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ARTICLE



Enhancing the “broaden-and-build” cycle of attachment security as a means of overcoming prejudice, discrimination, and racism

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ABSTRACT

Attachment theory emphasizes both the importance of supportive relationship partners, beginning in infancy, for developing a sense of security, and the adaptive benefits of this sense. In this article, we consider bolstering the sense of attachment security as a means of reducing and overcoming prejudice, discrimination, and racism. We review basic concepts of attachment theory, focusing on what we call the broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security. We review studies showing that the sense of attachment security is associated with reduced prejudice and less discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward people outside one's own social or racial group. Finally, we propose theoretical ideas and research suggesting that attachment security can protect against the adverse psychological effects of others' acts of prejudice and discrimination toward oneself. We conclude that, despite large gaps in the research literature, attachment theory is a useful conceptual framework for understanding and combatting prejudice, discrimination, and racism.

KEYWORDS

Attachment; security; intergroup relations; prejudice; racism

Attachment theory has proved to be one of the most fruitful frameworks for understanding emotion regulation and interpersonal relations (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016), having generated an enormous, cohesive body of supportive research. In his original exposition of the theory, John Bowlby (1973, 1980, 1969/1982) explained why the availability of reliable, caring, supportive relationship partners, beginning in infancy, is so important for the development of a sense of safety and security (confidence that one is worthy and lovable and that others will be protective and supportive when needed). This inner sense of “felt security” (Sroufe & Waters, 1977b) fosters an authentic sense of self-worth and the development of effective ways of coping with life stressors, which contribute to overall mental health (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Moreover, the sense of security arising from supportive relationships heightens one's confidence in others' benevolence, promotes harmonious relationships, and favors the endorsement of constructive means of conflict resolution at both interpersonal and intergroup levels (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Given these empirically supported claims, it seems likely that the sense of attachment security buffers against negative reactions (e.g. hostility, prejudice, discrimination) to people who

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differ from oneself or one's most important social or racial groups (Carnelley & Boag, 2019). Moreover, possessing a sense of security rooted in supportive attachment relationships seems likely to protect children, adolescents, and adults from the harmful effects of other's hurtful expressions of disdain, hatred, discrimination, and racism.

In this article, we briefly review basic concepts of attachment theory, focusing on what we, following Fredrickson (2001), call a "broaden-and-build" cycle of attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Specifically, we discuss ways in which attachment theory can be applied in the field of intergroup relations. First, we review research findings showing that enhancing the "broaden-and-build" cycle of attachment security contributes to a reduction in prejudice and discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward people who differ from oneself racially, ethnically, or in terms of group membership. We also consider theoretical ideas and research suggesting that attachment security functions as an inner resource when one is forced to cope with acts of prejudice, discrimination, and racism against oneself. Despite the huge body of research on attachment processes in childhood and adulthood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016), there is surprisingly little research on attachment and racial prejudice, which makes this an important topic for future research.

Attachment theory: basic concepts

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), human beings are born with a biologically evolved psychobiological system (*attachment behavioral system*) that motivates them to seek proximity to supportive others (*attachment figures*) in times of need as a way of reducing anxiety and obtaining protection from threats. Ideally, these attachment figures function effectively, over time, as both a *safe haven* in times of need – providing protection, comfort, and relief – and a *secure base*, encouraging autonomous pursuit of non-attachment goals grounded in confidence that support will be available if needed. Having a safe haven and secure base over time creates, in a child, a sense of attachment security, including feelings of being loved and cared for, helps with emotion regulation, and provides support in the pursuit of goals, including exploration, learning, and the development of social skills.

Although the attachment system is generally considered to be most important early in life (when it is literally a matter of life or death), Bowlby (1988) viewed it as active and important across the life span, being manifest in thoughts and behaviors related to self-worth, support seeking, and coping with loss, and being an important influence on psychosocial adaptation and overall mental health. Bowlby's claim of lifespan relevance of attachment processes provided the impetus for subsequent theorists and researchers to conceptualize and study attachment-related processes in adulthood (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main et al., 1985; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016)

Bowlby (1973) also discussed important individual differences in the extent to which a person possesses a stable underlying sense of security. In his view, these individual differences are rooted in reactions of attachment figures, over extended periods of time, to one's bids for protection and support in times of need, and in the incorporation of these reactions into mental representations of self and others (*internal working models*). Interactions with attachment figures who are sensitive and responsive to one's bids for protection and support facilitate the smooth, normative functioning of the attachment system, promote felt security, and contribute to positive working

models of self and others. When a person's attachment figures are not reliably available and supportive, however, his or her sense of lovability and worth is shaky or absent, others' benevolence and reliable support are in doubt, and the person becomes less secure in interpersonal relationships and less confident in dealing with threats and challenges (Bowlby, 1973).

