

## How Integrative is Attachment Theory? Unpacking the Meaning and Significance of Felt Security

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Mikulincer and Shaver argue that attachment theory belongs under the umbrella of positive psychology, and moreover that attachment theory can supply an integrative framework for the positive psychology movement. In their view, attachment theory offers a “demonstrably generative and empirically validated framework in which both positive and negative aspects of human behavior and experience can be conceptualized” (p. 139). Their target article attempts to support that view by reviewing some very creative and systematically connected experiments demonstrating the effects of security-supportive and unsupportive primes on an array of relational and well-being outcomes.

In the spirit of dialogue that characterizes *Psychological Inquiry*, we examine the sufficiency of attachment theory as an integrative framework for understanding positive psychological phenomena. In this vein, we will express little doubt that, as both Bowlby and Mikulincer and Shaver claim, attachment processes represent an adaptive mechanism that plays a significant role in development. We also have no doubt that, as Mikulincer and Shaver’s meticulous and compelling program of research has shown, the priming of positive and loving attachment figures can activate positive states of mind, whereas the priming of rejecting, controlling or cold figures may activate fewer, and perhaps even crowd out, people’s positive capacities. This work has advanced both attachment theory and positive psychology. Yet even accepting these ideas, we suggest that there may be important limitations to the degree to which attachment perspectives—and the concept of felt security in particular—provide a comprehensive understanding of all positive psychological phenomena, from growth, to virtues, to relationships.

In what follows, we present several theoretical concerns about the integrative span of attachment frameworks. First, we question whether the construct of *felt security* provides an integrative description of what adult relationships either ideally or typically entail or provide, especially on the positive psychology side of the ledger. However formative and important attachment processes may be in early development, they do not describe all relationships or facilitative inter-

personal situations. Next, we suggest that attachment surveys and primes may evoke an array of positive relational attributes beyond felt security *per se*, and thus may capture several positive qualities without differentiating or delimiting the role of those qualities within the broader construct of attachment. Specifically, attachment theory, when extended to explain many positive behaviors, may actually obscure the role of specific social processes such as autonomy support, empathy, or warmth that actually foster both security within relationships and positive behaviors and outcomes. Finally, we examine the ultimate viability of attachment security as a basis for psychological and relational well-being through a discussion of the meaning of “security” in light of our own and others’ scholarship and research on mindfulness and notions of the self.

### **Core or Correlate: Is Felt Security a Basis for Positive Relational Experience?**

Attachment theory as articulated by Bowlby was one of several object relations theories to emerge from the British Psychoanalytic Association in the 1950’s. Unlike the others set forth by Fairbairn, Winnicott, and Guntrip among others, Bowlby’s approach was formulated through an evolutionary, ethological lens, with its central focus on the caregiver-infant *attachment system*’s role in protecting the infant through the formative period of dependency. As Mikulincer and Shaver state, in this ethological view of this dyad, the “goal of the system is a sense of protection or security”, which normally “terminates the system’s activation” (p. 5). Kobak, Cassidy and Yir (2004) similarly state that, as Bowlby conceptualized it, attachment is “a behavioral system that is activated by appraisals of danger and accompanying feelings of fear” (p. 388). This is a very different focus than, for example, Winnicott’s theory of object relations, in which the dyad’s function is to foster development—the differentiation and integration of a person’s psychological self. Winnicott was less concerned than Bowlby with moments of danger, which may be highly episodic, and he was

more concerned than Bowlby with issues of ongoing being—being warmly held, having ones autonomy or volition supported by contingent responsiveness, and not being impinged upon in states of quiescence or fatigue. Bowlby focused on safety issues as if they represented the central organizing issue for all other processes, whereas Winnicott may have been more likely to explain what happens in moments of danger in terms of the more general qualities of responsiveness and warmth evident within the caregiver-infant dyad, rather than the reverse (Winnicott, 1965).

It is this fundamental problem, of attempting to understand human relatedness (and positive outcomes more generally) on the basis of mechanisms derived from moments of threat to safety, and proximity seeking in the face of them, that makes one question why attachment theory would supply an integrative perspective for the diverse landscape of positive psychology. No question, those episodic appearances of “dangers and strangers” provide moments when the caregiving system may be tested. In fact, the caregiver’s reactions to such moments may also correlate with, or even predict, her/his other capacities for care, responsiveness, and interest in the infant. But do these moments of danger and stranger “organize” this system of care? Does the moment of danger explain the caregiver’s ongoing relations of warmth or their absence; the cooing and smiling in moments of happiness; the holding in moments of fatigue; the active encouragement and support of active growth? Instead, it seems more appropriate to consider attachment theory as a more circumscribed viewpoint that complements other more general theories of socialization and of the development social and relational capacities.

