

# Attachment style, emotional expressiveness, and guilt among college women<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Forty-four college women who had been in romantic relationships of at least a year completed 3 attachment measures (Armsden & Greenberg's 1987 IPPA, modified to include romantic partner; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan's 1994 ASQ; and a modified Hazan-Shaver (1987) technique). Comfort with emotional expression was assessed by King & Emmons (1990) EEQ and AEQ. Interpersonal guilt was assessed using O'Connor, et al.'s (1997) guilt questionnaire, which has subscales for guilt about surpassing a loved one (survivor guilt), guilt about being different than a loved one (separation guilt), and guilt about lack of compliance with negative parental views of the self (self-hate guilt). Insecure attachment predicted high levels of guilt; however, even secure college students reported relatively high separation guilt. Secure attachment enabled comfort with emotional expressivity in close relationships, while insecurity, especially ambivalent attachment, was related to discomfort with emotional expression. Discomfort with emotional expression was also a strong predictor of guilt. We infer that comfort with emotional expressiveness in childhood and beyond allows adults both to maintain ties as well as to develop new relationships with relative ease.

Positive developmental outcomes have been associated with secure (vs. insecure) attachment styles, traditionally attributed to the development of a "secure base" of parental representation. Yet, optimal late adolescent and adult functioning in our society is also often coupled with the expectation of development of autonomy and movement away from parental influence. We conceptualize optimal outcome as the ability to maintain the benefits of secure attachment without a sense of guilt (in Weiss's, 1993 control-mastery theory sense) about developing autonomy. In control-mastery theory, guilt, while often adaptive in moderation, if excessive can inhibit movement toward developmental goals, such as developing one's own

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life or engaging in rewarding romantic relationships. We expected that the development of secure attachment is associated with lower guilt about separation from and surpassing parents and other loved ones. Conversely, insecure attachment, especially ambivalent attachment, should be related to vulnerability to guilt.

Attachment has also been related to emotional expressivity, both in infancy (e.g., Cassidy, 1994; Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996) and later (e.g., Bretherton, 1990; Main, 1995). We proposed that the same features of a relationship with a parent (or emotional partner later) that would likely promote guilt would also inhibit emotionally expressive communication. For example, an insecure parent who demands compliance from her child might simultaneously discourage the child's expressions of autonomy, leading to separation guilt as well as emotional distance, since the child desires to maintain contact however possible. Thus, we expected that securely attached adults would be more comfortable with emotional expressiveness in close relationships than those insecurely attached. We also expected that comfort with emotional expressiveness would be related to lower levels of guilt.

### METHOD

Forty-four college women who had been in romantic relationships of at least a year completed 6 self-report measures. Three were attachment measures: (1) Armsden & Greenberg's (1987) Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), modified to include romantic partner; (2) Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan's (1994) Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ), developed to be a more sensitive adaptation of the Hazan-Shaver measure and more suitable for younger adults who may have had less experience in romantic relationships; and (3) the Hazan-Shaver (1987) technique, modified to include Likert-type scales for each of the three original forced-choice paragraphs. Comfort with emotional expression was assessed by King & Emmons (1990) Emotional Expressiveness Questionnaire (EEQ) and Ambivalence

over Emotional Expression Questionnaire (AEQ). Interpersonal guilt was assessed using O'Connor, et al.'s (1997) Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ), which has subscales for guilt about surpassing a loved one (Survivor Guilt), about being different than a loved one (Separation Guilt), about an exaggerated sense of responsibility for others (Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt), and about lack of compliance with negative parental views of the self (Self-Hate Guilt). See Appendix A for examples of measure.

### FINDINGS

Distribution of ASQ attachment styles was: 59% secure, 16% avoidant, and 25% ambivalent; we also used a combination of ASQ and H&S scores to classify subjects, with results essentially the same as those for the ASQ classification, reported here.