Pursuing these theoretical ideas in adulthood, many researchers have focused on a person's *attachment orientation* or *style*, a systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that results from a particular history of interactions with attachment figures (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). These orientations can be conceptualized as regions in a continuous two-dimensional space (e.g. Brennan et al., 1998). One dimension, *attachment-related avoidance*, reflects the extent to which a person distrusts others' benevolence and defensively strives to maintain independence and emotional distance from relationship partners. The other dimension, *attachment anxiety*, reflects the extent to which a person worries that others will not be responsive in times of need, which increases the tendency to be preoccupied with, and intrusive in, close relationships. People who score low on both dimensions of attachment insecurity are said to be secure, or secure with respect to attachment.

Bowlby (1988) summarized the adaptive benefits of a well-functioning attachment system. First of all, interactions with a security-enhancing relationship partner help a person to down-regulate negative emotions and maintain equanimity in the face of threats (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). Moreover, such interactions facilitate the cultivation of personal skills and talents, because a child or adult who feels adequately protected and supported has greater courage and more conflict-free attentional resources to engage in free play, curiously investigate objects and environments, and develop affiliative relationships with peers. In the next section, we focus on these beneficial effects of felt security.

The broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security

According to our model of adult attachment-system functioning (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2016), appraisal of the availability and supportiveness of an attachment figure in times of need automatically activates mental representations of attachment security. These representations include both declarative and procedural knowledge organized around a relational prototype or *secure-base script* (Bretherton, 1991; Waters & Waters, 2006), which contains something like the following if-then propositions: "If I encounter an obstacle and/or become distressed, I can approach a significant other for help; he or she is likely to be available and supportive; I will experience relief and comfort as a result of proximity to this person; I can then return to other activities." Having many experiences that contribute to the construction of this kind of script makes it easier for a person to confront threatening, stressful situations with optimistic expectations and to feel relatively calm and resolute when coping with threats and difficulties.

Indeed, adolescents and adults who possess a stronger sense of security are more likely to include elements of the secure-base script (support seeking, support provision, and distress relief) when narrating threat-related experiences or creating stories from word prompts (e.g. Dykas et al., 2006; Mikulincer et al., 2009; Steele et al., 2014). There is also

longitudinal evidence linking parental responsiveness during childhood to the propensity in adolescence and adulthood for offspring to create secure-base stories from word prompts (e.g. Waters et al., 2017).

Attachment-figure responsiveness and the activation of the secure-base script have proliferating and widespread effects on a person's motives, cognitions, feelings, and behaviors – which we call the *broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security*. The secure-base script includes positive beliefs about threats and challenges, one's own value and efficacy, others' benevolence, and the benefits of relational dependence and closeness. These security-based cognitions have beneficial emotional effects and contribute to a dual transformation in a person's motives. Instead of being exclusively focused on self-protection, the person can also focus on (a) other people's needs and interests and (b) one's own possibilities for growth.

The broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security emanates from the set of positive beliefs embedded in the secure-base script. First, adhering to the script makes it easy to believe that most of life's threats and challenges are manageable, because the script implies that approaching an attachment figure in times of need is likely to result in successful distress management. Second, the secure-base script includes positive beliefs about other people's benevolence, kindness, and good will, because others have usually been responsive to one's support-seeking bids. Third, interactions with responsive attachment figures lead people to perceive themselves as valuable, lovable, and special – thanks to being valued, loved, and viewed as special by caring figures. Fourth, the secure-base script also implies that relational dependence and closeness are rewarding (approaching others and relying on them in times of need results in comfort and support). Research has consistently shown that an optimistic outlook and positive views of self, others, and relationships are more characteristic of people who possess a stronger sense of attachment security (e.g. Caldwell & Shaver, 2012; Collins et al., 2006; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

The secure-base script also includes a fund of useful procedural knowledge concerning emotion regulation and coping with stress. During interactions with sensitive and responsive figures, people learn that they can confidently and openly express their vulnerability and need while relying on others' support, and that these actions will yield positive outcomes. They also learn that they can often deal effectively with problems and setbacks themselves, seeking help only when needed, and that turning to others is an effective way to bolster their own considerable coping capacity. Moreover, they learn to expect that awareness of, reflection on, and expression of feelings, desires, and thoughts usually leads to distress-alleviating support and guidance (Cassidy, 1994). These beliefs encourage openness to one's own and others' mental states, including needs and vulnerabilities, and encourage one's own and others' open and accurate expression of feelings (Bretherton, 1990). This openness is manifested in what Fonagy et al. (1991) called *mentalization* or *reflective functioning* – the ability to notice, think about, and understand mental states, including one's own and those of other people. Indeed, people holding a stronger sense of security have been found to rely on more effective emotion-regulation and coping strategies and to score higher on measures of mentalization (e.g. Berant et al., 2001; Sharp et al., 2016; Winterheld, 2016).

The most immediate psychological effect of activating the secure-base script is distress management. The optimistic appraisals and constructive ways of regulating emotion embedded in the script can assuage distress, activate positive emotions (anticipatory relief and comfort), and thereby maintain emotional balance. Hence, people who possess a secure-base script can remain relatively unperturbed in times of stress and enjoy longer runs of positive affect. Over time, relying on the script and experiencing felt security contributes to sustained emotional well-being and mental health. Hundreds of studies have shown that adolescents and adults who possess a stronger sense of attachment security score higher on measures of well-being and score lower on measures of emotional problems and psychiatric symptomatology (see Ein-Dor & Doron, 2015;; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for reviews).

Besides contributing to emotional stability, the secure-base script allows a person to move from anxious self-focus to an other-orientation that promotes pro-relational and prosocial attitudes and behavior. At the relational level, a positive assessment of close relationships along with positive beliefs about others' benevolence makes it easier for a person to get emotionally close to others; express needs, desires, and hopes; ask for and provide support when needed; and feel comfortable with intimacy, interdependence, and commitment to others. In this way, adherence to the secure-base script can enhance relationship engagement, quality, and stability. Indeed, hundreds of studies, summarized in the second edition of our book on adult attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), have shown that people holding a stronger sense of attachment security maintain more stable romantic relationships and report higher levels of relationship satisfaction.

Of special relevance to the current Special Issue, the sense of attachment security can move a person from an egoistic to a more prosocial orientation. Bowlby (1969/1982) noticed that when facing threats and challenges, people are naturally focused mainly on seeking their own safety and care. Only when a sense of attachment security is restored can a person perceive others as not only potential sources of support, but also as worthy and benevolent human beings who themselves need and deserve sympathy and care. Moreover, possessing a secure-base script implies that one has witnessed, experienced, and benefited from generous attachment figures' effective care, which provides models to follow when another person is distressed. The predicted link between felt security and a prosocial orientation has received empirical support in studies of parenting, romantic and marital relationships, and compassionate responses to needy strangers (e.g. Bernier & Matte-Gagné, 2011; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Westmaas & Silver, 2001).

On the whole, people with security-related mental representations of attachment experiences generally tend to feel safe and protected, to hold authentic and stable senses of self-efficacy and self-esteem, and to rely on constructive ways of coping, thereby making it unnecessary to resort to reality-distorting defenses that can exacerbate interpersonal and intergroup tensions and conflicts. In the following sections, we review evidence concerning how these positive consequences of attachment security are manifested in the expression of, and coping with, prejudice, discrimination, and racism.



Attachment security reduces intergroup hatred, prejudice, and discrimination

Secure people's genuine interest in others and their positive beliefs about others' benevolence and goodwill may extend even to those who do not belong to their own social or racial group. That is, such people may be less prone to intergroup bias – the tendency to perceive one's own group (in-group) as better than others (out-groups). According to social identity theory (e.g. Abrams, 2015), this tendency serves a self-protective and self-enhancing function: "We, including I, are better than them." Unfortunately, this method of maintaining self-esteem depends on devaluing out-group members and even attacking them if they are perceived as threats to one's own personal identity and value. When the devalued outgroup is defined in terms of racial characteristics, this defensive and hostile stance is manifested in expressions of racism (rejection, negative stereotyping, insults, and discriminatory acts). At the extreme, devaluation and disdain can be enacted violently, even murderously. In terms of social identity theory, inter-racial interactions are viewed as a perpetual struggle over the relative value of one's own race over other races, creating perpetual antagonism, hostility and conflict. When one racial group is structurally dominant over another, as has been the case in the United States, the less dominant group is characteristically the recipient of most of the venom and violence.

According to an attachment-theoretical framework, derogation, hostility, and hatred are not necessary characteristics of intergroup relations in general or of inter-racial relations in particular. Rather, these negative feelings and behaviors depend partly on a person's degree of felt security. Secure people possess an authentic and stable sense of safety and self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) and therefore do not need to derive further security and self-esteem from inflated, unrealistically positive in-group or race-based perceptions (e.g. white supremacy) or from the derogation, discrimination against, and attacks on other groups and races. In addition, besides being associated with greater empathy and generosity, attachment security has been shown to foster a more open and tolerant attitude toward unfamiliarity and novelty (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), which may allow a secure person to explore potential commonalities and shared interests with people from less familiar (in their experience) groups or races; endorse a more cooperative and sympathetic attitude toward them; and work toward a more peaceful, more productive coexistence. We suspect that intergroup and inter-racial conflicts are partly fueled by attachment insecurities and rigid, defensively motivated attachment to a group or race. Insecure people may attempt to repair attachment-related wounds and replenish their impoverished self-esteem by glorifying and idealizing their own group or race and derogating and attacking other groups and races that threaten their fragile personal identity and value.

It is important to note that we are not implying that attachment insecurity is the single or even main contributor to prejudice, discrimination, and racism – or that every attachment-insecure person holds racist attitudes. There are, of course, other social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors involved, such as desire for power, in-group cultivation of prejudice against outgroups, feeling that one's own group or identity are threatened, that contribute to prejudice and racism even on the part of people who grow up in warm and supportive families. Moreover, there are many attachment-insecure people who fight against racism, although they may be intolerant of people and ideas that diverge from

their political ideology. We are proposing only that the sense of being loved and confident in others' benevolence can facilitate cognitive and experiential openness, heighten tolerance of unfamiliarity and novelty, and counter or soften hostile feelings and attitudes concerning people who do not belong to one's own social or racial group or who don't share one's religion faith, cultural values, or political ideology.

Unfortunately, beyond a single exception (Mallinckrodt et al., 2013, discussed below), no systematic research has been conducted directly testing the hypothesis that attachment security reduces expressions of racism. However, there is substantial evidence linking attachment security with less prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward other kinds of outgroups (e.g. immigrants, gay people, members of other religions). In three studies conducted with young adult Italians, for example, Boccato et al. (2015) found that self-reports of attachment security were associated with reduced prejudice against immigrants, and this link was mediated by both approach tendencies toward immigrants and openness to exploration. That is, as compared with insecure individuals, secure individuals were more accepting of immigrants because these individuals tended to remain open to unfamiliar people and were interested in creating connections with them. Boccato et al. (2015) also found that self-reports of attachment-related avoidance (one of the main forms of attachment insecurity) were associated with heightened prejudice toward immigrants. Similar findings have been reported in studies examining Dutch adults' attitudes toward immigrants' integration into the Netherlands (Hofstra et al., 2005; Van Oudenhoven & Hofstra, 2006); Israeli young adults' prejudice toward elderly people (Bodner & Cohen-Fridel, 2010) and people with a disability (Vilchinsky et al., 2010); and heterosexual people's prejudice toward gay individuals (e.g. Ciocca et al., 2015; Gormley & Lopez, 2010; Marsh & Brown, 2011).

In an attempt to overcome methodological weaknesses of correlational studies and to examine the direction of causality in the attachment-prejudice link, attachment researchers have implicitly or explicitly primed mental representations of attachment security (a procedure we call *security priming*; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) to examine how this momentarily security-enhancing manipulation affects prejudice and discrimination. In this procedure, participants are exposed to the name or a picture of their primary security provider or are instructed to visualize this person's face or to imagine a security-enhancing interaction with him or her. (See Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for a review of priming techniques.) Research shows that participants primed with security-related representations momentarily think, act, and feel in ways consistent with the behavior of a person with a secure attachment orientation, presumably due to the activation of positive working models of self and others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

In a series of five laboratory studies involving secular Israeli Jewish college students, we (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001) found that experimentally activating mental representations of attachment security eliminated negative responses to a variety of out-groups: Israeli Arabs, Ultra-orthodox Jews, Russian immigrants, and homosexuals. That is, as compared to neutral priming, security priming promoted more tolerant and accepting attitudes toward people who did not belong to the study participants' own social groups. Moreover, this security priming effect was found even among participants who scored relatively high on attachment anxiety and were found to exhibit prejudice in neutral priming conditions. Our findings also indicated that the positive effect of security priming occurred even when study participants were led to believe that their own group had been

insulted by an out-group member. That is, experimentally augmented security minimized the tendency to derogate out-group members even when derogation would have been an understandable reaction. In subsequent studies, security priming has been found to increase white American participants' empathy and positive attitudes toward racially different others and to reduce British undergraduates' prejudice and discriminatory behavior towards immigrants and Muslims (Boag & Carnelley, 2012, 2016; Mallinckrodt et al., 2013).

