance on oneself as the only reliable source of safety and comfort.

When studying these secondary strategies during adolescence and adulthood, attachment researchers have focused on a person’s attachment style – the chronic pattern of relational cognitions and behaviors that results from a particular history of attachment experiences (Fraley
& Shaver, 2000). Initially, attachment research was based on Ainsworth et al. ’s (1978) three-category typology of attachment patterns in infancy – secure, anxious, and avoidant – and on Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) conceptualization of similar adult styles in the romantic relationship domain. Subsequent studies (e.g., reviewed and extended by Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) revealed, however, that attachment styles are more appropriately conceptualized as regions in a two-dimensional space. The first dimension, *avoidant attachment*, reflects the extent to which a person distrusts relationship partners’ good will, deactivates his or her attachment system, and strives to maintain behavioral independence and emotional distance from partners. The second dimension, *anxious attachment*, reflects the degree to which a person worries that a partner will not be available in times of need and therefore hyperactivates efforts to gain a partner’s attention and support. People who score low on both insecurity dimensions are said to be secure with respect to attachment or securely attached. The two dimensions can be measured with reliable and valid self-report scales and are associated in theoretically predictable ways with mental health, adjustment, and relationship quality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a).

**Attachment Insecurities, Caregiving, and Prosocial Behavior**

Beyond conceptualizing the attachment system, Bowlby (1982) proposed that human beings are innately equipped with another behavioral system aimed at providing nurturance (the *caregiving behavioral system*). Theoretically, the caregiving system evolved because providing care for dependent or injured individuals (e.g., infants, frightened or injured family members) increased inclusive fitness (Shaver, Mikulincer & Shemesh-Iron, 2009). Its operation is most evident in parents’ emotional and behavioral reactions to their offsprings’ signals of need or distress. We believe, however, like Batson (2010) and others, that this system is also the innate
foundation of broader empathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a).

According to Bowlby (1982), there is a dynamic interplay between the attachment system and the caregiving system: Activation of the attachment system can interfere with the caregiving system, because potential caregivers may feel that obtaining safety and care for themselves is more urgent than providing care and support for others. At such times, people are likely to be so focused on their own vulnerability that they lack the mental resources needed to attend sensitively to others’ needs. Only when a sense of attachment security is restored can most people perceive others to be not only potential sources of security and support, but worthy human beings who need and deserve comfort and support themselves.

Reasoning along these lines, attachment theorists (e.g., Kunce & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a; Shaver & Hazan, 1988) have hypothesized that attachment security provides an important foundation for optimal caregiving. Moreover, being secure implies that a person has witnessed, experienced, and benefited from generous attachment figures’ effective care, which gives them a model to follow when they occupy the caregiving role. According to the “model of assimilation” (e.g., Bretherton, 1985; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986), we learn prosocial behavior from observing and experiencing our parents’ (and other attachment figures’) behavior. That is, a secure person comes to show genuine interest in others’ welfare and a desire to help them by knowing what it is like to be cared for by considerate others (George & Solomon, 2008).

Research shows, in line with attachment theory, that secure individuals are comfortable being intimate and interdependent with others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), so it is relatively easy and nonthreatening for them to have other people approach them for help and honestly express feelings of vulnerability and need. In addition, secure individuals’ positive working models of
others make it easier for them to construe others as deserving of sympathy and support, and their positive models of self allow them to feel confident about their ability to respond to other people’s needs while effectively regulating their own emotions. All of these qualities make it easier for secure people to act in a caring, prosocial, and moral manner toward others.

In contrast, individuals who score relatively high on measures of anxious or avoidant attachment are likely to have difficulty providing effective care (e.g., George & Solomon, 2008; Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Although people who suffer mainly from attachment anxiety may have some of the qualities needed for effective caregiving (e.g., willingness to experience and express emotions and comfort with psychological intimacy and physical closeness), their habitual focus on their own distress and unsatisfied attachment needs may draw important mental resources away from attending accurately and consistently to others’ needs. Moreover, their strong desire for closeness and their need for approval may cause them to become intrusive or overly involved, blurring the distinction between another person’s welfare and their own. Attachment anxiety can, in other words, lead to what Kunce and Shaver (1994), following Bowlby (1982) called compulsive caregiving.

