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ADULT ATTACHMENT STYLES, PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AND COPING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT
The relations between adult attachment styles, perceived social support and the use of various coping strategies was examined in a sample of young adults (N = 81). Participants completed measures of adult attachment style, perceived social support from friends and family, and a modified version of the Ways of Coping scale. In addition, participants rated the coping strategies they would most likely use in response to a series of hypothetical vignettes describing social- and achievement-related stressors. Results indicated that secure individuals perceived more available support from friends and family, and sought more social support in response to stress. Although preoccupied adults also sought social support in response to stress, they also tended to use escape/avoidance strategies. Dismissing and fearful individuals were much less likely to seek social support, and were more likely to distance themselves in some contexts. Finally, regression analyses indicated that the link between secure attachment and support-seeking as a coping strategy was mediated, in part, by the perception that support is available from friends and family.

KEY WORDS • adult attachment • coping styles • social support

A growing body of work suggests that attachment theory is a useful framework for understanding interpersonal functioning in adulthood and for predicting the nature and quality of adult close relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1993). Recent studies also suggest that individual differences

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in attachment style may have important implications for personal well-being and emotional adaptation (Carnelley et al., 1994; Cooper et al., in press; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer et al., 1993). Differences in working models of attachment, which are thought to underlie differences in attachment style, are believed to play a central role in personal well-being by guiding the way that individuals regulate their emotions and cope with stressful, threatening or challenging life experiences. Understanding the factors that predict the use of various coping strategies is important because such strategies may have important implications for psychological as well as physical well-being. In the present study, we examined the role of attachment style in the way that college students cope with various stressors that they experience, or may experience, in their daily lives.

Attachment theory is concerned with the nature of the relationship that develops between an infant and his or her primary caregiver, and the importance that this relationship has for a child’s developing personality and world view (e.g. Bowlby, 1969). According to attachment theory, through repeated experience with attachment figures, children develop mental representations, or internal working models, of themselves and others. These working models center on the availability and responsiveness of others, and the worthiness of the self. Children whose attachment figures are consistently responsive should come to believe that others are trustworthy and reliable, and that the self is valuable and worthy of love and support. In contrast, individuals whose attachment figures are either inconsistently responsive, or consistently unresponsive, may develop more pessimistic models of both themselves and others. Once developed, these models will be activated and used to guide behavior whenever the attachment system is activated. Thus, individual differences in attachment behavior, or attachment style, are thought to reflect underlying differences in working models (Main et al., 1985).

A central notion of attachment theory is that early working models of self and others will be carried forward into adulthood where they continue to guide personal and interpersonal functioning. Of course, working models of attachment will be shaped by experiences outside as well as within the family, and such models are open to continued elaboration, refinement and modification as individuals develop and mature. Nevertheless, models that are rooted in early childhood experiences are expected to remain influential (Collins & Read, 1994). Adults with secure attachment histories should be better equipped to manage stressful situations, relying both on their belief that they can control their environment and on their faith that others will be available to help if needed. In contrast, individuals who had inconsistent or rejecting attachment figures will be less equipped to cope with stressful situations because of, in part, their negative expectations about their ability to control their environment or about the dependability and trustworthiness of others. Thus, when faced with stressful or threatening situations, insecure adults may lack the personal and interpersonal resources needed to effectively regulate their
emotions and to cope successfully (Cooper et al., in press; Kobak & Screery, 1988).

Although the links between childhood and adult attachment styles are not yet clear, social and clinical psychologists have begun to examine attachment theory as a framework for understanding social and emotional adaptation in adulthood (e.g. Carnelley et al., 1994; Collins, 1996). To accomplish this, researchers have developed measures for identifying, in adulthood, the three attachment styles (secure, anxious/ambivalent, avoidant) first observed in children (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although there are a number of unresolved measurement issues, individual differences in adult attachment style have been shown to be associated with differences in personal and interpersonal functioning. For example, several recent studies indicate that adults with different attachment styles differ in the way that they cope with stressful events. In one study, Simpson et al. (1992) examined the relation between attachment style and support-seeking behavior in a laboratory study of dating couples. In this study, women were placed in an anxiety-provoking situation and were then unobtrusively observed to examine the extent to which they sought support from their male partners. Secure women (as measured by a self-report scale) tended to seek more support from their partners as their level of anxiety increased, whereas avoidant women sought less support as their anxiety increased. Simpson speculated that avoidant women may have desired support, but feared that their partners would be either unwilling or unable to provide them with the level of support they sought. Such reasoning has previously been used to explain similar approach-avoidance behavior exhibited by avoidant children toward their caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

The links between attachment style and a broader range of coping strategies were examined in a study by Mikulincer and colleagues (1993). With a sample of Israeli college students, self-reported attachment style was related to coping reactions and emotional adjustment in response to Iraqi Scud missile attacks during the Gulf War. Specifically, results indicated that secure individuals sought more social support than individuals classified as either ambivalent or avoidant. Anxious/ambivalent individuals were more likely to use emotion-focused coping, whereas avoidant individuals utilized more distancing strategies. This latter finding held true only for people living in the more dangerous areas of the city, who presumably experienced the highest levels of threat. Mikulincer & Florian (1995) replicated these findings in a sample of Israeli military recruits undergoing combat training. In this sample, however, both secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals reported more support-seeking as a coping strategy.

These studies suggest that attachment style may indeed predispose individuals toward particular ways of coping with stress. Based on their attachment experiences and current working models of attachment, people with different attachment styles appear to have different strategies for managing distress and maintaining feelings of security. One pattern
observed in all three studies is that secure adults are more willing to seek support in stressful situations. One reason they seek more support may be that they have more positive expectations that others would be both willing and able to assist, if called upon, during times of stress. Consistent with this idea, two studies have demonstrated links between attachment style and perceptions of social support. Using an adult attachment interview that assesses adults’ representations of their attachment experiences with their parents, Kobak & Sceery (1988) found that dismissing (avoidant) adults perceived that less social support was available from their family. In a more extensive study of social support, Bartels & Frazier (1994) used a self-report scale of adult attachment and found that individuals who were more secure (low in anxiety and high in comfort with depending on others) perceived more available support, received more support, and were more satisfied with the support they received. In contrast, those who were more anxious in their attachment relationships reported a greater need for support, but perceived that less social support was available to them. In addition, when they did receive support, anxious adults were less satisfied with it and reported a larger gap between what they said they needed and what they actually received. Taken together, these studies suggest that adults with different attachment styles do indeed differ in the support that they believe is available. This is consistent with Sarason et al.’s (1990) view that perceptions of social support reflect one’s general ‘sense of acceptance’ by others, which is thought to be closely tied to individual differences in attachment experience.