Building on these studies, we (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) examined whether security priming can reduce actual aggression between contending or warring social groups. Specifically, Israeli Jewish undergraduates participated in a study together with another Israeli Jew or an Israeli Arab (the same experimenter's confederate was presented with different ethnically characteristic names). They were then implicitly exposed to the name of their primary security provider, the name of a familiar person who was not viewed as an attachment figure, or the name of a mere acquaintance. Following the priming procedure, the experimenter informed participants that they would evaluate a food sample, and that they had been randomly selected to present the confederate with hot sauce to evaluate. They also learned that the confederate disliked spicy foods – a frequently used laboratory procedure for assessing interpersonal aggression. The dependent variable was the amount of hot sauce allotted to the confederate.

When participants had been primed with the name of someone who was not a security provider, they delivered more hot sauce to the Arab confederate than to the Jewish confederate, a case of intergroup aggression. But security priming eliminated this difference: Participants whose sense of security had been enhanced allotted equal (relatively low) amounts of hot sauce to both the Arab and the Jewish confederate. This finding fits with Saleem et al.'s (2015) discovery that security priming reduces American undergraduates' negative feelings and aggressive behavior toward Arabs. Thus, it seems that people who are experimentally induced to feel more secure are better able to tolerate intergroup differences and to refrain from engaging in intergroup aggression.

There is also evidence that security priming not only reduces prejudice and discriminatory behavior, but also leads people to be more aware of, and more ready to disclose, their negative attitudes and behaviors. Davis et al. (2016) primed Israeli Jewish participants with security-related or neutral stimuli and found that security priming led them to admit holding more negative attitudes and having committed more discriminatory behaviors toward Israeli Arabs. Davis et al. (2016) argued that felt security leads people to be less defensively guarded and self-defending, allowing them to disclose perhaps unwanted prejudicial inclinations. Another way of saying this is that security allows implicit racial or ethnic biases (Dovidio et al., 2002) to be examined explicitly, which is considered an important step in working toward the elimination of prejudice (Kendi, 2019).

On the whole, considering the findings we have reviewed, as meager as they are at present, we tentatively conclude that the sense of attachment security, either dispositional or contextually- or experimentally-activated, increases people's awareness of their own discriminatory attitudes and behaviors and reduces prejudice, hostility, and discrimination toward people different from themselves and their own social group. These findings provide an encouraging impetus for extending attachment research on prejudice and racism. We look forward to studies that can point to effective attachment-based

interventions that cultivate feelings of personal safety, a solid sense of personal worth, and increased openness to different others, and can then mitigate racial hatred, prejudice, and discrimination.

Attachment security buffers against adverse effects of being a target of discrimination

Theoretically, felt security should be able to buffer against some of the hurtful effects (including poorer mental health; e.g. Major et al., 2018; Sue, 2010) of being discriminated against, because secure individuals are not as easily threatened, and when they are threatened they have an array of effective coping strategies. They may also be better able to respond assertively to discrimination. Hundreds of cross-sectional and prospective longitudinal studies have shown that attachment security is associated with reduced subjective and physiological indicators of distress across a wide variety of natural and man-made stressors (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for a review). Overall, these studies support the hypothesis that secure individuals' optimistic appraisals of situations and reliance on constructive ways of coping mitigate distress in challenging circumstances. They also indicate that attachment anxiety or avoidance can interfere with effective ways of coping with life stressors, thereby increasing the risk for prolonged distress and serious mental health problems. Certainly, racially motivated micro-aggressions, overt discriminatory acts, racial violence, and systemic structural racism are among such chronic stressors for minority-group members.

The idea that attachment security can function as a coping resource for dealing with acts of discrimination and racism is not meant to imply that attachment-insecure victims can be blamed for their vulnerability ("If only people were secure they wouldn't get hurt so easily; it's their or their family's fault for not being secure.") or that security provides full protection against racism. In fact, harsh and consistent social rejection, not to mention consistent deprivation (structural racism) and violence, can overcome even secure individuals' ability to remain calm and optimistic. In these cases, the protective resources provided by the sense of security might not be sufficient to effectively cope with systemic attacks on minority-group members' survival. We need innovative research to reveal what security can and cannot buffer people from, and how to best use the personal strength contributed by security when coping with racism.

There is some evidence suggesting that attachment-related security can reduce the adverse emotional effects of exposure to prejudice and discrimination. For example, studies assessing LGBT adults' reactions to sexuality-related prejudice and discrimination have found that self-reports of attachment security are associated with lower levels of shame, guilt, distress, and internalized homonegativity, as well as with higher levels of acceptance of and esteem for their sexual orientation (e.g. Brown & Trevethan, 2010; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Rosario et al., 2014a, 2014b; Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019; Wang et al., 2010). In a more direct test of the stress-buffering hypothesis, Trub et al. (2017) found that self-reports of attachment security reduced LGBT young adults' internalization of negative attitudes toward homosexuality after being exposed to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards them. Moreover, security-enhancing interactions with loving and caring parents have been found to protect children of same sex couples from distress resulting from teasing or bullying related to their parents' sexual orientation (Bos &



Gartrell, 2010). In studying reactions of people living with HIV to acts of prejudice and discrimination, Fazeli et al. (2017) also found evidence for the buffering effect of attachment security. Specifically, daily acts of discrimination by others due to HIV led to increased feelings of internalized stigma and distress among people living with HIV mainly when they scored relatively high on attachment anxiety or avoidance, but not when they were relatively secure with respect to attachment.

Several studies have found that secure attachment to parents is associated with greater well-being and better college adjustment of African American or Latinx students attending predominantly white universities (e.g. Garriott et al., 2010; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Love, 2008; Love & Murdock, 2012). However, although they are encouraging, these studies cannot be considered valid tests of the buffering hypothesis, because they did not assess exposure to acts of racial prejudice and discrimination. This means that they could not examine either the effects of such exposure to psychological distress or the moderating role of attachment security.

In a correlational study of emotional reactions to racial prejudice and discrimination, Chen et al. (2002) asked students from East Asian countries who had been studying in predominantly white American universities to complete self-report scales measuring attachment orientations, experiences of racism, and psychological distress. Findings indicated that attachment security moderated the effects of experiences of racism on distress. Specifically, experiences of racism were associated with heightened distress when attachment security was relatively low, but not when security was relatively high. More secure students reported lower levels of psychological distress even when they reported being exposed to frequent expressions of racial prejudice and discrimination. However, because experiences of racism were assessed via self-report scales, it is possible that attachment-insecure students were more likely than secure students to interpret interaction partners' behaviors as discriminatory. In another study conducted with Chinese international students at predominantly white American universities, Wei et al. (2012) found that perceived racial discrimination was associated with heightened post-traumatic stress symptoms (over and above perceived general stress) only among students who lacked a sense of secure connection to their ethnic group, but not among those who felt connected, esteemed, and supported by their community.

Findings of these two correlational studies do not allow us to reach a strong conclusion about the extent to which felt security can mitigate the distress resulting from racial prejudice and discrimination. More research is needed that assesses people's attachment orientation or experimentally manipulates their momentary sense of attachment security, and then records their short- and long-term emotional reactions to episodes of racial prejudice and discrimination. Such studies would test for the hypothesized buffering effects of felt security. Such studies would also reveal specific cases in which security is effective in shielding people from discrimination and racism and cases in which prejudicial behavior overwhelms the ability of security to psychologically protect victims of discrimination.

Future studies should also examine whether prejudice, discrimination, and racism can interfere with the development of attachment security in minority-group children. It seems likely that minority-group parents who are chronically exposed to racist attacks and structural racism find it harder to attend to their children's needs and signals, keep their children's mental processes in mind (i.e. "mentalize"), and provide a reliable safe

haven and secure base, no matter how much they wish to do so. In this way, sadly, racism can interfere with the development of attachment security, which might otherwise protect minority-group children from some of the injuries of discrimination and hostility.

Concluding remarks

We hope this article and the studies we have reviewed will inspire attachment scholars, and other researchers who are interested in the study of racism, to systematically examine the hypothesized buffering role of attachment security. Findings from such studies could contribute to the development of attachment-based interventions aimed at increasing people's felt security and resilience, both when tempted to behave prejudicially and when becoming the victim of others' racist, discriminatory behavior. Relevant interventions could be designed for use by parents, teachers, counselors, therapists, the clergy, and the mass media. Ideas for possible interventions could be taken from various experimental and field interventions that have already proved useful in enhancing felt security. To date, the effects of these interventions on racial prejudice have barely been explored.

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