Security/insecurity and guilt subtypes were related as expected, with the exception of Separation Guilt, which was not related to attachment type, as measured by the ASQ (Table 1). Both ASQ Anxiety and Avoidance were related to higher Survivor, Omnipotent Responsibility, and Self-Hate Guilt. Multiple regression analyses showed parallel findings, with ASQ attachment style accounting for significant parts of the variance in Survivor Guilt (34.9%), Self-Hate Guilt (73.9%), and overall Interpersonal Guilt (37.4%), but not Separation Guilt (2.5%). Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that Anxiety was the best predictor of variance in Survivor, Self-Hate, and Interpersonal Guilt, followed by Security and Avoidance, respectively. Overall, these results suggest that insecure attachment, particularly ambivalent attachment, contributes significantly to guilt levels.

However, the IPPA attachment measure yielded different results for the Separation Guilt measure. Contrary to expectation, Separation Guilt was related to the IPPA Mother subscales of Trust ( $r = +.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Communication ( $r = +.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Alienation ( $r = -.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in ways similar to secure attachment (and

different from the other guilt scales); the Father subscales showed a similar pattern (high Trust and Communication; low Alienation). Thus, while secure attachments allow these women to share their accomplishments and maintain a positive view of the self, their relatively high separation guilt may be related to the importance of maintaining parental contacts during the college years, a transitional developmental period when psychological separation may be particularly sensitized. College students may be particularly aware of how their views and values are beginning to differ from those of their parents, thus elevating separation guilt, even for many securely attached students.

Emotional Expressiveness was related both to ASQ Security ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ) and Avoidance ( $r = -.52, p < .001$ ), although not to Anxiety ( $r = -.18, n.s.$ ). Relationships between attachment styles and Ambivalence over Emotional Expression were greater: Security ( $r = -.683$ ), Avoidance ( $r = .60$ ), and Anxiety ( $r = .60$ , all significant at  $p < .001$ ); all these were in the expected directions. Multiple regressions indicated that attachment style contributed 43.7% of the variance in EEQ ( $F = 10.351, p < .0001$ ) and 55.9% of the variance in AEQ ( $F = 16.875, p < .0001$ ). These substantial relationships suggest that emotional fluency is a large part of security/insecurity in these women's parental relationships, and that this dynamic also characterizes current relationships. Securely attached women are accustomed to relying on emotional expressivity to maintain parental attachments. In contrast, insecure attached women have perceived their parents as either unavailable or as overly controlling, either discouraging or inhibiting development of emotionally expressive communication, or promoting ambivalence over expressivity. Since expressivity is relatively lacking in their parental representations, these women may be uncomfortable relying on expressivity to foster new relationships.

Emotional Expressiveness (EEQ) was negatively related both to Survivor Guilt ( $r = -.38, p < .05$ ) and to Self-Hate Guilt ( $r = -.46, p < .01$ ), but not to the other

guilt subscales. Ambivalence over Emotional Expression (AEQ) was related to all guilt subscales, with the exception of Separation Guilt: Survivor ( $r = .62$ ); Omnipotent Responsibility ( $r = .55$ ); Self-Hate ( $r = .67$ ); and Interpersonal Guilt ( $r = .57$ , all significant at  $p < .001$ ). Multiple regression analysis indicated that the two expressiveness measures together accounted for a significant amount of the variance in the guilt scales: 38.9% of Survivor Guilt ( $F = 13.059$ ); 31.4% of Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt ( $F = 9.393$ ); 45.8% of Self-Hate Guilt ( $F = 17.317$ ); and 34.7% of Interpersonal Guilt ( $F = 10.899$ , all significant at  $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, the regression for Separation Guilt was not significant, suggesting it operated differently in this sample, as discussed earlier. Overall, these results suggest that ambivalence over emotional expression is more powerfully related to guilt than expressiveness alone. Women with high expressivity in close relationships reported lower guilt, while those with high ambivalence over expressiveness reported higher guilt. We propose that facile and guiltless expression allows children to maintain closeness to parents and reduce fear of damaging ties in these important relationships. Fluent emotional expression, therefore, enables both assertion of autonomy and the desire to stay close, in turn reducing vulnerability to guilt.