There is growing evidence that adults with different attachment styles differ in the way they manage and cope with stressful life experiences. The current research seeks to extend this work in several ways. First, we examined a more elaborate model of adult attachment styles. All of the prior work on attachment and coping has been based on a three-group typology of adult attachment, yet there is growing consensus that adult attachment may be best described by four rather than three styles. Based on Bowlby’s notion of working models, Bartholomew (1990) defines four attachment style prototypes by combining working models of self (either positive or negative) with working models of others (either positive or negative). Working models of self represent one’s internalized sense of self-worth and competence, and working models of others represent the degree to which one seeks intimacy with others and views relationships as rewarding and desirable.

The primary difference between the three- and four-category typologies is the differentiation of two types of avoidant adults. Dismissing avoidants have a positive model of self and a negative model of others; they avoid intimate contact with others because they value independence and self-reliance. In contrast, fearful avoidants have negative models of both self and others; they avoid intimate contact with others because they fear being rejected. The remaining two groups are similar to those defined by the original three-group typology. Secure individuals have positive models of both self and others; they perceive themselves as worthy and competent,
and are comfortable with intimate relationships. Finally, preoccupied individuals have a negative model of self but a positive model of others; as a result, their self-esteem is highly dependent on others’ approval, and they are quick to become intimately involved with others. The preoccupied style corresponds to the ‘anxious/ambivalent’ style in the three-category model of attachment. As Bartholomew (1990) notes, each of these styles represents a theoretical ideal, or prototype, that people might approximate to different degrees.

Thus, with respect to models of others, both secure and preoccupied individuals view close relationships as desirable and important in their lives, and they share a readiness to become intimately involved with others. Dismissing and fearful individuals, on the other hand, tend to view relationships as risky, and prefer to maintain distance from others. With respect to models of the self, secure and dismissing individuals tend to have high self-worth and feelings of self-efficacy, whereas preoccupied and fearful adults have more negative (more dependent or contingent) self-images and more negative expectations about their ability to control events. By distinguishing between dismissing and fearful avoidants, and by specifying the underlying dimensions that differentiate the styles, a four-group model of adult attachment may provide a more detailed picture of attachment-style differences in coping. In the current study, we examined how coping behavior is related to each of the four attachment prototypes as well as the underlying dimensions of self and others.

A second way in which this study extends past research is by examining attachment style differences in coping in response to common, everyday problems. In the three prior studies on attachment and coping, the stressful situations studied were fairly extreme and, in some cases, rather unusual. For example, Mikulincer et al. (1993) studied coping in response to missile attacks during the Gulf War. Although studying such extreme events is very interesting, and is a clear strength of these prior studies, such events are, nevertheless, likely to differ from the events that most people experience on a daily basis. Daily stressors, or daily hassles, differ both quantitatively (in terms of overall stress levels) and qualitatively (in terms of required coping responses) from the stressors studied in prior research. For example, many of the stressful events that people experience on a daily basis involve interpersonal disagreements and difficulties, yet none of the existing studies examined interpersonal stressors. Thus, it is important to explore whether the patterns observed in prior studies generalize to more common, daily stressors. In the current study, we directly examined this question by exploring attachment style differences in coping with two types of events: interpersonal stressors and achievement-related stressors.

Finally, a third way in which this study extends prior research is by exploring the links between perceptions of available support and support-seeking as a coping strategy. Prior studies have examined either coping or perceptions of social support, but not both. In the current study, we examined the links between support expectations and support-seeking. Specifically, we tested a mediational model whereby the relation between
attachment style and support-seeking was predicted to be mediated by the perception that support is, or is not, available.

The following specific hypotheses were proposed and tested:

1. Because secure individuals should have greater confidence in the availability and dependability of others, we predicted that they would perceive more social support from friends and family relative to the other three attachment groups. In addition, because preoccupied individuals are comfortable developing and maintaining intimate relationships, we expected that they would perceive more support than dismissing and fearful adults (but still less than secure individuals).

2. We reasoned that secure and preoccupied individuals (who are comfortable with close relationships) should view social interaction as beneficial in their attempt to cope with stress, and thus would cope in a manner that involved social interaction. In contrast, we expected that dismissing and fearful individuals (who are less comfortable with social interaction) should see less value in interacting with others as a means of alleviating their stress and would therefore avoid social interaction. Thus, we predicted that secure and preoccupied individuals would be more likely than dismissing and fearful individuals to seek social support, and also more likely to confront and deal directly with the person responsible for (or associated with) the stressor.

3. Because dismissing and fearful individuals should be less willing to use interpersonal methods of coping, we expected that they would be more willing to utilize non-interpersonal methods of coping. In addition, because they have difficulty acknowledging distress, we reasoned that they would use coping strategies that allowed them to escape or avoid dealing directly with the stressful situation. Specifically, we predicted that dismissing and fearful individuals would be more likely than secure and preoccupied individuals to psychologically distance themselves from the stressor (e.g. by carrying on as if nothing had happened), and we also expected that they would be more likely than secure individuals to try to escape or avoid the stressor (e.g. by eating, drinking alcohol, etc.).

Two additional predictions were made with regard to escape/avoidance coping. First, because fearful individuals are low in self-confidence and self-efficacy, they should be most likely to escape the stressful situation. Thus, we predicted that fearful avoidants would be more likely than dismissing avoidants to use this strategy. Second, because preoccupied individuals also have negative self-images, are less able to manage their emotions, and feel less confident about their ability to control events in their lives, we expected that they would be more likely than secure individuals to use escape-avoidance strategies.

4. In addition to our primary hypotheses, two additional questions were explored. First, we explored whether the links between attachment style and coping strategies might differ in response to social and achievement-related stressors. Although we did not have a detailed set of hypotheses, we speculated that because social stressors may be
more likely to activate the attachment system and may be more threatening to individuals with an insecure attachment style, attachment style differences in coping may be more pronounced in the social domain. For instance, we speculated that dismissing and fearful adults may be most likely to psychologically distance themselves from social stressors, but not necessarily from achievement stressors.

5. Finally, we reasoned that there would be a positive relation between perceptions of available support and the use of support-seeking as a coping strategy. In addition, we speculated that the relation between attachment styles and support-seeking behavior would be mediated by the perception that support is available from family and friends. Specifically, we predicted that secure adults may seek more social support than insecure adults, in part, because they are more confident that others will be available to help them when they need it.

Method

Undergraduate psychology students were invited to participate in a study of stress and coping. Students completed a series of background measures that included measures of attachment style and perceived social support from friends and family. Next, they completed a coping scale that asked them to report how they coped with their most stressful life experience during the past month. Finally, in order to examine achievement and interpersonal stressors and to control for the type of stressful event, respondents were presented with a series of six hypothetical vignettes. They were asked to imagine what they would be thinking and feeling if the event happened to them, and how they would respond. They then completed a set of coping measures in response to the vignettes.

Participants were 40 male and 41 female introductory psychology students who received credit in partial fulfillment of course requirements. To increase the likelihood that all attachment styles would be adequately represented in our sample, participants were invited to participate on the basis of a brief, preliminary measure of attachment style that was completed during a mass-testing session at the beginning of the semester. (This measure was used solely for the purpose of seeking adequate representation across attachment groups. We used more elaborated measures of attachment style — which participants completed during the study session — for hypothesis testing.)

Participants completed two measures of attachment style. First, they were presented with Bartholomew’s (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) four attachment paragraphs (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, fearful), and were asked to rate the extent to which each one described their feelings about close relationships (on a 7-point Likert scale). Second, participants completed Bartholomew’s Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; described in Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). This scale contains 30 items, some of which were derived from Bartholomew & Horowitz’s four attachment prototypes, and some of which were adapted from Collins & Read’s (1990) Adult Attachment Scale. Participants were asked to indicate, on a 5-point Likert scale, the extent to which each statement represented their feelings about close personal relationships. Following procedures outlined by Griffin & Bartholomew (1994), we computed four attachment-style subscales by averaging the items.
representing each of the four attachment prototypes. Although Griffin &
Bartholomew use only 18 of the scale items, we supplemented the subscales
with 11 additional items from the RSQ in order to improve their reliability and
maximize our use of the available data. Items were selected if they were (i)
consistent with theoretical descriptions of the attachment prototypes (i.e. they
were ‘face valid’), and (ii) associated with the four styles (as measured by the
paragraphs) in theoretically expected ways. Cronbach’s alpha was .37 for
secure (8 items), .75 for fearful (7 items), .72 for preoccupied (7 items), and .62
for dismissing (7 items). These low reliabilities are consistent with those
reported by Griffin & Bartholomew (1994), and they simply reflect the
underlying nature of the attachment prototypes, which are based on two
relatively orthogonal dimensions (models of self and other). See Griffin &
Bartholomew (1994) for further discussion of these measurement issues.

As would be expected, the paragraph ratings were highly correlated with the
attachment-style subscales. Correlations between corresponding attachment
styles ranged from .54 to .72, and correlations between non-correspondent
styles ranged from -.14 to -.49. These measures were then used to compute
different types of attachment style variables that were used in the
analyses.

First, in order to obtain the most sensitive and reliable assessment of
attachment style, we formed four continuous indexes of the attachment styles
by standardizing and averaging each paragraph rating and its corresponding
attachment-style subscale from the RSQ. Thus, each subject received a score
for each attachment-style. t-Tests that compared men and women on each of
the four indexes indicated no significant sex differences, although men scored
somewhat higher on the dismissing and preoccupied indexes (ps < .10).

Second, in order to examine mean differences for each of the attachment
styles, we created a categorical measure of attachment by assigning people to
the style in which they scored the highest, based on the four continuous indexes
described above. Using this procedure, 27 percent of the sample was categor-
ized as secure (6 men, 16 women), 24 percent as preoccupied (9 men, 9
women), 22 percent as fearful (11 men, 8 women), and 27 percent as dismissing
(14 men, 8 women). There was a marginally significant relation between sex
and attachment style [χ² (3, N = 81) = 6.64, p < .10]. Women were more likely
than men to be secure, whereas men were somewhat more likely to be
dismissing.

Finally, in order to examine the theoretical dimensions underlying the
attachment styles, the four continuous attachment-style indexes were used to
form two additional indexes: model of self and model of others. Based on
procedures suggested by Bartholomew (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991;
Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), the model of self index was computed as
follows: secure + dismissing − fearful − preoccupied. The model of others
index was computed as follows: secure + preoccupied − dismissing − fearful.
As expected, the correlation between the two indexes was low (r = .06, NS).

Perceived available support was assessed with the Perceived Social Support
scale (PSS; Procidano & Heller, 1983). The PSS contains two subscales, one for
support from friends (PSS-Fr) and one for family (PSS-Fa). Each subscale
contains 20 items. Sample items include: ‘My friends (family) give me the
moral support I need’ and ‘I rely on my friends (family) for emotional support’.
Participants were asked to indicate, on a 5-point Likert scale, the extent to which they agreed with each statement. Cronbach’s alpha was .89 for the support from friends index and .96 for support from family. The correlation between support from friends and family was $r = .28, p < .05$.

A modified version of the revised Ways of Coping (WOC) scale (Folkman et al., 1986) was used to assess methods of coping with a recent stressor. Participants were asked to recall the most stressful event that they had experienced during the past month, and then provide a brief (one or two sentence) written description of this event. Next, they were asked to rate how stressful the event was on a scale from 1 (not at all stressful) to 100 (extremely stressful). Finally, they were asked to indicate, on a 4-point Likert scale, the extent to which they used certain specific coping strategies in dealing with the stressful event. Only four subscales (26 items) of interest were included in this study: (i) Seeking social support, 6 items (‘Talked to someone about how I was feeling’), (ii) Confrontive coping, 6 items (‘I expressed anger to the person(s) who caused the problem’), (iii) Distancing, 6 items (‘Didn’t let it get to me; refused to think about it too much’) and (iv) Escape-Avoidance, 8 items (‘ Tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs or medication, and so forth’). Cronbach’s alphas for the subscales were somewhat low, but acceptable (.73 for seeking support, .56 for confrontive coping, .58 for distancing and .55 for escape-avoidance). Correlations among the four coping indexes ranged from .11 to .36.

All participants were asked to read descriptions of, and imagine being involved in, six separate hypothetical vignettes of stressful situations. Three of the vignettes were designed to be social stressors and three represented achievement-related stressors. All of the vignettes involved situations that were commonly faced by college students. For example, participants were asked to imagine that they scored poorly on a midterm exam or that their roommate behaved in an inconsiderate manner. After reading each scenario, participants were asked to rate how stressful they thought this event would be on a scale from 1 (‘not at all stressful’) to 7 (‘extremely stressful’). Next, they were asked to indicate, on a 7-point Likert scale, the likelihood of their using each of several different coping strategies in dealing with the event. These coping strategies were drawn from those included in the WOC scale, but were modified to be specific to each hypothetical situation. Every effort was made to develop three items for each of the four subtypes mentioned earlier; however, this was not always possible given the particular stressor. Thus, the number of items ranged from 8 to 12. Descriptions of the vignettes can be found in the Appendix.

Scores across the six vignettes were averaged to provide overall indexes of the four coping strategies. Cronbach’s alpha was .93 for seeking support, .77 for confrontive coping, .83 for distancing and .81 for escape-avoidance. Correlations among the four indexes ranged from −.05 to .52.

As expected, participants tended to report similar coping styles across the WOC and the vignettes in our composite index of coping. Correlations between correspondent coping styles ranged from .26 (for confrontive coping) to .54 (for social support seeking), with an average correlation of .44. Correlations between non-correspondent styles ranged from −.16 to .29, with an average correlation of .07. Because we were interested in obtaining the most reliable assessment of coping styles, and because we expected the links between attachment and coping to be similar across the two coping assess-
ments, we computed a combined set of coping indexes by standardizing and averaging the correspondent scales from the WOC and the vignettes. Correlations among the four composites indicated that social support-seeking and confrontive coping were moderately correlated ($r = .48$, $p < .001$), but the remaining coping indexes were not associated with each other ($r_s$ ranged from $-.04$ to $.17$).

Results

Hypothesis testing was conducted in several stages. First, for each set of outcomes (perceived social support and coping) we began by computing correlations between the four continuous attachment-style indexes and the dependent measures. These analyses provided the most sensitive tests of our hypotheses by allowing us to examine the degree to which each of the prototypes was associated with each of the outcomes. Next, we conducted multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) using our categorical attachment-style variable as our grouping variable. The purpose of these analyses was simply to provide further descriptive information regarding the specific attachment group differences implied by the correlational findings. Following this, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses using models of self and others as our predictor variables. These analyses provided insight into the particular dimension of attachment style that was most strongly associated with each outcome. Finally, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses to examine the mediational hypotheses concerning the links between attachment style, perceived available support and support-seeking. (Because there were some non-significant sex differences on some of the attachment measures, and because sex was significantly correlated with some of the dependent variables, we included sex as a control variable in our analyses whenever appropriate.)

Our first set of hypotheses concerned the links between attachment style and perceptions of social support. We began by computing partial correlations (controlling for sex) between the four continuous attachment-style indexes and perceived social support from friends and family. As shown in the upper portion of Table 1, as predicted, individuals with a more secure attachment style perceived greater social support from friends ($r = .46$, $p < .001$) and from family ($r = .24$, $p < .05$), whereas those with a more fearful attachment style perceived less available support from friends ($r = -.44$, $p < .001$). Contrary to our expectations, neither the preoccupied nor dismissing attachment indexes were significantly associated with perceptions of social support.

In our next analysis, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using our categorical measure of attachment style as our grouping variable and our two social support outcomes as our dependent variables. The overall MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate effect of attachment style, $F(6,152) = 2.39$, $p < .05$. Group means and univariate $F$-tests are presented in the upper portion of Table 2. Secure individuals reported significantly more social support from their friends than did fearful individuals. In addition, although the $F$ statistic was only marginally significant, secure individuals also tended to report more social support from their family than did preoccupied individuals.

In our next set of analyses, we examined whether the relations between attachment style and perceived social support could be accounted for primarily by models of self, models of other, or the interaction of the two. To address this
TABLE 1
Partial correlations (controlling for sex) between continuous attachment-style indexes, social support and coping strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment style indexes</th>
<th>Secure</th>
<th>Preocc.</th>
<th>Dismiss.</th>
<th>Fearful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived social support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.44***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite coping indexes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support-seeking</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontive coping</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.20†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-avoidance</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>-.19†</td>
<td>.19†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( N = 81 \). * Coping indexes based on combined vignette and WOC-R data.
† \( p < .10 \); * \( p < .05 \); ** \( p < .01 \); *** \( p < .001 \).

issue, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses using the model of self and model of other indexes to predict perceptions of social support. Sex was used as a control variable in these analyses. For all analyses, sex was entered in step 1, models of self and other were entered in step 2, and the interaction of self-by-other (the multiplicative term) was entered in step 3. Where appropriate, we also computed the squared, semi-partial correlations (\( sr^2 \)) to report the proportion of variance in the dependent variables uniquely accounted for by each predictor variable.

TABLE 2
Attachment style differences in perceived social support and coping styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment style</th>
<th>Secure ( (n = 22) )</th>
<th>Preocc, ( (n = 18) )</th>
<th>Dismiss, ( (n = 22) )</th>
<th>Fearful ( (n = 19) )</th>
<th>( F(3,77) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived social support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>4.18 a</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.60 b</td>
<td>3.61*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.48)</td>
<td>(0.50)</td>
<td>(0.54)</td>
<td>(0.66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>4.02 a</td>
<td>3.35 b</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.15†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(0.98)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite coping indexes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support-seeking</td>
<td>.45 a</td>
<td>.18 a c</td>
<td>-.38 b</td>
<td>-.27 b c</td>
<td>4.71**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontive coping</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
<td>(0.85)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.95)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-avoidance</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.40 a</td>
<td>-.32 b</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2.48†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
<td>(0.97)</td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( N = 81 \). Standard deviations are in parentheses. * Coping indexes based on combined vignette and WOC-R data. Within rows, means that do not share a superscript \( (a, b, c) \) differ at \( p < .05 \).
† \( p < .10 \); * \( p < .05 \); ** \( p < .01 \); *** \( p < .001 \).
As shown in the upper portion of Table 3, perceptions of social support from friends was significantly associated with the attachment dimensions. As predicted, those with a more positive model of self ($\beta = .32, sr^2 = .10$) and more positive model of others ($\beta = .37, sr^2 = .14$) reported greater social support from friends. Together, these models uniquely accounted for 25 percent of the variance in ratings of support from friends. The self-by-other interaction did not significantly add to the equation, although there was a significant gender effect ($sr^2 = .03$), with women reporting higher levels of support from friends.

With regard to family support, those with a more positive model of self reported greater support from their family ($\beta = .28, sr^2 = .08$). Model of others and subject gender did not significantly predict any additional variance in ratings of family support. However, the self-by-other interaction was marginally significant, explaining an additional 4 percent of the variance. To examine this interaction, we regressed family support on model of self at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the model of others (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). This analysis indicated that, for those with a negative model of others (e.g., fearful and dismissing), there was no significant relation between model of self and family support ($\beta = .01$). However, for those with a positive model of others (e.g., secure and preoccupied), there was a strong positive relation between model of self and family support ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). This latter finding is consistent with the mean differences reported in Table 2, which indicated that the secure group tended to report more support from family than did the preoccupied group.

Our next analysis examined attachment style differences in patterns of coping. We began by computing partial correlations (controlling for sex) between our continuous attachment indexes and our four composite coping indexes. As illustrated in the lower portion of Table 1, as predicted, individuals with a more secure attachment style were more likely to seek social support ($r = .33, p < .01$) in response to stress. In addition, those who were more preoccupied were more likely to seek support ($r = .33, p < .01$), to use confrontive coping ($r = .22, p < .05$) and to use escape-avoidance strategies ($r = .33, p < .01$). Finally, there were several trends that were consistent with our hypotheses: individuals with a more fearful style were somewhat more likely to use distancing ($r = .20, p < .10$) and escape-avoidance ($r = .19, p < .10$) tactics. However, there was one trend that was inconsistent with our expectations: dismissing individuals were somewhat less likely to use escape-avoidance strategies ($r = -.19, p < .10$).

Next, to explore specific attachment group differences, we conducted a MANOVA using our categorical attachment style as our grouping variable and our four coping indexes as our dependent variables. A significant multivariate effect of attachment style was obtained, $F (12,196) = 2.02, p < .05$. Group means and univariate $F$-tests are reported in the lower portion of Table 2. As expected, the pattern of results was similar to that obtained in the correlational analyses, but was somewhat weaker because the categorical measure of attachment-style is less sensitive than the continuous measure. As predicted, dismissing individuals reported less social support seeking than did secure and preoccupied individuals. Fearful individuals also reported less support-seeking than secure adults, but they did not differ significantly from preoccupied adults. In addition, although the $F$ statistic was only marginally significant, preoccupied individuals tended to report more escape-avoidance coping than did dismissing individuals.
Next, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses on our coping measures using the same general procedure described earlier. The results of this analysis are shown in the lower portion of Table 3. First, the social support-seeking index was significantly predicted by the model of others, but not by the models of self. As expected, those with a more positive model of others were more likely to seek support in response to stress ($\beta = .36, sr^2 = .13$). It is interesting to note that there was also a significant sex difference, with women being much more likely to seek social support ($sr^2 = .15$).

Confrontive coping was also associated only with models of others. As expected, those with a more positive model of others were more likely to use confrontive coping ($\beta = .23, sr^2 = .05$). None of the other predictors accounted for any additional variance. Next, the distancing index was not significantly predicted by the attachment models or by subject sex. Finally, escape-avoidance coping was primarily a function of models of self. As expected, those with a more negative model of self were more likely to use escape-avoidance coping ($\beta = -.34, sr^2 = .12$). Neither sex, model of other, nor the self-by-other interaction predicted any additional variance.

In our next analysis we explored whether the relations between attachment and coping might differ across social and achievement domains. To examine this question, we computed correlations between the continuous attachment-style indexes and coping patterns separately for social and achievement stressors. Where appropriate, we also computed $t$-tests for dependent correlations (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) to test the difference between correlations in the two domains. However, because our sample size was too small to provide powerful tests of these differences, we focused primarily on the general pattern of differences.

Results indicated that the relation between secure attachment and support-seeking was consistent across social ($r = .34, p < .01$) and achievement ($r = .31, p < .01$) domains. In addition, the positive relation between preoccupied attachment and support-seeking was similar across social and achievement domains ($r = .20, p < .10$ and $r = .19, p < .10$), as was the relation between preoccupied attachment and escape-avoidance ($r = .26, p < .05$ and $r = .20, p < .10$). However, the correlation between preoccupied attachment and confrontive coping tended to be stronger in the social ($r = .31, p < .01$) than in the achievement ($r = .08, NS$) domain, $t (78) = 1.87, p < .10$.

The links between dismissing attachment and the various coping patterns also tended to be somewhat inconsistent across the two domains. Specifically, the correlation between dismissing attachment and confrontive coping tended to be stronger in the social ($r = -.23, p < .05$) than in the achievement ($r = .01, NS$) domain, $t (78) = 1.92, p < .10$. In addition, the correlation between dismissing attachment and distancing was somewhat more pronounced in the social ($r = .22, p < .05$) than in the achievement ($r = .05, NS$) domain, although the difference between these correlations did not approach significance ($p > .10$).

In our final set of analyses, we wanted to explore the relations between attachment style, perceived available support and support-seeking. As indicated in the previous analyses, both secure and preoccupied individuals sought more social support in response to stress. Based on the results we obtained concerning perceptions of social support, and on theoretical differences between these two styles, we reasoned that secure individuals may seek more social support partly because they perceive that more support is available to
### TABLE 3
Hierarchical regression analyses predicting social support and patterns of coping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome variable</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>(\Delta R^2)</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived social support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite coping indexes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support-seeking</td>
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<td>.18***</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontive coping</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-avoidance</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Unless otherwise labeled, values are standardized regression coefficients (betas). Betas are shown only for the step at which they entered the regression equation. S \(\times\) O = self \(\times\) other interaction. Sex is coded as 1 = male, 2 = female.

† \(p < .10\); * \(p < .05\); ** \(p < .01\); *** \(p < .001\).
them. However, we did not expect that support availability would explain the tendency of preoccupied individuals to seek social support. To explore these ideas, we conducted a series of regression analyses following procedures outlined by Baron & Kenny (1986). For these analyses we used only the secure and preoccupied attachment indexes because the other indexes were not significantly correlated with seeking support and were therefore not relevant to this mediational analysis (refer to Table 1).

In the first step of our analysis, we regressed the composite support-seeking index (our dependent variable) on the two attachment-style indexes (our independent variables). Each of the predictors was strongly associated with support-seeking, and together they accounted for 23 percent of the variance in support-seeking, $F(2,78) = 11.92, p < .001$. The regression coefficients from this analysis are shown, in parentheses, in Figure 1.

Next, we regressed the support-seeking index (our dependent variable) on perceived available support from friends and family (our mediator variables), $F(2,78) = 21.37, p < .001, R^2 = .35$. Perceived support from friends was strongly associated with support-seeking ($\beta = .54, p < .001$), but perceived support from family was only weakly related ($\beta = .15, \text{NS}$).

In the third step of our analysis, we regressed perceived support from friends (our first mediator variable) on the secure and preoccupied indexes (our independent variables), $F(2,78) = 12.33, p < .001, R^2 = .24$. As shown in Figure 1, the secure index was strongly associated with support from friends, but the preoccupied index was not. Next, we regressed perceived support from family (our second mediator variable) on the secure and preoccupied indexes (our independent variables), $F(2,78) = 2.81, p < .10, R^2 = .07$. As shown in Figure 1, the secure index was marginally associated with support from family, but the preoccupied index was unrelated to this mediator.

Finally, we regressed support-seeking (our dependent variable) on both sets of predictors simultaneously. If, as expected, perceived social support mediates the link between security and support-seeking, we would expect that the regression coefficient observed at step 1 would be greatly reduced or even eliminated, once perceived support was added to the model (at step 4).

**FIGURE 1**

Summary of mediational analyses. Path values are standardized regression coefficients (betas). Values shown in parentheses are the direct effects of the attachment variables before the mediators were added to the model. $N = 81$. $+p < .10; \ast p < .05; \ast\ast p < .01; \ast\ast\ast p < .001$. 

[Diagram showing regression paths and coefficients with $R^2 = .46$**].

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However, we expected the relation between preoccupation and support-seeking to remain roughly the same. The results from this analysis were consistent with our expectations. As shown in Figure 1, the regression coefficient for the secure index decreased from .46 to .19, which reduced the variance accounted for from 19 percent to 3 percent. In contrast, the regression coefficient for the preoccupied index remained virtually the same (.33 to .31; 10 percent versus 9 percent of the variance accounted for). Together, these four variables accounted for 35 percent of the variance in support-seeking, $F(4,76) = 15.53, p < .001$.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine attachment style differences in perceptions of social support and patterns of coping with stress. We extended past research by using a four-group model of attachment, by differentiating between social and achievement-related stressors, and by studying the links between perceptions of available support and social support-seeking as a coping strategy. Taken together, our findings provide evidence that individual differences in attachment style are indeed related to social support and to patterns of coping. We found good support for some of our hypotheses and partial support for others. The strongest and most consistent set of findings was obtained on the social support outcomes.

First, as predicted, secure attachment was associated with higher levels of social support from both friends and family. In addition, fearful attachment was associated with less perceived support from friends, whereas preoccupied attachment tended to be linked to less support from family. Although we expected that dismissing attachment would also be associated with low levels of support, our results did not support this prediction. Finally, the regression analyses indicated that friend support was associated both with the degree to which a person was comfortable with relationships (models of other) and with the degree to which a person felt confident about themselves (model of self). Specifically, individuals who had more positive models of self and others were more confident that their friends would be available when needed. In contrast, family support was associated only with models of self. Specifically, individuals who had more positive models of self had more favorable expectations about support from their family.

Second, we hypothesized that secure and preoccupied individuals (who are comfortable with relationships) would be more likely than dismissing and avoidant individuals (who avoid relationships) to use coping strategies that involved social interaction. Specifically, we predicted that secure and preoccupied adults would seek more social support and would use confrontive coping strategies. Results provided strong support for the support-seeking hypothesis, and partial support for confrontive coping. With regard to support-seeking, secure and preoccupied individuals were more likely than dismissing and fearful individuals to seek social support in response to
both social and achievement-related stressors. As expected, regression analyses indicated that support-seeking was primarily a function of having a positive model of others. Although the current study does not allow us to draw conclusions about specific support-seeking dynamics, it is likely that individuals who are comfortable with close relationships may find it easier to discuss their feelings with others and to ask for assistance and support when needed. They may also have positive expectations that such support will be comforting and helpful in alleviating their distress. In contrast, individuals with a negative model of others may be uncomfortable disclosing their feelings, may find it difficult to ask for support, or may believe that support will be ineffective in alleviating their distress. Fearful individuals may also worry that their support-seeking attempts will be rejected or ignored. Clearly, additional research is needed to explore the underlying expectations and goals that promote or discourage the use of support-seeking as a coping strategy.

With regard to confrontive coping, preoccupied individuals were more likely to use this tactic, and dismissing individuals less likely to use this tactic, but only in the social domain. Because confrontive coping involves openly discussing one’s problems, we had expected that secure individuals would be more willing to use this strategy. However, results did not support this prediction. One explanation for this may lie in our coping measure. A review of our confrontive coping items revealed that many of them involved disclosing anger and emotional distress. The items also tended to imply that someone else (other than oneself) was responsible for the stressful event. Thus, our confrontive coping items appear to reflect a willingness to express negative emotion and a tendency to blame others for stressful events, both of which may be more characteristic of preoccupied than secure individuals (Collins, 1996). Another explanation may lie in the events themselves. It is possible that the social stressors we used for our hypothetical events (e.g. being left by a friend at a party, learning that your romantic partner wants to date other people) were simply more stressful for preoccupied individuals. Consistent with this idea, we found that individuals who were more preoccupied (on our continuous index) rated the hypothetical social events as much more stressful (r = .40, p < .01, controlling for sex). Because of their increased distress, preoccupied individuals may have felt a greater need to express their negative emotions, and a stronger desire to change others’ behavior. Thus, future research may need to differentiate constructive and destructive methods of social confrontation, and to identify contexts in which confrontation may be more or less adaptive. It would also be useful to develop measures of confrontive coping that are uncontaminated by causal or responsibility attributions.

Our third hypothesis predicted that avoidant individuals (both dismissing and fearful) would be more likely to psychologically distance themselves from the stressor. Our results provided little support for this hypothesis. The only observable trend was that individuals who were more dismissing reported more distancing in response to social stressors. Nevertheless, although there was not strong evidence of psychological distancing,
there was evidence of *interpersonal* distancing in that dismissing and fearful individuals were much less likely to seek social support in both social and achievement domains. In addition, in response to social stressors, dismissing attachment was associated with lower levels of confrontive coping, a strategy that involves directly discussing a problem with another person. Thus, distancing may need to be conceptualized in broader terms to include the multiple ways that individuals may avoid directly addressing or managing a problem.

We also predicted that insecure adults would be more likely than secure adults to use escape-avoidance coping. Again, results provided partial support for this hypothesis. Individuals who were more preoccupied were more likely to report escape-avoidance coping in both domains, and there was a trend that indicated that fearful individuals were more likely to do so as well. However, contrary to our expectations, there was also a trend that indicated that dismissing individuals were somewhat *less* likely to use escape-avoidance. One reason for this may be that dismissing adults possess relatively positive self-images. Indeed, the regression analysis indicated that the use of escape-avoidance strategies was primarily a function of negative models of self. Although we can only speculate about the motivations underlying escape-avoidance coping, it seems likely that individuals who lack a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy may have negative expectations about their ability to control stressful events. As a result, they may attempt to alleviate their distress through the use of alcohol, drugs and other escape strategies. Consistent with our findings, Brennan & Shaver (1995) found that preoccupied and avoidant adults were more likely to use alcohol as a means of coping with negative emotion (also see Cooper et al., in press). However, that study did not distinguish between fearful and dismissing avoidants.

In summary, the results of our study suggest a distinct pattern of coping associated with each attachment style. Secure adults were more likely to seek social support in response to both social and achievement stressors. Preoccupied adults tended to seek social support and to use escape-avoidance strategies in both domains, but they were more likely to use confrontive coping only in the social domain. Dismissing individuals tended *not* to seek social support or to use escape-avoidance strategies. However, they were also less likely to use confrontive coping and somewhat more likely to distance, but only in the social domain. Finally, fearful individuals were less likely to seek social support. Two additional issues are worth noting. First, patterns of coping were somewhat different in response to social and achievement-related events, which highlights the importance of examining coping in multiple domains. Second, we found evidence that dismissing and fearful avoidants had somewhat different coping patterns, which indicates the value of using a four-group model of adult attachment.

The final issue we addressed concerned the links between support-seeking and perceptions of available support. We speculated that one reason why secure adults are more inclined to seek social support is, in
part, because they perceive that such support is available. However, we did not expect that preoccupied individuals’ tendency to seek support would be based on this same expectation. Based on theoretical expectations and previous research, we reasoned that preoccupied adults would desire support but would not necessarily believe that it is consistently available to them. Results from our mediational analysis provided strong support for our hypothesis. Social support from friends and family explained most of the variance linking secure attachment to social support-seeking. However, as expected, the link between preoccupation and support-seeking was not explained by perceived available support from either friends or family. Thus, although both secure and preoccupied individuals seek support, the mechanisms underlying their behavior may be quite different.

It is also noteworthy that perceived support from friends was a stronger mediator than perceived support from family. This is not surprising given that our sample was composed primarily of undergraduate freshman and sophomores. We would expect that students, many of whom live away from home, would rely heavily upon friendship networks for support. Indeed, as Hazan & Zeifman (1994) have shown, individuals in this age group are much more likely to direct their attachment behaviors (such as seeking a safe haven for comfort) toward peers rather than toward parents. This may be especially true in response to the daily social and achievement stressors that most college students face, and which were utilized in this study. However, it is likely that social support from family may be important for more serious events, such as serious illness or loss. Thus, additional work is needed to examine the links between attachment, social support and coping, using a broader range of stressful life experiences.

It is useful to consider how the current set of findings compares with prior studies of attachment and coping. Recall that, using a three-group typology of attachment, Simpson et al. (1992) and Mikulincer and colleagues (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Mikulincer et al., 1993) found that, compared with avoidant individuals, secure individuals sought more social support in response to stress. Consistent with this finding, secure adults in our sample reported more support-seeking than both dismissing and fearful avoidants. Like Mikulincer & Florian (1995), we also found evidence of high support-seeking by preoccupied adults. Our findings for other coping strategies were also consistent with previous research (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Mikulincer et al., 1993). Specifically, we found evidence of emotion-focused coping by preoccupied individuals (through escape-avoidance coping), and evidence of distancing by dismissing and fearful avoidants (although prior studies did not differentiate the two types of avoidants). The consistency of our findings with prior research suggests that these patterns of coping are reliable, and at least somewhat generalizable across samples and coping contexts.

One interesting finding obtained by Simpson et al. (1992) was that attachment style differences in support-seeking were more pronounced under high stress conditions. Specifically, as their anxiety increased, secure women sought more support whereas avoidant women sought less support.
Although Simpson’s study was based on observational data, we ran exploratory analyses to see if this effect would replicate with our self-report data. In particular, we investigated whether dismissing and fearful adults’ tendency to avoid social support would be more pronounced under high stress conditions. Likewise, we expected that the tendency of secure individuals to seek support would be stronger under conditions of high stress. To test these ideas, we began by dichotomizing the sample based on respondents’ perceptions of the stressfulness of the events (we did this separately for the self-reported event and for the hypothetical events). We then computed partial correlations (controlling for sex) between support-seeking and each of the attachment style indexes. Our results were consistent with previous findings, but only on the hypothetical social stressors. Specifically, the dismissing and fearful attachment indexes were not related to support-seeking under low stress conditions \((r = .00 \text{ and } -0.05, \text{ respectively})\), but they were negatively related under high stress conditions \((r = -0.32 \text{ and } -0.36, \text{ respectively, } ps < .05)\). Likewise, secure attachment was not related to support-seeking under low stress conditions \((r = -0.04)\), but was strongly related under high stress conditions \((r = .58, p < .001)\). Thus, consistent with Simpson’s study, our findings are compatible with the idea that stress may increase support-seeking among secure adults, but decrease it among avoidant adults. Interestingly, the correlation between the preoccupied attachment index and support-seeking did not differ under conditions of low and high stress \((r = .29 \text{ for low and high stress conditions})\). This suggests that preoccupied adults may be less discriminating in their need for support. However, we want to emphasize that these analyses were exploratory and these results must be replicated with larger samples before we draw any firm conclusions about the interaction of attachment style with levels of stress. Nevertheless, these results are consistent with previous studies and, at a minimum, suggest that the intensity of the stressor may be an important factor to consider in future research.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that people with different attachment styles have distinct patterns of coping with stress. We must be careful, however, not to draw exaggerated conclusions from these data. Most individuals have a variety of coping strategies available to them, and the particular strategy they choose will depend, in part, on the specific demands of the stressor and the context in which it takes place. Indeed, in this sample, most respondents reported using a number of different coping behaviors in response to each stressful situation. Nevertheless, these findings do suggest that people with different attachment styles will be predisposed to cope in particular ways. Over time, these differences may have important implications for long-term adjustment to stressful life experiences, and may place some individuals at risk for poor adaptational outcomes (e.g. depression, decreased life satisfaction, poor interpersonal functioning). For example, to the extent that escape-avoidance coping (associated with preoccupied and fearful attachment) involves poor health behaviors (such as drinking, over-eating or indiscriminate sexual behavior),
then the use of this strategy is likely to have long-term negative effects on psychological and physical well-being. In addition, to the extent that individuals distance themselves from others in response to stress (associated with dismissing and fearful attachment), they may limit their ability to develop lasting intimate relationships. To cope effectively with a variety of life events, individuals need a variety of personal and interpersonal resources. Secure individuals, who have strong personal resources (e.g. feelings of self-worth, competence and effectance) and who are more likely to have strong interpersonal resources (close relationships with others, supportive social networks), may have greater flexibility in their coping strategies. In contrast, insecure individuals, who lack one or more of these resources, may have more limited coping repertoires. Thus, an important topic for future research will be to examine how attachment style is related to the flexibility or rigidity of one’s coping responses over time, and over a variety of life experiences.

Finally, we acknowledge several limitations of the current research. First, the correlational nature of our study does not permit us to draw causal inferences. Although it is unlikely that coping patterns caused attachment ratings, we cannot rule out the possibility that some unmeasured third variable may better explain these findings. Longitudinal studies would be useful for ruling out some alternative explanations, and for examining the extent to which attachment style predicts over time. A second limitation is that the homogeneity of our sample makes it difficult to know whether these findings generalize beyond college undergraduates. However, because our findings were consistent with previous studies of attachment and coping — some of which used very different samples — we are optimistic that our results are not unique to our sample. Nevertheless, it is important that future studies examine coping processes in other age groups and in more diverse samples. A third limitation concerns the use of hypothetical stressors. The benefit of the hypothetical scenarios is that we were able to control for differences in stressful experiences by providing a standardized set of stimuli. One cost, however, is that we cannot be certain that an individual’s predicted coping responses would match his or her actual behavior in such situations. We were pleased to see that the pattern of findings on the real-life stressor was largely consistent with the hypothetical stressors. Nevertheless, future studies may wish to further examine coping in response to actual life events. One useful strategy, which was used by Mikulincer et al. (1993), is to examine coping processes within a sample of individuals who have shared a single life experience (such as war, natural disaster or loss). A final limitation is that some of our measures were somewhat brief, and the reliability coefficients were quite low in some circumstances. This, combined with our relatively small sample, means that the power of our statistical tests was somewhat low and that some of our analyses must be viewed as exploratory. Despite these limitations, the current research suggests that attachment theory is a useful framework for understanding social support and coping processes, and provides a basis for continued work in this area.
APPENDIX

Hypothetical Social and Achievement-related Stressors

Social stressors
1. Please imagine that whenever your best friend or room-mate asks you to join in on an activity that he or she is interested in, you always agree, even if you are not nearly as interested in the activity as your best friend or room-mate is. However, whenever you ask your best friend or room-mate to join you in an activity that interests you, he or she always refuses. You want to go to a particular social gathering tonight, but you will only go if your best friend or room-mate agrees to go with you. You ask him or her to accompany you and are once again refused. You become involved in a serious argument with your best friend or room-mate.

2. Please imagine that you have been dating your boyfriend/girlfriend for the past 6 months, and he/she has just told you that he/she wants to date other people.

3. Please imagine that a close friend accompanies you to a party. When both of you arrive, however, your friend leaves you to go talk with his/her friends for the entire night. You do not know these friends, nor does your friend bother to introduce you. You don’t know anyone else at the party.

Achievement-related stressors
1. Please imagine that you scored poorly on an essay test that you studied very much for.

2. Please imagine that for the past few years, you have been looking forward to attending law school at an ivy-league university. You just received your score on the law school entrance exam that you took last month. You discover that you scored considerably lower than the average of those students who were accepted at ivy-league law schools the previous year. While your grades are respectable, you realize that your chances of gaining acceptance into an ivy-league law school are now very slim.

3. Please imagine that you have been working for a particular company for the past 3 years. Since you have the most seniority at your position, you feel that you definitely deserve to be next in line for a promotion. Last week, your manager was considering promoting either you, or a fellow employee with 1 year’s experience, to supervisor status. You find out today that your manager has decided to promote the less senior employee.

REFERENCES