Avoidant individuals’ lack of comfort with closeness and negative working models of others may also interfere with optimal caregiving. Their discomfort with expressions of need and dependence may cause them to back away rather than get involved with someone whose needs are strongly expressed. As a result, avoidant individuals may attempt to detach themselves emotionally and physically from needy others, feel superior to those who are vulnerable or distressed, and experience disdainful pity rather than empathic concern.

Recently, we have begun to examine associations between the dimensions of attachment insecurity, on the one hand, and prosocial feelings and behaviors, on the other. For example,
Mikulincer et al. (2001) found that various methods of contextually heightening a person’s sense of attachment security (using what we call “security priming” techniques; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b, 2007c) – methods such as subliminally presenting the names of the person’s security-enhancing attachment figures, or asking participants to visualize the face of such a figure or to think about a particular interaction with him or her – increased compassionate responses to other peoples’ suffering. These researchers also found that higher scores on avoidant attachment were negatively associated with empathic reactions to others’ suffering. Higher scores on the anxiety dimension were associated with increased personal distress in response to another’s suffering but not with empathic reactions. In another series of studies, Mikulincer et al. (2003) found that security priming techniques increased the endorsement of two “self-transcendence values” (Schwartz, 2009), benevolence and universalism, which encourage prosocial behavior. In these studies, higher scores on the avoidance dimension were negatively associated with endorsement of these values.

Attachment insecurities are also negatively related to offering care to a mate. Individuals who score high on anxiety or avoidance are less sensitive to their romantic or marital partner’s needs, report less cooperative caregiving, and offer less comfort and reassurance to their distressed partner in laboratory studies (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; B. Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). For example, Simpson et al. (1992) unobtrusively videotaped dating couples while the female partner waited to undergo a stressful procedure, finding that secure men recognized their partner’s worries and provided more emotional support and more supportive comments if their partner showed higher levels of distress. In contrast, men who scored high on avoidance actually provided less support as their partner’s distress increased.
Following this line of research, B. Feeney and Collins (2003) assessed motives for providing care to a romantic partner and found that secure adults tended to endorse more altruistic reasons for helping (e.g., helping out of concern for the partner needs). In contrast, avoidant adults reported more egoistic reasons for helping (e.g., to avoid a partner’s negative reactions, to get something explicit in return). Moreover, they disliked coping with a partner’s distress, lacked a sense of responsibility for their partner, and perceived the partner as too dependent. Attachment-anxious adults endorsed altruistic reasons for helping (helping because of concern for the partner), but they also reported helping in order to gain a partner’s approval and increase the partner’s relationship commitment. In addition, anxious people were reluctant to provide support for their partner’s engagement in new and challenging activities and attributed this reluctance to worries that the partner’s independent pursuits might damage the relationship.

In an attempt to examine attachment-and-caregiving dynamics in the wider social world, we (Gillath et al., 2005) examined associations between attachment insecurities, involvement in altruistic volunteer activities, and motives for volunteering. The findings were similar across the three countries we studied – the US, Israel, and the Netherlands. Avoidant attachment was associated with engaging in fewer volunteer activities, devoting less time to such activities, and being less motivated by desires to express altruistic values and to learn about oneself and the world. Attachment anxiety was not generally related to engaging or not engaging in volunteer activities or to devoting more or less time to such activities, but it was associated with more egoistic reasons for volunteering (e.g. getting social approval and admiration, increasing their sense of group belongingness).

In a series of laboratory experiments, we (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005, Studies 1-2) examined the actual decision to help or not to help a person in distress. Participants
watched a confederate while she performed a series of aversive tasks. As the study progressed, the confederate became increasingly distressed, and the actual participant was given an opportunity to take her place, in effect sacrificing self for the welfare of another. Shortly before this scenario unfolded, participants were primed with either representations of attachment security (the name of a participant’s security provider) or attachment-unrelated representations (the name of a familiar person who was not an attachment figure or the name of a mere acquaintance). This priming was conducted at either a subliminal or a supraliminal level in each of two studies. Both kinds of security priming increased participants’ compassion and willingness to take the distressed person’s place. Again, whereas avoidant attachment was associated with reduced expressions of compassion and willingness to help, anxious attachment was associated with increased personal distress but not necessarily with helping while witnessing another person’s suffering.

