

Attachment and Emotion Dysregulation as Predictors of Interpersonal Problems, Friendship Satisfaction, and Romantic Relationship Maintenance

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INTRODUCTION

- Researchers have linked insecure attachment styles to various relationship challenges across relationship contexts, including friendships and romantic relationships. The two major insecure attachment styles are anxious and avoidant. Both insecure styles are characterized by high frustration with partners and low trust/confidence in others. Whereas anxious attachment is characterized by high anxious-clinging and jealousy/fear of abandonment, avoidants are high in self-reliance and low in proximity-seeking (Brennan et al., 1998; Brennan & Shaver, 1995).
- Both insecure attachment styles have been linked to difficulties regarding emotional regulation (Cronin et al., 2018) and an inability to regulate negative moods (Creasey et al., 1999), with anxious attachment predicting emotional reactivity and mental rumination and avoidant attachment predicting emotional cut-off and distancing (Riebel, 2015; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).
- Both anxious and avoidant attachment have been linked to similar interpersonal problems (e.g., cold, vindictive, socially inhibited, dominant, self-sacrificing), with anxious attachment predicting over-accommodation (Haggerty et al., 2009). Moreover, emotional dysregulation has been found to mediate the relationship between both attachment dimensions (i.e. anxious, avoidant) and interpersonal problems (Wei et al., 2005).
- Both insecure attachment styles have been associated with intimacy issues in relationships, including friendships (Hudson & Fraley, 2017; Chow et al., 2016; Grabill & Kerns, 2000). Whereas avoidants tend to fear and avoid intimacy, anxious individuals may be overly likely to seek out friendship intimacy (Chow et al., 2016). These intimacy issues may potentially have negative implications for friendship satisfaction, especially for avoidants. Similarly, emotional dysregulation issues associated with both insecure styles may also have implications for friendship satisfaction.
- Avoidant attachment has been consistently found to predict a decreased propensity toward engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors (Pistole & Roberts, 2010; Adams & Baptist, 2012; Baptist et al., 2012; Edenfield et al., 2013). The results are less consistent for anxious attachment, with most studies finding no relationship (e.g., Pistole & Roberts, 2010; Baptist et al., 2012; Edenfield et al., 2013; see Adams & Baptist, 2012, for an exception).
- Our study was designed to examine the mediating role of emotion dysregulation and negative affect in the relationship between insecure attachment and various relationship outcomes (i.e., interpersonal problems, friendship satisfaction, romantic relationship maintenance behaviors).

Table 1: Correlations for Anxious and Avoidant Attachment Styles

Variables	Attachment	
	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment
Emotion Dysregulation		
• Difficulty with Impulse Control	.513***	.223***
• Lack of Emotional Awareness	.265***	.388***
• Limited Access to Emotions	.597***	.359***
• Lack of Emotional Clarity	.416***	.397***
Negative Interpersonal Affect		
• Anger	.419***	.183**
• Jealousy	.504***	NS
Interpersonal Problems		
	.574***	.311***
Friendship Outcomes		
• Friendship intimacy	NS	-.455***
• Friendship Satisfaction	-.314***	-.436***
Relationship Maintenance		
	NS	-.171*

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

METHODS

Participants

307 undergraduate students at SUNY Geneseo

- 249 women, 56 men, and 2 genderfluid

Sexual Orientation:

- 265 Heterosexual
- 18 Bisexual, 8 Lesbian, 4 Pansexual, 4 Asexual, 6 Questioning, 2 Prefer not to disclose

Measures

Attachment: *Experience in Close Relationships* (short form) - Wei et al. (2007)

Anxious Attachment: 6 items

Avoidant Attachment: 6 items

Emotional Dysregulation: *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)* - Gratz & Roemer (2004)

Difficulty with Impulse Control (ImpControl): 6 items

Lack of Emotional Awareness (EmotAware): 6 items

Limited Access to Emotions (AccEmot): 8 items

Lack of Emotional Clarity (EmotCla): 5 items

Negative Interpersonal Affect:

Anger: *Aggression Questionnaire* - Buss & Perry (1992) - 7 items

Jealousy: *Jealousy Scale* - Melamed et al. (1991) - 8 items

Interpersonal Problems: *Interpersonal Problems-Short Circumplex Form (IIP-SC)* - Soldz et al. (1995)

6 subscales: cold, socially avoidant, nonassertive, exploitable, overly nurturant, intrusive

Friendship Outcomes:

Friendship Intimacy: *Self Disclosure Index (SDI)* - Miller et al. (1983) - 10 item modified short version

Friendship Satisfaction: *Investment Model Scale* - Rusbult et al. (1998) - 5 item subscale

Relationship Maintenance: *Modified version of the Relationship Maintenance Behavior Measure (RMBM)* - Stafford (2010)