### **Is There More to Attachment Measures and Primes Than Felt Security?**

Mikulincer and Shaver successfully demonstrate that security primes can produce a number of salutary outcomes. Measures and primes of attachment security typically contain several positive attributes of self and others, but are they all necessarily or inextricably wrapped around a characteristic concern with security? For instance, “positive” attachments are accepting, loving, non-controlling, non-threatening, supportive, etc. There is no doubt that these positive characteristics correlate with good outcomes, and when such characteristics are primed, that they would be associated with “broaden and build” feelings and many positive attributes and representations. But such studies have not compellingly linked this suitcase of positives with the passenger specifically carrying it, namely, attachment theory. What is needed is more discriminate evidence showing that these facilitative effects are unique to characteristics of attachment systems *per se* as op-

posed to positive or facilitative affordances within relationships.

What might such affordances be? Relationships (even in infancy) do more than protect, or provide security. They incite, excite, stimulate, teach, inform, and even supply a basic sense of meaning and purpose that attachment styles or the situations that activate them, do not, in our view, encompass. This point is particularly pertinent when we focus on positive psychology, and what facilitates the energies, virtues, and strengths it has in focus. Attempting to explain such prosocial, growth oriented, and vital manifestations of human development through the mechanisms entailed in responding to the anxiety and insecurity associated with separation seems akin to behaviorists in the 1950’s seeking to account for effectance motivation and exploration using anxiety reduction (see White, 1959). We suggest that the organism’s natural propensities toward growth, connection and intimacy, and exploration, are not reducible to the attachment dynamic of anxiety reduction, nor are the exploratory, growth-oriented and proactive propensities in human nature “explained” by the availability of simply soothing figures. Instead they may be more closely linked to proactive and nurturing activities on the part of adults, as across situations they meet the child’s psychological needs by offering opportunities for action, partaking in the world as experienced by the child, and providing a responsive and supportive environment.

### **Unpacking attachment constructs**

As we have noted already, good primary caregivers, as well as good friends, good lovers, and good colleagues, do many good, facilitative things. Not all of them concern attachment or security or protection in the face of threat, though some can apply there. For example, whether we are considering attachment figures or not, people typically feel closer to others who are warm and accepting. Though these attributes of warmth and acceptance play a critical role in the capacity to sooth and comfort so central to Bowlby’s thinking on felt security, warmth, and acceptance also play a significant role in fostering connections and openness in relationships that are not of an attachment variety, and whether or not threat is salient. Do we need attachment theory to explain these positive effects of warmth and acceptance? Similarly, supports for competence, in the form of encouragement, investment, and interest, probably are also helpful in relationships. In short, there are a number of specific dimensions of social environments that are facilitative of human functioning. They all seem to predict felt security, but it is not always theoretically clear why felt security explains them.

One particularly important variable that characterizes positive, facilitative relationships is *autonomy*

*support*, which concerns an appreciation of the actor's internal frame of reference, and support for her/his volitional or choiceful regulation of action (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 1993). It requires being responsive to the other's perspective and initiations rather than attempting to control his or her experience or behavior. Certainly, secure attachment relationships are autonomy supportive. As Bretherton (1987) stated, attachment represents a "relationship that, from the beginning, permits optimal autonomy in the context of emotional support. In the framework of attachment theory maternal respect for the child's autonomy is an aspect of sensitivity to the infant signals. . ." (p. 1075). Such autonomy support stands in contrast to either overcontrol and overprotection, on the one hand, and unresponsiveness or neglect on the other. Autonomy support, which entails an interest in the taking the child's perspective, reading his or her signals, and responding in a way that shows that these signals are meaningful and relevant, is thus central to building a secure attachment relationship.