Attachment insecurities are also associated with prosocial feelings of gratitude and forgiveness. We (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006) found that avoidant attachment was associated with lower levels of dispositional gratitude and forgiveness and with a tendency to experience narcissistic threats and distrust while feeling grateful or forgiving. Although attachment anxiety was not significantly associated with dispositional gratitude or forgiveness, it was positively related to narcissistic threats and a sense of inferiority while feeling grateful or forgiving. In other words, anxious attachment was associated with more negative experiences of gratitude. We also found that the links between attachment insecurities and prosocial feelings of gratitude and forgiveness could be observed in daily reactions to specific partner behaviors in a sample of married couples. For both husbands and wives, avoidant but not anxious attachment predicted lower levels of daily gratitude and forgiveness toward one’s partner across a 21-day
study period. Interestingly, husbands’ avoidant attachment interacted with daily perceptions of wives’ behavior in determining daily gratitude. Whereas less avoidant husbands reported more gratitude on days when they perceived more positive spousal behavior, more avoidant husbands reported relatively low levels of gratitude even on days when they noticed their wife’s positive behavior. In other words, a husband’s avoidant orientation not only inhibited gratitude overall, it interfered with feeling grateful for a wife’s specific beneficial behavior on a particular day.

Overall, the reviewed findings indicate that attachment insecurities are related to reductions in or distortions of prosocial feelings and behavior. Avoidant attachment is related to lower levels of compassion, empathy, gratitude, forgiveness, and helping behavior even in interpersonal or relational contexts that might make these prosocial feelings and behavior seem natural. Anxious attachment has a more complex signature: It does not necessarily eliminate prosocial inclinations, but it sullies them with conflicting feelings and egoistic motives that may erode its expected beneficial effects on the welfare of other people.

**Attachment Insecurities and Morality**

Here, we wish to extend our studies of attachment and prosocial inclinations into the realm of moral choices. As noted throughout this volume, there are many definitions and conceptions of morality: social prescriptions and principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong; intentions, choices, and behavior that are subject to (or judged according to) generally accepted moral norms of behavior; rational judgments and evaluations about the extent to which an action is right or wrong; and intuitions (“gut feelings”) about the differences between right and wrong. For present purposes, we will accept Staub’s (this volume) definition of morality as “principles, values, emotional orientations and practices that maintain or promote
human welfare.” According to this definition, virtuous or good behavior is prosocial in nature and stems from an individual’s genuine, or authentic, wish to benefit other people.

In a recent series of studies, Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, and Chun (in press) examined associations between attachment anxiety and avoidance, on one hand, and various measures of authenticity (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and honesty (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2004), on the other. Attachment security was, as hypothesized, related to honesty and authenticity. Moreover, both conscious and unconscious security priming (compared with neutral priming) increased state authenticity and reduced dishonesty and cheating. Similar effects did not occur when positive mood priming rather than attachment security priming methods were used, indicating (in line with other studies reviewed by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b) that security priming is not just a form of elevated mood.

As explained in the previous section of this chapter, people who score high on attachment-related avoidance are less inclined than other people to embody other-regarding virtues or engage in prosocial behavior. Moreover, research has consistently shown that more avoidant people appraise others’ traits and intentions negatively, and tend to hold cynical and pessimistic views of human nature. They seem to be primarily focused on increasing their own personal resources while remaining independent and self-reliant (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a, for a review). We therefore expect that more avoidant people will be less inclined to consider other people’s welfare when making moral judgments and choices. That is, when facing situations in which the welfare of others is pitted against their own welfare, avoidant people will be less inclined to consider or base their decisions on moral principles and intuitions. Moreover, their personal identity and self-esteem can be expected to be less grounded in moral values and traits and based more on self-interest and a sense of agency and self-reliance.
Our previous research has shown that people who score high on attachment anxiety differ from those who score low, not in the extent to which they experience prosocial emotions or are inclined to behave in a prosocial manner, but in the way they construe these experiences and inclinations. As explained earlier, whereas less anxious (i.e., more secure) individuals’ prosocial states of mind include a blend of altruistic motives, positive feelings of love and kindness, and a positive outlook on others, the prosocial states of mind of more anxious individuals include a blend of these positive elements with narcissistic motives, personal distress, self-focused fears and worries, and a sometimes envious or hostile outlook on others. Thus, although anxious and secure people may score high on a measure of compassionate love, the secure person may feel real compassion for others in need and authentic concern for their suffering, the anxious person may feel what he or she thinks is compassion but is actually colored by narcissistic propensities, such as wishing to be accepted and applauded, and by self-focused worries about rejection and abandonment.

In extrapolating previous findings to the realm of morality, we can expect that when anxious individuals are confronted with situations in which the welfare of other people is pitted against their own welfare, they will be inclined to make moral choices and behave according to moral principles and intuitions to the extent that these choices may increase the social approval they receive as a result, may compensate for their sense of inadequate worth, or may prevent rejection. They are likely to be less concerned with moral principles and intuitions, and less likely to exhibit mental access to moral cognitions and feelings when moral choices and behavior do not promise any personal benefits.

Our ideas about the possible links between attachment anxiety and morality are influenced by Jordan and Monin’s (2008) observation that people sometimes use moral behavior
as a defense against threats to the self. They found that people who completed a tedious task and then saw a confederate quit the same task (as compared with people in the same study who only completed the task or only saw a confederate quit) were more likely to elevate their sense of their own morality. This effect was eliminated if study participants engaged in self-affirmation, suggesting that moral self-elevation was less necessary when the self could be elevated in other ways.

We reasoned that this defensive use of morality might be more characteristic of people who score high on attachment anxiety compared to those who score low and are more likely to operate on genuine moral principles. In other words, we suspect that there are two importantly different forms of morality: (a) *authentic morality*, manifested by relatively secure people and anchored in a genuine concern for others’ welfare, and (b) *defensive morality*, manifested by people who score high on attachment anxiety and anchored in a sense of inadequate self-worth or serving as a defense against self-relevant threats and narcissistic wounds. Based on this line of reasoning, we expect that increasing an anxious person’s sense of security will move him or her toward a more authentic form of morality.

We recently conducted two as yet unpublished studies testing the basic idea that attachment-anxious people sometimes make moral choices to defend against feelings of unworthiness and to repair wounded self-esteem. In these studies we tested two main hypotheses. First, we expected that threats to the self would increase the tendency of anxious individuals but not secure ones to make moral choices. Second, we predicted that security priming would reduce the tendency to engage in defensive forms of morality and allow anxious individuals to be truly (i.e., less defensively) moral.
In the first study, we examined the effects of attachment anxiety and threats to the self on moral choices, expecting that more attachment-anxious participants would make more moral choices when their self-esteem was threatened than when it was not. We conducted a two-session laboratory study involving 60 Israeli university students (42 women and 18 men). In the first session, conducted during regular class time, participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships inventory (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), a reliable and valid measure of attachment anxiety and avoidance. In the second session, conducted two weeks later by a different experimenter, participants individually performed four cognitive tasks while an ego-relevant threat – failure feedback – was presented to a randomly selected half of them. In the threat condition, participants were presented with four unsolvable problems and told that they had failed them all. In the no-threat condition, participants were presented with the same four unsolvable problems but received no feedback concerning their performance. The cognitive tasks and manipulations were identical to ones used previously by Mikulincer (1998, Study 1).

Afterwards, all participants received four scenarios assessing moral choices that were adapted from Perugini and Leone’s (2009) study. In each scenario, a moral choice was pitted against a financial loss (i.e., choosing the moral option meant losing money or foregoing potential economic gains). Two scenarios concerned investing in companies that take advantage of immoral activities, such as violent sports and prostitution. Two other scenarios concerned the opportunity to break the law without suffering any consequences, such as evading taxes on prize money or falsely reporting the amount of a charitable donation.

For instance, the scenario dealing with prostitution went as follows: “Suppose a well-known newspaper has experienced a notable increase in earnings as soon as it began publishing explicit advertisements for paid sexual services. Most of these ads were paid for by organizations...
that control the illicit sex market, mainly using young immigrant women as prostitutes. After publishing the sex ads, the company running the newspaper became very profitable, and it is likely to become even more profitable in the future. Suppose you have some money to invest. Would you invest your money in the company that owns the newspaper?” The scenario dealing with a false report to the government read as follows: “You run an orphanage and have had a hard time making ends meet. A car dealership offers you a new van worth $15,000 for free if you will falsely report to the government that the dealership donated a van worth $30,000. You really need the van and it will give you an opportunity to make the children happy. Would you agree to take the van under these conditions?”

Ratings were made on 7-point response scales ranging from 1 (definitely not) to 7 (definitely yes). The Cronbach alpha for the four scenarios was .87, so it was possible to compute a total score for each participant (after reversing scales to that higher scores indicated moral choices) by averaging the four ratings.

To examine the effects of threats to self and attachment anxiety and avoidance on making moral choices, we conducted a two-step hierarchical regression analysis with participants’ scores on the ECR anxiety and avoidance and threat induction as the predictor variables. In the first step, we entered threat induction (a dummy variable comparing the threat and no-threat conditions, and anxious and avoidant attachment Z scores as a block to examine the unique main effects of these predictors. In the second step, the 2-way interactions between threat to self and each of the attachment scores were entered as additional predictors.

Two main effects were significant: avoidant attachment, $\beta = -.37, p < .01$, and threat to self, $\beta = .26, p < .05$. Participants scoring higher on avoidant attachment were less likely to make moral choices, whereas those in the threat condition chose more moral options than those in the
no-threat condition. The regression analysis also yielded a significant interaction between attachment anxiety and threat, $\beta = .24, p < .05$. Examination of the significant interaction (using Aiken & West’s, 1991, procedure) revealed that a threat to self produced more moral choices than no threat to self only when the score on anxious attachment was relatively high (+1 SD), $\beta = .50, p < .01$, and not when it was relatively low (-1 SD), $\beta = .02$. Stated another way: People scoring higher on attachment anxiety were more likely to make moral choices in the threat condition, $\beta = .36, p < .01$, but not in the no-threat condition, $\beta = -.12$.

These results fit with Jordan and Monin’s (2008) conclusion that a self-threat can sometimes lead to heightened morality, but they also indicate that this kind of defensive morality is more characteristic of attachment-anxious people than it is of relatively secure ones. Relatively secure individuals’ moral choices were not influenced by threats to the self, suggesting that choosing the more moral of available options is a stable, dispositional tendency in their case. The findings also revealed that attachment-related avoidance is associated with a reduced tendency to choose a moral option when it means foregoing a personal gain – a tendency that is in line with previously reviewed findings showing that avoidant people are more interested in gaining resources that sustain their independence and self-reliance than in engaging in prosocial, other-regarding activities.

In our second study, we examined the extent to which brief security priming provides an antidote to the defensive use of morality and helps attachment-anxious individuals make less defensive moral choices. To examine this issue, we conducted a two-session laboratory study involving 100 Israeli university students (71 women and 29 men). The procedure was based on the first study described here, but it added security priming as an additional variable.
The first session was designed to assess participants’ attachment patterns and acquire specific names of security-enhancing attachment figures and other familiar persons to be used later as primes in the second session. In that first session, participants completed the ECR inventory and two computerized measures of the names of attachment figures and other familiar persons who were not attachment figures. The first of these two computerized measures was a Hebrew version of the WHOTO scale (Fraley & Davis, 1997), in which participants were asked to type in a Microsoft EXCEL worksheet the names of their security-enhancing attachment figures (although not described in those technical terms). The scale included six items, two of which addressed the proximity-providing function of attachment (e.g., Who is the person you most like to spend time with?), two of which addressed the safe-haven function (e.g., Who is the person you would count on for advice?), and two of which addressed the secure-base function (e.g., Who is the person you can always count on?). For each item, participants wrote the name of the person who best served the targeted attachment-related function. In the second measure, participants were asked to type into a separate EXCEL worksheet the names of their father, mother, brothers, sisters, best friend, current romantic partner, and grandparents without making any reference to the attachment functions they did or did not serve. We assumed that because these people’s names were not provided as primary attachment figures, they probably did not meet the strict theoretical requirements for that role.

In the second session, conducted two weeks later by a different experimenter, participants performed a 30-trial computerized word-relation task. During each of the trials, a participant was subliminally exposed (for 20 milliseconds) to the name of their most security-enhancing attachment figure (based on the first session of the study) or the name of a familiar person who was not selected as an attachment figure. Following the priming procedure, participants in both
priming conditions performed four cognitive tasks and were randomly divided into threat and no-threat conditions using the manipulations described above. In sum, participants were randomly divided into four experimental conditions (with 25 participants in each), according to a 2 x 2 factorial design defined by kind of priming (security, neutral) and presence of a threat to self (yes, no).

After they completed the four cognitive tasks, all participants were told that the experiment was over, and that in exchange for participating they would be given one free lottery ticket for three prizes of NIS120 (about $30), to be drawn from the names of participants in the experiment. They were then sent to another room where they could collect one ticket from another research assistant. The experimenter explicitly and unambiguously said “one ticket.” In the other room, a research assistant gave each participant two lottery tickets (the moral temptation), providing them a greater chance of winning the lottery compared with the rest of the participants. If a participant returned the additional ticket, the experimenter apologized for the mistake. The dependent variable was whether a participant returned the additional undeserved lottery ticket (the moral choice) or not. Participants were partly debriefed and provided an e-mail contact for a full debriefing when the entire study was completed. The undeserved lottery ticket was kept by 58 participants (58% of the sample) and given back by 42 (42%).

To examine the extent to which security priming mitigated attachment-anxious participants’ tendency to make moral choices defensively, we conducted a three-step hierarchical regression analysis with participants’ scores on the ECR anxious and avoidant attachment scales, security priming (yes, no), and threat induction as the predictor variables. The predicted variable was whether participants returned the undeserved ticket or not (no = 0; yes =1). In the first step of the analysis, we entered security priming (a dummy variable comparing the security priming
condition with the neutral priming condition), threat induction (a dummy variable comparing the threat and no-threat conditions), and anxious and avoidant attachment Z scores as a block to examine the unique main effects of these predictors. In the second step, the 2-way interactions between security priming and threat induction, between security priming and each attachment score, and between threat and each attachment score were entered as additional predictors. In the third step, we added the 3-way interactions: security priming x threat x anxious attachment and security priming x threat x avoidant attachment.

In line with the findings of the first study, the main effects for avoidant attachment, $\beta = -.42, p < .01$, and threat induction, $\beta = .22, p < .05$, and the interaction of threat and attachment anxiety, $\beta = .21, p < .05$, were significant. Participants scoring higher on attachment-related avoidance were less likely to return the undeserved lottery ticket, and a threat led to more moral choices than the absence of threat only when anxious attachment was relatively high (+1 SD), $\beta = .43, p < .01$, and not when it was relatively low (-1 SD), $\beta = .01$. However, the 3-way interaction of threat, security priming, and attachment anxiety was also significant, $\beta = -.32, p < .01$. Examination of the interaction revealed that a threat led more anxiously attached people to return the additional lottery ticket only in the neutral priming condition, $\beta = .75, p < .01$, and not in the security priming condition, $\beta = .11$. After receiving security priming, neither threat nor attachment anxiety increased the tendency to return the additional lottery ticket. This does not mean that security priming led to less moral choices, but that this priming eliminated the effects of threats and anxious attachment on hyper-moralization.

Overall, the findings were in line with our predictions. A temporary increase in the sense of attachment security counteracted the tendency of attachment-anxious individuals’ tendency to make more moral choices after receiving a threat to self. In other words, security priming
eliminated the effects of attachment anxiety on moral choice, making it less necessary to use moral choices as a defense against viewing oneself as deficient. It is important to note that there was not a significant interaction between security priming and attachment-related avoidance, implying that avoidant people were less inclined to make moral choices even after being primed with security-enhancing representations and that security priming failed to increase avoidant people’s moral concerns and interest in others’ welfare. Evidently their generally negative views of other people are well-entrenched and do not respond, in the short run at least, to momentarily bolstered security.

Concluding Remarks

A growing body of research evidence indicates that attachment security is conducive to prosocial motives, emotion, and behavior, and that more secure individuals are generally more authentic and honest in their dealings with other people. Even when people are relatively insecure with respect to attachment, they can sometimes become more considerate, helpful, and honest if their sense of security is temporarily augmented. Here, we have extended the existing research to include the defensive use of moral choices to bolster a threatened self-image. Whereas many previous studies had shown that attachment insecurities might erode prosocial and moral inclinations, or dilute them with egoistic concerns, the two new studies described briefly here indicate that attachment-anxious individuals sometimes make moral choices defensively, a motivational tendency that can be essentially eliminated in the short run by increased security. In these new studies, attachment-related avoidance did not respond to security priming, seemingly because negative, cynical views of other people and practiced tendencies to feather one’s own nest when the opportunity presents itself were not affected by temporary boosts in security. This is interesting theoretically, because previous security priming studies
have shown that avoidant intolerance or lack of concern for others could be mitigated by security priming. The studies reported here, which involved a more explicit and concrete opportunity to gain something for oneself, may have made it more difficult for security priming to overcome lack of concern for others. This is something that deserves to be examined further, and more systematically, in future studies.

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