5 subscales: positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, relation talks, assurance of partner

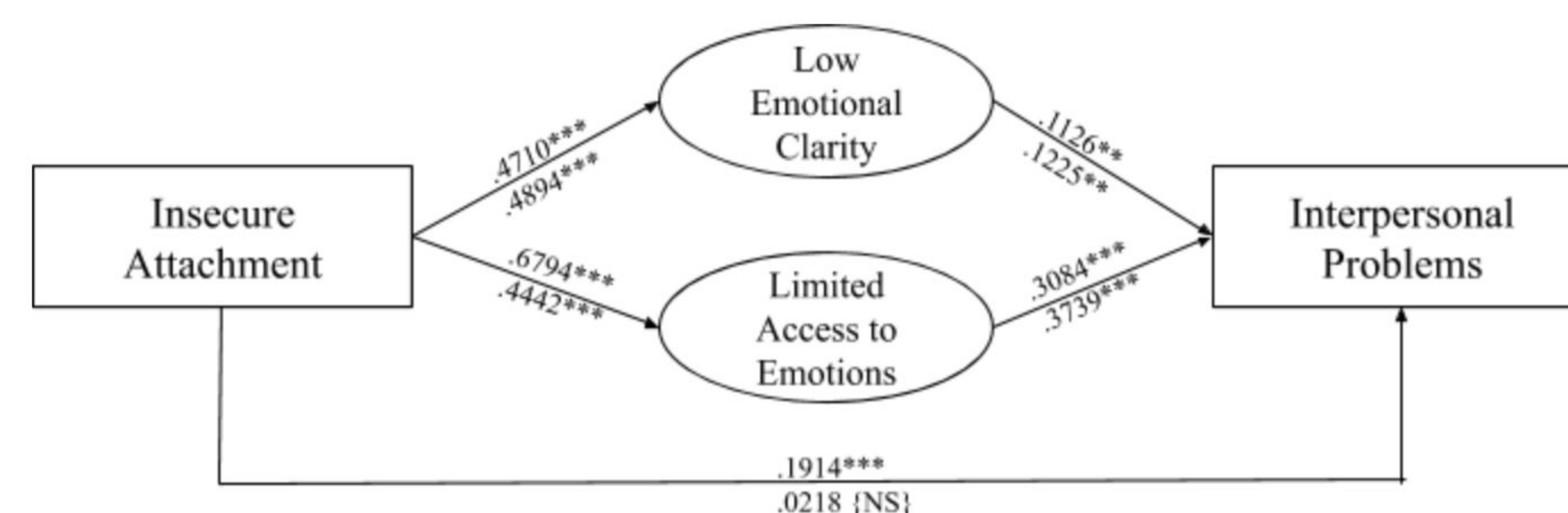


Figure 1: The mediating role of low emotional clarity and limited access to emotions in the relationship between insecure attachment and interpersonal problems

Note: regression coefficients above the arrow represent anxious attachment style; regression coefficients underneath the arrows represent avoidant attachment.

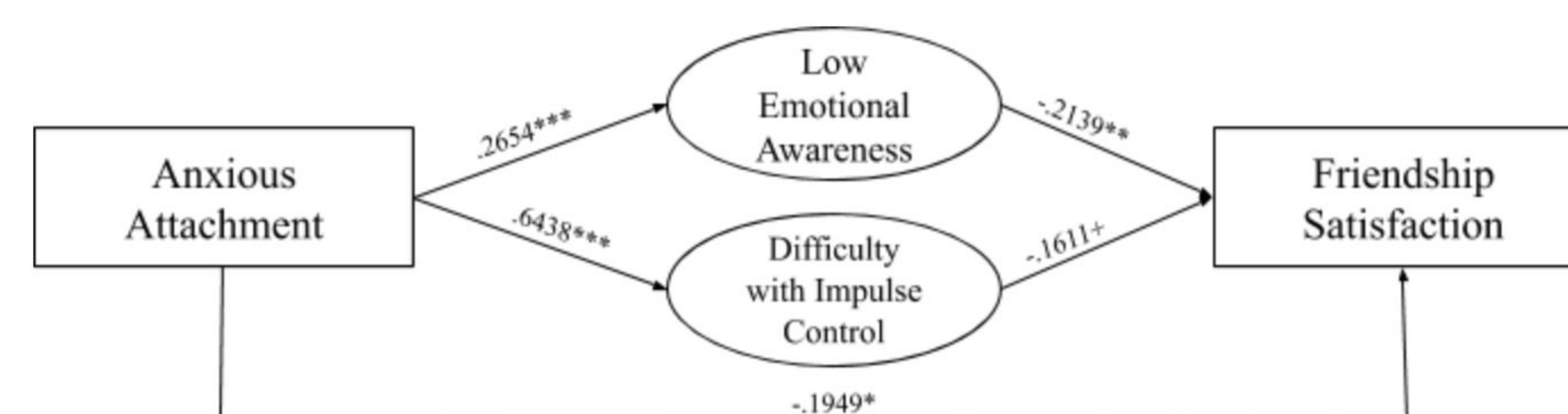


Figure 2: The mediating role of low emotional awareness and difficulty with impulse control in the relationship between anxious attachment and friendship satisfaction.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Correlations for Anxious and Avoidant Attachment Styles

- As shown in Table 1, Pearson correlations revealed that both insecure attachment styles significantly predicted all four emotion dysregulation issues. Although both insecure attachment styles were significantly associated with greater anger, only anxious attachment predicted greater jealousy and only avoidant attachment predicted lower friendship intimacy. Both insecure attachment styles significantly predicted more interpersonal problems and lower friendship satisfaction. Only avoidant attachment predicted lower relationship maintenance.

Emotion Dysregulation Issues as Mediators of Insecure Attachment & Interpersonal Problems

- To test for mediation, direct and indirect effects were computed using a series of OLS regressions and bootstrapping procedures (Hayes, 2013). The significance of the indirect effect (i.e., mediating), based on the 95% CI derived from 1,000 bootstrapping resamples, is indicated when the bias-corrected bootstrap CI values do not cross zero. Unstandardized regression coefficients (B) for significant effects are presented.
- Figure 1: Low emotional clarity and limited access to emotions mediated/partially mediated the relationship between insecure attachment and interpersonal problems. These results suggest that individuals who have either avoidant or anxious attachment are more likely to have interpersonal problems because they have limited access to their emotions and low clarity of the emotions they experience.

Mediators of the Relationship Between Insecure Attachment and Friendship Satisfaction

- Figure 2: Low emotional awareness and difficulties with impulse control partially mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and friendship satisfaction. These results suggest that people who are more anxious tend to have lower friendship satisfaction because they have difficulty regulating their emotions and are less aware of their emotions.
- Figure 3: Difficulty with impulse control and friendship intimacy partially mediated the relationship between avoidant attachment and friendship satisfaction. These results suggest that people who are more avoidant tend to have lower friendship satisfaction partially because they have difficulty regulating their emotions and they do not disclose their intimate details and feelings to their friends.

Mediators of the Relationship Between Avoidant Attachment and Relationship Maintenance

- No significant indirect effects were found for the relationship between avoidant attachment and relationship maintenance. These results suggest that although avoidants are less likely to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors, emotion dysregulation issues do not account for this effect.

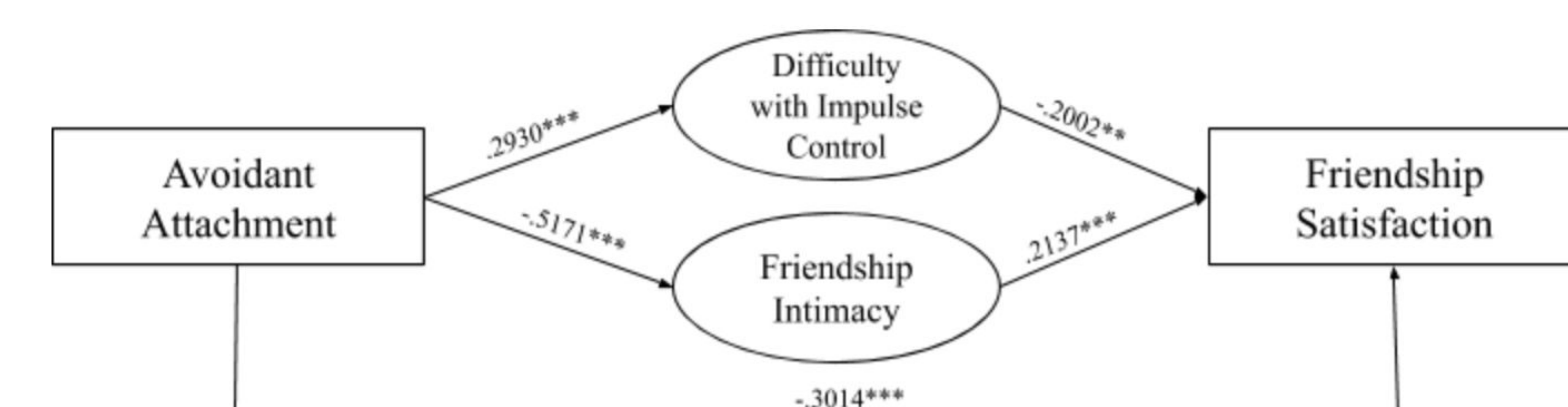


Figure 3: The mediating role of difficulty with impulse control and intimacy in the relationship between avoidant attachment and friendship satisfaction.