Although Bretherton (1987) was speaking of attachment in infancy, the role of autonomy support in accounting for variations in adult security of attachment is perhaps even more important. For example, using assessments of adult attachments applied to multiple social partners, La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci (2000) demonstrated that perceived autonomy support accounted for a large proportion of the variance in within-person variations in felt security. That is, the more one's social partner was autonomy supportive the higher one's score on felt security with that partner.

Yet beyond predicting security of attachment, autonomy support has been shown to enhance a wide variety of positive outcomes in children and adults, and in settings and relationships as diverse as those found in health care, psychotherapy, classrooms, and organizations. Autonomy support has been shown to play a positive role within relationships from parent-child (Grolnick, 2003) to romantic involvements (e.g., Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007) to business associations (e.g., Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). It is a characteristic of good therapies as well as good teaching (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In turn research on autonomy support has highlighted specific techniques and methods of using praise, structuring rewards, offering feedback, and communicating in ways that promote versus undermine the recipient's perceived autonomy.

Autonomy support thus exemplifies the kind of social psychological variable that can systematically explain within-person variance in adults' felt security, as well as a variety of other positive relational outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, willingness to rely on or trust the other, a sense of vitality, as well as positive interpersonal experience more generally (Ryan, La

Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005). But a larger question is that do we need attachment theory to explain the positive effects of autonomy support? In short, whereas autonomy-support plays a positive role across varied relationships, it is not clear that we need attachment mechanisms to explain that.

As we explore variables that predict attachment as an outcome, including warmth and autonomy support, we can begin to explore more exactly whether felt security itself gives rise to many of the good things associated with it in Mikulincer and Shaver's review, or whether it is, like many of these outcomes, a *result* of responsive social conditions. Mikulincer and Shaver suggest that it is felt security that drives an array of positive psychology outcomes—such as prosocial behavior, positive affect, and increased wellness. But in another account, felt security may itself be an outcome of need-fulfilling social conditions, just like these other variables. Perhaps we will find that under social conditions of warmth, responsiveness, and support for autonomy many good outcomes happen, of which secure attachment is one. Thus one needs to see precisely when felt security is itself a function of certain social supports and interpersonal qualities and, perhaps, when that construct is needed as a mediator of prosocial and positive psychological behaviors.

Our primary point is simply that a positive working model of primary attachments may relate to, but should not be equated with, what makes for a good relationship or a positive life. Psychology has numerous models and dimensions that concern how social contexts and interpersonal relationships can facilitate exploration, growth, wellness and "positive" behaviors. Filtering them solely through the lens of the mechanisms operative in infant/caregiver reactions to threat may, in the long run, not always be clarifying.

### **Mindfulness and Felt Security**

Our final comment on the centrality of attachment security to positive psychological outcomes concerns the ultimate viability of felt security as a foundation for wellness when considered from the perspective of recent theoretical and empirical work on mindfulness (e.g., Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, in press) Mikulincer and Shaver drew some interesting parallels between the constructs of felt security and mindfulness, which inspires us to attempt to further unpack the meaning of both felt security and mindfulness, and what distinguishes them. We begin by noting several intriguing similarities and convergences between felt security and mindfulness, in their developmental antecedents, relation to each other, and correlates and consequences. We then contrast the centrality of mental representations in attachment relationships both secure and insecure, with what is ideally entailed in being mindful in relationships.

Mindfulness describes a condition in which a person is attentive to and aware of what is occurring, a state that can be likened to participatory observation of the flow of impulses, thoughts, emotions, and events. Among other features, mindfulness entails a reflective capacity, including the resources to mentally “step back” from thoughts, feelings, verbal exchanges, and other events that permits a certain freedom from automatic or habitual reactions or self-identifications with events and experiences (e.g., Linehan, 1993; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). The capacity to impartially observe thus provides a basis for more informed choices, and in so doing facilitates greater self-regulation. Although mindfulness is a “natural” or inherent capacity (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003) it is also a relatively sophisticated quality of mind that is subject to developmental influences and intervention effects.

Persons who grow up in contexts characterized by loving, autonomy-supportive caregiving may have optimal opportunity to develop mindful awareness (Ryan, 2005). The development of reflective, self-observing capacities are facilitated by providers who can be attuned to, mirror, and resonate with the infant’s experience. This in turn fosters the infant’s developing capacities for awareness. Increasingly, studies are documenting that children with more attentive, sensitive, accepting caregivers develop greater reflective and regulative skills, including those associated with mindfulness (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Ryan, 2005). In contrast, those who grow up in threatening and unsupportive environments are compromised in these capacities, such that early insults may have cascading effects on subsequent development. As Mikulincer and Shaver’s review suggests, interventions highlighting self-acceptance and mindful awareness may offer a parallel means to the development of reflective, regulatory skills.

The developmental research outlined here suggests the first of three connections between felt security and mindfulness. People who have experienced attentive, responsive, and sensitive caregiving are likely to be both more securely attached and more mindful. That is, developmental supports may enhance both of these outcomes. A second connection between attachment and mindfulness processes is that they may be related, perhaps bidirectionally. Secure attachment foster greater attentiveness to relational partners, as Mikulincer and Shaver note, and initial evidence suggests that mindfulness is related to a securely attached adult relationship style (Cordon & Feeney, 2007; Lukowitsky, Pincus, & Carlson, 2006). Further, mindfulness may facilitate secure attachments through an open, receptive attention to relationship partners (c.f., Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004; Fonagy & Target, 1997; Hodgins & Knee, 2002). Third, felt security and mindfulness both appear to contribute to a variety of positive outcomes. For example, a person who is securely attached

possesses a set of rich resources for dealing with stress. This makes it less necessary for them “to rely on psychological defenses that distort perception, limit coping flexibility, and generate interpersonal conflict”, as Mikulincer and Shaver suggest (p. 143). These adaptive qualities also appear to be fostered by mindful-states, in which a person is more open to experience, less susceptible to distortions of reality, more flexible in response options, and possibly less prone to conflict. Aside from this diminished threat appraisal and defensiveness, and enhanced affect regulation, other benefits also appear to accrue from both felt security and mindfulness, including greater emotional availability, enhanced self-regulation, higher quality relationships, and pro-social attitudes and behaviors (see Brown et al., in press, for a discussion of mindfulness correlates and outcomes).

A primary difference between attachment and mindfulness perspectives concerns the place of the self in optimal functioning. In using the term “self” here, we refer particularly to one of the two major designations of that term (McAdams, 1990) that involves the various cognitive representations (and their associated affective reactions) that form the basis for personal identity, or the “Me-self” (Mead, 1934), including representations of others and their relationships to Me. Mikulincer and Shaver note that cognitive representations or mental models are central to the felt sense of security: “. . . a person’s attachment orientation is actually rooted in a complex cognitive and affective network that includes many different episodic, context-related, and relationship-specific, as well as fairly general attachment representations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003)” (p. 141). Such representations, as these authors note, concern safety, structure, meaning, lovability, self-worth, and so on.

We suggest that although cognitive representations of self, others, and relationships are not inherently problematic, they can easily become so when individuals identify with them and behave in accord with them—during social interactions, for example. In the context of attachment relationships, this filtering of events and experience through cognitive representations of self and others creates two potential obstacles to optimal functioning—obstacles that mindfulness may help to circumvent. First, mental models tend to be quite stable over time; indeed, a defining characteristic of the Me-self is the tendency to view ourselves, others, and the world as relatively constant or unchanging (Metzinger, 2000), and further, we have the propensity to fix or stabilize reality, given that change, especially of an unpredictable nature, can threaten the sense of self. These tendencies are problematic for relationships, in that like everything else, they change, sometimes dramatically. Our attachment figures leave or die. Thus, a sense of security and self-worth that requires maintenance and bolstering by actual or

symbolic others may always be, well, insecure. That is, as long as cognitive representations of self and other are the predominant lens through which we view our relationships; their stability will be subject to threatened or actual effects of perceived loss that can shake up those representations. This may be particularly important for those insecurely attached, who find it difficult to draw on actual or symbolic attachment figures. Mikulincer and Shaver suggest that security priming may help such people, but more research appears needed to determine whether this is a strategy that insecurely attached individuals can learn to deploy. More generally, however, if a sense of security—of being loved, feeling self-efficacious, and so on—is dependent on reflected appraisals, the self may actually be somewhat fragile, given its contingency on experiences of actual or symbolic attachment-figure availability and quality. Sometimes, as with those insecurely attached, they may not be. But even those with a strong felt sense of security might be at risk: It is often the members of the closest, most securely attached relationships that suffer most when those relationships end.

We do not suggest that attachment figures are irrelevant to coping with threats, losses, and other experiences that impinge on the sense of self. Obviously, relationships are a valuable, indeed essential source of support, maintenance, and growth. However, we propose that mindfulness may help to avoid the pitfalls associated with relational threat and loss appraisals, and with attachment-related contingencies in general. As noted earlier, mindfulness concerns a ‘clear seeing’ of reality as it is rather than, as is common, implicitly or explicitly relying upon cognitive representations as accurate reflections of reality, in mindfulness, reality is contacted directly, unfiltered by learning histories and memories. We argue that this direct or “experiential” mode of processing (Teasdale, 1999) may be beneficial for two reasons. First, it encourages recognition of the temporal nature of all phenomena; when one is in moment-to-moment contact with life, its continuously changing nature quickly becomes apparent. Thus, when a relationship is threatened or severed, an individual may be less likely to suffer from the painful mismatch between what is or has occurred and his/her images or representations of what was or is supposed to be. Without the sometimes difficult work of cognitive accommodation that comes with having to fit reality into established mental models, a person may be less likely to become dysregulated and more likely to adapt to changing relational circumstances. This may be helpful not only when a relationship is seriously disrupted, but also in more mundane affairs—for example, when a partner’s behavior changes in some way that affects the day-to-day functioning of the relationship.

A second benefit to a mindful, rather than representational, means of negotiating relationships is that when an individual is present and available to

ongoing experience, including the experience of being with another, closeness, and intimacy has a greater opportunity to flourish than it might if filtered through past attachment-related histories. Earlier in this commentary, we discussed recent research showing that individual’s attachment relationships differ across different social partners, according to their particular histories with those partners; this social specificity suggests that attachment styles are less consistent than previously thought. Mindfulness theory and research goes further, suggesting that people can potentially respond to others without a strong overlay of attachment-related learning histories or memories at all. That is, when the mindful person brings an open attention to and awareness of what is actually going on in interpersonal exchanges, a particular set of cognitive representations need not be required to establish the intimacy that marks the secure relationship. In this way, mindfulness—which research suggests can be cultivated by a wide range of people—may conduce to closeness and intimacy regardless of one’s historical fortune in attachment relations or the necessity to rely on social primes for security.

This, again, may be most important for those without a well-developed sense of attachment security. However, as Mikulincer and Shaver suggest, whenever one’s attachment style organizes behavior and coping, it does so by invoking cognitive biases or sets based on past experience. In contrast, mindful awareness of self and others ideally allows one to transcend such biases, so that interactions may be more freely and openly experienced without undue interference from past experiences and the cognitive representations that uphold them, and thereby potentially opening up greater opportunities for connection and closeness, warmth, satisfaction, and more successful threat management in relationships. Indeed, recent research suggests that mindfulness conduces to such positive outcomes (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Carson et al., 2004; see Brown et al., in press for review).

### Conclusion

In this commentary we have attempted to deconstruct the notion of felt security as a means to address Mikulincer and Shaver’s position that attachment theory may supply an integrative framework for positive psychology. We begin by agreeing with the authors that attachment phenomena are formative and important. We suggest, however, that not all relationships, let alone all positive behaviors, are focused on attachment dynamics or are dependent on them. We briefly reviewed evidence that felt security is fostered by social environments that are attentive, responsive, warm, and autonomy supportive. Yet, we further note that such environments also facilitate many other positive

outcomes, so the question is whether felt security “integrates” these findings, or is itself a result of positive, supportive social contexts. We also noted that assessments and primes used in adult attachment research tap a broad array of positive self and other attributes, and thus the fact that they correlate with or prompt positive outcomes does not itself pinpoint how attachment mechanisms *per se* are implicated. Finally, we use theory and research on mindfulness and the self to point out the potential pitfalls that accrue with the cognitive representational means of negotiating relationships that define attachment style dynamics, and suggest that the capacity to be present and available to others in an unbiased fashion may help both to foster positive relationships in general, and to facilitate positive outcomes when those relationships are placed under stress.

We hope these comments provide constructive occasion for Mikulincer and Shaver to continue to formulate the role of attachment theory in positive psychology. It is clear to us that they, and other attachment researchers have made an impressive theoretical and empirical contribution in showing how positive relational representations and their invocation can provide a firmer basis for wellness in a world all too often marked by insecurity, fear, and disconnection.

### Note

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