Overall, we conclude that security/insecurity of attachments in adult relationships is intertwined closely with emotional expressivity, particularly with ambivalence about expressivity. Likewise, guilt, conceptualized as concern with the effect of one's own actions on the well-being of attachment figures, is also closely related to attachment status, suggesting that optimal developmental outcome can be usefully thought of as guilt-free movement toward autonomy among securely attached adults. Finally, separation guilt seems to operate differently in this sample of college students, related to the special challenges of this developmental period.

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## APPENDIX A: SAMPLES OF MEASURES

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)  
Scales for trust, communication, and alienation (25 items each); 5-point Likert scales;  
done separately for mother, father, and romantic partner:

### Trust

My mother (father, romantic partner) accepts me as I am.  
My mother (father, romantic partner) respects my feelings.

### Communication

Talking over my problems with my father (mother, romantic partner) makes  
me feel ashamed or foolish.  
If my father (mother, romantic partner) knows something is bothering me, he  
asks me about it.

### Alienation

I feel alone or apart when I am with my romantic partner(mother, father).  
I feel angry with my romantic partner (mother, father).

Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994)  
40 items rated on 6-point Likert scales

### Security

I feel confident that other people will be there when I need them.  
I find it relatively easy to get close to others.

### Avoidance

Achieving things is more important than building relationships.  
My relationships with others are generally superficial.

### Anxiety

I worry a lot about my relationships.  
I find it hard to make a decision unless I know what other people think.



Hazan-Shaver (1987) Attachment Self-Report

As modified: Each paragraph rated on a 9-point Likert scale

Secure: It is pretty easy for me to get close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having them depend on me. I don't worry too much about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.

Avoidant: I am a little uncomfortable being close to others. It is hard to trust them completely and hard to depend on them. I get nervous when anyone gets too close, especially when love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.

Ambivalent: I think that others don't really want to get as close as I would like to get. I worry a lot that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me. I would like to be so close to another person that I feel we are completely together, like one person, and I think that others get scared away sometimes.

Emotional Expressiveness Questionnaire (EEQ) (King & Emmons, 1990)

16 items, rated on 7-point Likert scales

I often tell people that I love them.

I always express disappointment when things don't go as I'd like them to.

When I am angry people around me usually know.

Ambivalence over Emotional Expression Questionnaire (AEO) (King & Emmons, 1990)

28 items, rated on 7-point Likert scales

I want to express my emotions honestly, but I am afraid that it may cause me embarrassment or hurt.

I try to refrain from getting angry at my family even though I want to at times.

It is hard to find the right words to indicate to others what I am feeling.

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ) (O'Connor, et al., 1997)

67 items, rated on 5-point Likert scales

Survival Guilt (about accomplishments; 22 items)

I am uncomfortable talking about my achievements in social situations.  
It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with.

Separation Guilt (being different from parents; 15 items)

I feel that bad things happen to my family if I do not stay in close contact with them.  
It is difficult to see my parents' flaws.  
I am very reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends.

Omnipotence Guilt (excessive responsibility for others; 14 items):

I worry about hurting other people's feelings if I turn down an invitation from somebody who is eager for me to accept.  
I worry a lot about the people I love even when they seem to be fine.

Self-Hate Guilt (about being worthy; 16 items):

I deserve to be rejected by people.  
I feel there is something inherently bad about me.

Interpersonal Guilt: Sum of Survivor Guilt, Separation Guilt, and Omnipotence Guilt.

Table 1

Correlations Among Attachment Style Questionnaire 3-Factor Solution (ASQ) and  
IGQ Subscale Scores (IGQ)

ASQ	IGQ				
	Survivor	Separation	Omni.-Resp.	Self-Hate	Interpersonal
Security	-.54***	-.07	-.37*	-.73***	-.39**
Avoidance	.43**	.07	.20	.56***	.31*
Anxiety	.59***	.15	.58**	.79***	.60***

Notes. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .