

Attachment and Perceived Rejection: Findings From Studies of Hurt Feelings and the Adoption Experience.

Judith A. Feeney (j.feeney@psy.uq.edu.au)

School of Psychology

The University of Queensland, St Lucia QLD 4072 Australia

Abstract

Psychological theory and research suggest that human beings have a basic need to belong, and that perceived rejection is a highly aversive experience. This paper proposes that attachment theory offers a useful perspective on the nature and consequences of perceived rejection. Supporting evidence is provided from recent studies of hurt feelings in couple relationships, and of the relational concerns of adults who were adopted as infants. Studies of psychological hurt indicate that hurtful events commonly entail threat to positive mental models of attachment, as well as perceptions of rejection. Further, attachment dimensions are important predictors of the ongoing consequences of hurtful events for victims and for couple relationships. Perceptions of rejection are also thought to be important to the adoption experience, and to underlie the ongoing fear of rejection that many adoptees report. Data from our laboratory suggest that attachment insecurity is more prevalent in adult adoptees than in the general population, and that insecurity is linked to the perception that close relationships involve risk and hurt. Together, the findings support the argument that attachment principles shed light on the nature of perceived rejection: Attachment theory highlights the vital functions of human bonding across the lifespan, helps explain individual differences in responses to perceived rejection, and has implications for programs of intervention.

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), human beings have a fundamental “need to belong”, which is characterised by two main features. First, we need frequent personal contacts or interactions (ideally, most of them pleasant in emotional tone). Second, we need to perceive the presence of an interpersonal bond or relationship that is marked by stability and emotional involvement; in other words, those interactions should be embedded in a relational context. Baumeister and Leary presented an extensive body of evidence supporting the proposition that human beings are innately prepared to develop interpersonal relationships; that is, we are naturally driven to establish and sustain relationships, and cannot function optimally without them. Further, the need to belong can be understood in evolutionary terms: Being separated from social groups posed an important challenge to the survival of our ancestors, and individuals who formed strong relationships and were well integrated into social groups were more likely to survive, reproduce, and raise offspring to reproductive age (Leary, 2001).

For these reasons, humans are thought to have developed the capacity to recognise and react quickly to threats of rejection and exclusion (see, for example, Leary and Downs’s (1995) work on the sociometer, a putative psychological mechanism that monitors the social environment for cues of rejection and disapproval). In addition, perceptions of rejection lead to strong emotional responses, such as fear, anger, and sadness (Bowlby, 1973; Fitness, 2001). This paper proposes that attachment theory offers an integrative perspective on the nature and effects of perceived rejection. That is, attachment principles are useful in explaining the functions of human bonding, together with the individual differences that are observed when such bonding appears to be threatened. The paper focuses primarily on recent studies conducted by the author, addressing two apparently divergent lines of research: the nature and effects of “hurt feelings”, and the relational concerns of adult adoptees.

Hurt Feelings

The term “hurt” is widely understood as referring not only to physical injury, but also to a highly negative emotional experience (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O’Connor, 1987). Further, researchers generally agree that this emotional experience is inherently relational; in other words, appraisals of others’ behaviour, and its implications for the state of our relationships, are central to hurt feelings (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell & Evans, 1998; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). However, there is still much to be learned about the causes, emotional features and consequences of hurtful events.

What Sorts of Interpersonal Events Are Hurtful, and Why?

Leary et al. (1998) conducted a retrospective study of victims’ accounts of hurtful events, across a range of relationship types. Based on these accounts, they proposed that the key element in the experience of psychological hurt is relational devaluation; that is, the perception that the offender does not value the relationship as much as the victim would like (this point is revisited later). However, these researchers also suggested the relevance of distinguishing between different types of hurtful events. Specifically, Leary et

al. were able to group the accounts of hurtful events into six categories: active disassociation (explicit rejection, abandonment or ostracism); passive disassociation (implicit rejection, such as being ignored); criticism; betrayal; teasing; and feeling unappreciated, used, or taken for granted. Supporting the proposed link between hurt and rejection, all six types of hurtful events were associated with moderate to high ratings of perceived rejection.

More recently, Feeney (2004a) offered a critique of Leary et al.'s typology and adapted it for "romantic" (couple) relationships. Again using retrospective data provided by victims, support was found for five types of hurtful events: active disassociation (denying or retracting feelings of love and commitment), passive disassociation (ignoring or excluding partner from plans and activities), criticism, sexual infidelity, and deception (lying; breaking promises and confidences). Analyses of the characteristics of these types of events again supported the argument that humans crave a sense of belonging (or inclusion), and find rejection highly aversive: Despite important differences between the five types of events (e.g., in terms of feelings of powerlessness), all were associated with moderately high levels of perceived rejection and of negative affect.

Hurt Feelings and Threats to Models of Attachment Although hurtful events tend to elicit a range of negative emotions (such as fear and anger), researchers have suggested that hurt is a unique emotional experience (Leary & Springer, 2001). In other work based on the study of victims' accounts, Feeney (2005) proposed that the distinctive and key feature of hurt feelings is a sense of personal injury, defined as damage to the victim's view of the self as worthy of love, and/or to core beliefs about the availability and trustworthiness of others. In other words, damage to mental models (working models) of attachment was proposed as the key element of hurtful events. This conceptualisation is based on Bowlby's formulation of attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1979), which argued that humans possess an innate attachment behavioural system that motivates them to develop and maintain intimate relationships. The attachment system offers children a clear survival advantage by maintaining a balance between exploratory behaviour and proximity-seeking (attachment) behaviour; however, attachment needs remain important throughout the lifespan (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1980). Although attachment needs are universal, attachment behaviour shows marked individual differences that reflect underlying mental models. That is, based on their unique history with caregivers, individuals develop expectations regarding two basic issues: whether they themselves are worthy of love (mental model of self),

and whether attachment figures are available and responsive (mental model of others). These mental models influence needs, attributions, and perceptions, and hence shape responses to relational events (Collins & Read, 1994).

Importantly, mental models of attachment carry vital information about acceptance and rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Hence, given the fundamental nature of the need to belong, events that compromise positive views of self and/or others are likely to be seen as signalling a threat to safety. From this perspective, it is not surprising that acts which threaten models of self and others produce emotions that are intense and long-lasting (Fitness, 2001; Kowalski, 2001): As highlighted by attachment theory and research, "felt security" is of vital importance to individual well-being, and has its origins in actual interactions with attachment figures. Interestingly (and in line with the view that threats to working models produce a sense of personal injury), Johnson, Maikinen, and Millikin (2001) recently coined the term "attachment injury" to explain certain impasses encountered in therapy. According to these researchers, attachment injury occurs when one partner abandons or betrays the other in a way that creates (or exacerbates) negative assumptions about attachment relationships.

Consistent with the term "attachment injury", people seem to experience hurtful partner behaviour in ways that resemble the experience of physical pain and injury. In Feeney's (2005) study, for example, victims provided open-ended reports of their emotional responses to the hurtful events, and commonly used terms that focused directly on pain and injury (e.g., "hurt", "torn apart", "in pain"). Further, a considerable number used more idiosyncratic terms that implied pain, damage, and incapacitation, such as "cut to the quick", "pierced", "traumatised", "stabbed", "wrenched", "like a needle in my heart", and "like a nerve had been hit". The link between physical injury and threats to inclusion has received more direct support from a recent neuro-imaging study (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). In this study, the neural correlates of "social pain" (operationalised as exclusion from a social activity) were very similar to those identified in previous studies of physical pain. The researchers suggested that because social bonds have strong adaptive value, the attachment system may have "piggybacked onto the physical pain system" (Eisenberger et al., 2003, p. 291). In this way, the sense of hurt associated with perceived rejection enhances survival, by alerting us to the need to restore social ties. Hence, descriptions of the pain associated with perceived rejection may be "real", rather than metaphorical (Eisenberger et al., 2003; Panksepp, 2003).

Feeney's (2005) study was designed, in part, to compare the utility of several theoretical perspectives in explaining hurtful events: threats to mental models of attachment, relational devaluation, and relational transgression (rule violation). Victims of hurtful events were asked to report whether the partner's hurtful behaviour had violated a relationship rule, and if so, what that rule was. Interestingly, although most participants endorsed the role of rule violation, they cited only a sub-set of the relationship rules discussed by previous researchers (e.g., Baxter, 1986). For example, participants frequently cited partners' failure to be supportive, loyal, open and trusting, but rarely cited failures in the areas of similarity display, equity, or autonomy. Ratings by expert judges confirmed that violations of those frequently cited rules were likely to be hurtful, to threaten mental models of attachment, and to be seen as devaluing the relationship. Of particular importance, however, offenders' failure to trust the partner was seen as threatening the victim's model of self (and as hurtful), but not as implying relational devaluation. Overall, these findings suggest that most hurtful events in couple relationships involve threat to mental models, together with relational devaluation and violation of relationship rules (but only some rules). However, threat to mental models seems to be more relevant than relational devaluation in explaining the hurt that is felt in the face of partners' distrust.

Attachment Style Differences in Responses to Hurtful Events

An important advantage of the attachment perspective on hurtful events lies in its ability to generate testable, theory-based predictions about individual differences in responses to these events. This point can be illustrated by considering the two major dimensions that underlie measures of adult attachment: relationship anxiety and avoidance. Individuals who are high in relationship anxiety may report more frequent and extreme distress, reflecting their tendency to fear rejection and to expect the worst of relationship partners (Feeney & Noller, 1996). On the other hand, those high in avoidance may report quite low levels of distress in response to hurtful events, having learned to defend against attachment-related concerns by focusing their attention away from the thoughts that activate them (Fraley & Shaver, 1997). Consistent with these predictions, Feeney (2005) found that victims' relationship anxiety was positively correlated with reports that hurtful events caused them (at the time) high levels of hurt, fear, shame, and general distress. Conversely, victims' avoidance was negatively correlated with reports of hurt, fear, and general distress.

Individual differences in attachment security are likely to have implications not only for immediate emotional

reactions to hurtful events, but also for subsequent attitudes and behaviours. To examine this issue, Feeney (2004a) developed structural models of the variables that predicted ongoing negative consequences of hurtful events for the victim and for the couple relationship. The predictor variables included attachment dimensions (relationship anxiety and avoidance), together with measures of the victim's affective, cognitive, and behavioural reactions to the event.

Ongoing Consequences for the Victim It was expected that more severe consequences for the victim (lowered self-confidence, increased self-doubt) would be associated with relationship anxiety, as well as with ratings of immediate feelings of rejection and powerlessness, negative affect, and negative self-perceptions. These predictions were supported. Of particular relevance to this discussion, relationship anxiety had a direct effect on ongoing consequences for the victim, together with indirect effects through negative affect and negative self-perceptions. These results suggest that the ongoing self-doubts reported by anxious individuals reflect, in part, their initial tendency to become highly distressed by negative partner behaviour and to see themselves as blameworthy, foolish, and unlovable. In other words, for anxious individuals, hurtful behaviour by romantic partners serves to reinforce existing models of the self as undeserving of love and acceptance (Feeney, 1999).

Ongoing Consequences for the Relationship More severe consequences for the couple relationship were expected to be associated with variables tapping the victim's perceptions of the offender, and the victim's actual behaviour. Specifically, ongoing relationship problems were expected to be predicted by insecurity (relationship anxiety and avoidance), perceptions of low offender remorse, victim's attributions of the event as intentional, and destructive victim behaviour (e.g., sarcasm). Again, most of the predicted effects were supported, although the effect of relationship anxiety was of marginal significance. Interestingly, avoidance had rather complex effects on relationship outcomes. The net effect of avoidance was to increase relationship problems, and this occurred both directly (perhaps through an overlearned tendency to deny or downplay attachment needs), and indirectly through perceptions that the offender lacked remorse. However, avoidance also had an indirect path through *less* destructive victim behaviour, which served to decrease relationship problems. Hence, although avoidant individuals reported more ongoing relationship problems overall, it seems that their controlled interpersonal style may sometimes prevent conflicts from "simmering" and/or escalating.

Methodological Issues

Although the data cited to this point suggest that secure and insecure individuals differ in their responses to perceived rejection, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties that arise in trying to establish causal associations from these retrospective studies. As we have seen, retrospective data generally support predictions that insecurity (especially relationship anxiety) promotes more negative perceptions of, and responses to, hurtful events; however, it is also possible that more hurtful events create (or exacerbate) insecurity, and/or that insecure persons simply select more serious events to report.

To address the limitations of retrospective data, we designed an experimental study in which participants were asked to read four structured vignettes (Hill & Feeney, 2004). All the vignettes depicted an interaction between dating partners, in which one partner's behaviour was likely to be perceived as rejecting; specifically, one partner was described as breaking away from the other's display of affection. The vignettes were designed to vary in terms of role and severity. That is, versions were written from the perspective both of the victim ("your partner pushes you away"), and of the perpetrator ("you push your partner away"); in the "more severe" versions, the partner who was rejected was portrayed as already facing a major stressful event, and hence in a relatively vulnerable position. Participants in this study were asked to imagine each interaction vividly, and to answer a series of questions tapping their perceptions of its consequences for the victim and the relationship.

Analyses assessed the effects on these perceptions of role, severity, participants' gender and participants' attachment style - the present discussion focuses primarily on the effects of attachment style. Participants' attachment style (simply classified as secure or insecure) had no main or interactive effects on perceived consequences for the relationship (Hill & Feeney, 2004). However, attachment style had a main effect, and an interactive effect with role, on perceived consequences for the victim: When placed in the role of victim, insecure participants anticipated more negative consequences for their self-confidence and self-esteem (regardless of the severity of the offence). This finding suggests that previous reports of attachment-style differences in responses to hurtful events do not simply reflect insecure persons' tendency to select more severe events. Rather, for those who are insecure, potentially hurtful events are perceived as more threatening, as confirming existing self-doubts, and as indicating intentional rejection by the partner (Collins, 1996).

The Adoption Experience

The studies discussed to this point support the fundamental importance of a sense of belonging, and the aversive nature of perceived rejection. They also suggest the utility of attachment principles in understanding responses to perceived rejection. From this perspective, there are important reasons for investigating the relationship experiences and attachment concerns of adult adoptees. Adoptees have lost the major person(s) with whom attachments are normally formed; that is, biological parents. Several authors have noted the significance of this situation for the adoptee's social and emotional development. For example, Verrier (1993, pp. 20-21) stated:

'What the child has missed is the security and serenity of oneness with the person who gave birth to him, a continuum of bonding from prenatal to postnatal life. This is a profound connection for which the adoptee forever yearns. It is this yearning which leaves him often feeling hopeless, helpless, empty, and alone'.

Verrier (1993) went on to argue that the severing of the connection between mother and child often results in the adopted person experiencing a deep sense of loss, coupled with a fear of any type of rejection. Being a core relational issue, this fear of rejection may be manifested in such relationship difficulties as mistrust, withdrawal, isolation, "testing out" of others, sabotaging of relationships, and extreme separation anxiety (Verrier, 1993). Other authors (e.g., Brodzinsky, 1990) have noted that the loss associated with the adoption experience is quite pervasive, and may cause the adopted person to feel incomplete and disconnected. That is, adopted persons experience not only the loss of their birth parents, but also the loss of the extended birth family, and of their cultural and genealogical heritage.

At this point, it is important to note that in the case of those adopted as infants, a specific attachment between infant and mother is unlikely to have developed prior to the relinquishment of the child (and hence, unlikely to have been destroyed). Rather, attachment bonds form on the basis of repeated, mutual interactions, and require the infant's increasingly conscious awareness of the mother as a distinct person (Noller, Feeney, & Peterson, 2001). Further, the suggestion that separation of infant and mother inflicts a permanent wound on the child (e.g., Verrier, 1993) is contentious, and some researchers (e.g., Leon, 2002) have argued that the losses associated with adoption are largely socially constructed. That is, deep-seated beliefs in the maternal instinct and in the importance of kinship cause us to view child relinquishment in terms of rejection and

abandonment. However, arguing for the social construction of adoption losses does not make those losses less “real”, and does not deny the possibility of some degree of loss embedded in the experience of being parented by a nonbiological parent (Leon, 2002).

In summary, there is widespread consensus that the losses associated with adoption may result in offspring perceiving that they have been rejected, betrayed, and abandoned by birth parents (Brodzinsky, 1990; Jones, 1997; Nickman, 1985). Further, with recent changes in legislation, many adult adoptees are now searching for birth relatives, and search and reunion experiences entail the possibility of further loss and rejection. Hence, adoption may be a risk factor for negative relational attitudes and relationship difficulties in adult life, and the adoption experience is now widely viewed as a “lifelong process” (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000). Given that attachment theory emphasises the importance of felt security and its origins in consistent, accepting responses on the part of parental figures, attachment principles should offer a useful perspective on the adoption experience. In fact, Edens and Cavell (1999) argued for the utility of attachment theory in the study of adoption, noting that current conceptualisations of adult attachment are directly relevant to relationship issues that are faced by adoptees, including the loss of biological ties, and the potential for search and reunion.

To our knowledge, however, Borders et al. (2000) are the only researchers to have systematically studied attachment security in adult adoptees. These researchers studied a sample of adoptees and their non-adopted friends. The two groups did not differ on questionnaire measures of marital satisfaction or sensitivity to rejection (the latter measure focused primarily on attitudes towards situations involving negative feedback from others). However, differences did emerge with regard to adult attachment and perceptions of social support. In terms of attachment categories, non-adoptees were over-represented in the secure group, whereas adoptees were over-represented in the preoccupied and fearful groups. Adoptees also reported less social support than their non-adopted friends. However, consistent with previous work linking “search status” to indices of psychological adjustment (e.g., Sobol & Cardiff, 1983), this association was moderated by search status: Adoptees who had searched for birth relatives (“searchers”) reported less support than non-searchers and non-adopted respondents. This study provided an important first step in exploring the link between adoption and adult attachment security. However, it was limited by its cross-sectional design, its reliance on a categorical measure of attachment security, and its failure to fully

consider the role of childhood and ongoing relationship experiences.

To address these issues, members of our research team are currently conducting a comprehensive study of adoption, attachment, and relationship experiences. Participants in this study are 140 adults who were adopted as infants (by non-relatives), and a comparison sample of 128 adults who grew up with both biological parents. When recruited, participants complete questionnaires assessing demographic variables, attachment categories and dimensions, and (for adoptees) search and reunion experiences; six months later, they complete additional questionnaires assessing various relationship attitudes and behaviours. Finally, a sub-set of those in the adopted sample (selected to represent a range of search and reunion experiences) take part in an in-depth interview, which focuses on their experiences as adoptees and their relationships with family members, friends, and romantic partners. Currently, the six-month (follow-up) data collection is almost complete, and interviews are ongoing. The following sections of this paper review some of the findings to date.

Adoption and Attachment Security

Our focal research question concerned the association between adoption status (adopted versus comparison sample) and attachment security; that is, do adoptees experience, on average, higher levels of insecurity? This question was assessed using both the categorical and dimensional measures of attachment (Feeney, Passmore, & Peterson, 2004). In terms of attachment categories, we found that sample (adopted versus comparison) was related to a four-group (forced-choice) measure of attachment style (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Adopted persons represented only 38% of the secure group; in contrast, they represented 59% of the dismissing group, 64% of the preoccupied group, and 72% of the fearful group. In this context, it is worth noting that fearful attachment represents the most negative attachment pattern, being defined by negative mental models of both self and others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Analyses using the dimensional measure (Attachment Style Questionnaire; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994) supported this conclusion, with significant differences between adopted and comparison participants emerging on all scales derived from this instrument. Specifically, adopted persons obtained lower scores than comparison persons on confidence in self and others, and higher scores on all scales tapping aspects of insecurity: discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary to achievement, need for approval, and preoccupation with relationships. Similarly, adopted persons obtained

higher scores than comparison persons on the two higher-order factors of avoidance and relationship anxiety. However, more fine-grained analyses indicated that adoptees who had not searched for birth relatives were similar in attachment profile to comparison participants; in other words, insecurity was more characteristic of searchers.

Adoption, Insecurity and Relational Concerns

These results indicate that adoption may be a risk factor for later attachment insecurity, and suggest that it is worth examining the impact of insecurity on adoptees' relational attitudes and behaviours. As noted earlier, collection of the follow-up questionnaire data is not quite complete. However, the available data indicate that adoptees also perceived higher levels of "risk in intimacy" (assessed using a questionnaire measure developed by Pilkington & Richardson, 1988) than did comparison participants. That is, adoptees were more likely to regard relationships as "risky business", to agree that they were afraid of getting close to people, and to report that they tried to maintain distance from others in order to avoid getting hurt. This finding is consistent with Verrier's (1993) focus on the link between adoption and fears of rejection and abandonment, although again, more fine-grained analyses showed that perceived risk in intimacy was greater for searchers than for non-searchers.

Our data also support the relevance of attachment style to this sense of fear and risk: For adoptees (and also for comparison participants), initial scores on the attachment dimensions predicted fear of intimacy at six-month follow-up. Specifically, perceptions of risk in intimacy showed moderately strong correlations with both avoidance and relationship anxiety; together, these scales accounted for almost half of the variance in this measure. In short, adoptees reported more insecurity than non-adoptees, and insecure respondents reported a more hesitant and guarded stance in terms of relating to others.

The relevance of issues related to connection, "belonging" and rejection is also supported by data from the semi-structured interviews. That is, interviews conducted to date (particularly with participants who have searched for birth relatives) provide substantial support for the types of relationship difficulties that Verrier (1993) regarded as stemming from adoptees' basic fear of rejection. Further, participants' reports of these difficulties fit with attachment theorists' analyses of the content of working models of attachment (focusing on issues of self-worth and the availability and dependability of others), and were often expressed in fairly extreme terms. For example, some adoptees explicitly talked about their fear of rejection. Others used such expressions as: "having trust and control

issues", "having no sense of self, nothing to grab on to", "never wanting to be tied down", "having a shocking habit of latching on", "always looking for someone to love me", "always thinking that no-one loves me", and "always waiting for partners to do something [hurtful]".

Interestingly, some participants' comments pointed to the likelihood of their relational expectations and behaviours being self-fulfilling. For example, one participant talked about "pushing people away because of fear of being rejected by them", and another stated that she "always set people up to fail". Unfortunately, these sorts of responses tend to produce the negative relational outcomes that maintain or increase insecurity. Another respondent suggested that her insecurity (which she saw as related to the adoption experience) had not only frightened off friends and romantic partners, but also impacted negatively on her own offspring:

"I've never felt that I've given them what I could have, had I not been adopted. I've passed on the insecurity; I've passed on the fear of abandonment. My children are insecure a bit, my daughter extremely so, my eldest. Fear of rejection. She has actually said to me, (she's 15 now), "Mum, I just wanted you to love me more."

These comments are consistent with the notion of the intergenerational transmission of attachment difficulties (van IJzendoorn, 1995). According to the intergenerational transmission hypothesis, individuals who lose confidence in their parents as attachment figures tend, as adults, to have difficulty in developing stable couple bonds, and in acting as a secure base for their offspring.

General Discussion and Conclusions

The studies of hurt feelings and adoption reported in this paper suggest some common themes. In particular, a range of data from these studies (e.g., structured questionnaires, ratings of specific relational events, interview material) suggest that issues of perceived rejection are central. Bowlby's formulation of attachment theory is directly relevant to these issues; his theory highlighted the universal and lifelong need for connection and felt security, and the role of warm, accepting attachment figures in satisfying this need. As suggested earlier, Bowlby's classic observations of the nature and importance of attachment bonds in humans and other primate species fit with conclusions based on recent neuro-imaging data (Eisenberger et al., 2003): Perceived rejection has a deep, visceral impact, akin to that of physical injury.

The attachment perspective also sheds light on individual differences in responses to perceived rejection. Both theory and research suggest that individual differences in attachment-related attitudes and behaviours are most pronounced under stressful conditions, including conditions in which close relationships are perceived to be threatened (Feeney, 2004b). In such conditions, anxious individuals experience extreme distress, engage in self-blame and other types of emotion-focused coping, and show a clingy yet coercive style of relating that may alienate their partners. It is not surprising that relationship anxiety is an important dimension in understanding responses to rejection. Indeed, Fraley and Shaver (2000, pp. 142-143) defined attachment-related anxiety as the individual's tendency toward "anxiety and vigilance concerning rejection and abandonment". Further, all these effects can be understood in terms of the chronic hyperactivation of the attachment system, as indicated by recent priming studies. That is, anxious individuals exhibit ready access to a range of attachment themes, including fears of rejection and abandonment, even in non-stressful contexts (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). In contrast, avoidant individuals experience relatively little attachment-related distress, unless the situation is so stressful that their usual defences fail them (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). However, their tendency to downplay attachment needs may again alienate relationship partners, especially those who are seeking high levels of intimacy. In these ways, negative working models are likely to drive dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours, which in turn may reinforce insecurity.

Issues related to perceptions of acceptance and rejection are relevant to practitioners who work with individuals and couples, as well as to researchers. In recent years, a number of authors have discussed attachment-related approaches to counselling and therapy. Some of these approaches have focused directly on changing mental representations (working models) of attachment, by increasing clients' conscious awareness of their expectations and "rules" for relationships (e.g., Sperling & Lyons, 1994). Others have focused more heavily on the role of emotional experience. For example, Johnson (2003, p. 12) has argued that "creating compelling emotional experiences" which are inconsistent with existing mental models is a particularly powerful way to disconfirm fears of rejection and abandonment. Similarly, Levy and Orlans (2003) described an emotion-focused therapy designed specifically to help adoptees deal with grief stemming from the loss of attachment (physiological and psychological) to the birth mother; this therapy is based on such attachment

principles as empathy, support, attunement, and reciprocity.

In considering issues related to perceived rejection, however, it is important to keep in mind that hurtful events are not universally destructive or divisive. Many instances of hurt feelings are successfully negotiated by relationship partners, particularly if the offender is perceived as acting unintentionally, and as holding the victim in high regard (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). As noted earlier, recent research into hurt feelings also indicates that relational damage is reduced when the offender expresses remorse and seeks forgiveness, and when the victim refrains from strong expressions of anger and sarcasm (Feeney, 2004a); these findings are relevant to those coming to terms with the adoption experience, including the possibility of searches and reunions. Equally, it is important to note that the experiences and concerns of adoptees are very diverse, and that the likelihood and severity of attachment disorder will depend on a range of factors, including age at adoption, prior interactions with caregivers, and experiences within the adoptive family (Levy & Orlans, 2003). Indeed, as noted earlier, more than one-third of the adoptees in our sample saw themselves as securely attached, and one participant suggested that her unique experiences with adoptive and biological families had promoted positive relational outcomes, by making her more tolerant of the ambiguities and complexities that characterise family life. The varying outcomes of hurtful events, and of the adoption experience, undoubtedly reflect two relational dynamics that have been expounded by attachment theorists: First, actual partner behaviours vary in terms of acceptance-rejection; and second, rejection nevertheless lies, to some extent, in the eye of the beholder.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, *44*, 709-716.
- Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *61*, 226-244.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*, 497-529.
- Baxter, L. A. (1986). Gender differences in the heterosexual relationship rules embedded in break-up accounts. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *3*, 289-306.
- Borders, L. D., Penny, J. M., & Portnoy, F. (2000). Adult adoptees and their friends: Current functioning and psychosocial well-being. *Family Relations*, *49*, 407-418.

- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol.2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. London: Tavistock.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Vol.3. Loss*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brodzinsky, D. M. (1990). A stress and coping model of adoption adjustment. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), *The psychology of adoption* (pp. 3-24). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, N. L. (1996). Working models of attachment: Implications for explanation, emotion, and behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71*, 810-832.
- Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1994). Cognitive representations of attachment: The structure and function of working models. In K. Bartholomew & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships* (Vol. 5, pp. 53-90). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Downey, G., & Feldman, S. I. (1996). Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 1327-1343.
- Edens, J. F., & Cavell, T. A. (1999). A review and reformulation of adoptive relationships from an attachment perspective. *Adoption Quarterly, 3*, 43-70.
- Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science, 302*, 290-292.
- Feeney, J. A. (1999). Adult romantic attachment and couple relationships. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *The handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 355-377). New York: Guilford.
- Feeney, J. A. (2004a). Hurt feelings in couple relationships: Towards integrative models of the negative effects of hurtful events. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21*, 487-508.
- Feeney, J. A. (2004b). Adult attachment and relationship functioning under stressful conditions: Understanding partners' responses to conflict and challenge. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Adult attachment: New directions and emerging issues* (pp. 339-364). New York: Guilford.
- Feeney, J. A. (2005). Hurt feelings in couple relationships: Exploring the role of attachment and perceptions of personal injury. *Personal Relationships, 12*, 253-271.
- Feeney, J. A., & Noller, P. (1996). *Adult attachment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Feeney, J. A., Noller, P., & Hanrahan, M. (1994). Assessing adult attachment: Developments in the conceptualization of security and insecurity. In M. B. Sperling & W. H. Berman (Eds.), *Attachment in adults: Theory, assessment, and treatment* (pp. 128-152). New York: Guilford.
- Feeney, J. A., Passmore, N. L., & Peterson, C. C. (2004, October). *Adoption and attachment security: The role of family and search/reunion experiences*. Paper presented at the 2nd National Conference on the Mental Health Aspects of Persons Affected by Family Separation, Brisbane, Australia.
- Fitness, J. (2001). Betrayal, rejection, revenge, and forgiveness: An interpersonal script approach. In M. R. Leary (Ed.), *Interpersonal rejection* (pp. 73-103). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fraley, R. C., & Shaver, P. R. (1997). Adult attachment and the suppression of unwanted thoughts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 1080-1091.
- Fraley, R. C., & Shaver, P. R. (2000). Adult romantic attachment: Theoretical developments, emerging controversies, and unanswered questions. *Review of General Psychology, 4*, 132-154.
- Hill, A., & Feeney, J. A. (2004, August). *Perspective-related differences in evaluations of hurtful events: A vignette study*. Paper presented at the 39th conference of the Australian Psychological Society, Sydney, Australia.
- Johnson, S. M. (2003). Attachment theory: A guide for couple therapy. In S. M. Johnson & V. E. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp. 103-123). New York: Guilford.
- Johnson, S. M., Maikinen, J., & Millikin, J. (2001). Attachment injuries in couple relationships: A new perspective on impasses in couples therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 27*, 145-155.
- Jones, A. (1997). Issues relevant to therapy with adoptees. *Psychotherapy, 34*, 64-68.
- Kowalski, R. M. (2001). The aversive side of social interaction revisited. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving badly: Aversive behaviors in interpersonal relationships* (pp. 297-309). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Leary, M. R. (2001). Toward a conceptualization or interpersonal rejection. In M. R. Leary (Ed.), *Interpersonal rejection* (pp. 3-20). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leary, M. R., & Downs, D. L. (1995). Interpersonal functions of the self-esteem motive: The self-esteem as a sociometer. In M. H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 123-144). New York: Plenum.
- Leary, M. R., & Springer, C. A. (2001). Hurt feelings: The neglected emotion. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving badly: Aversive behaviors in interpersonal relationships* (pp. 151-175). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Leary, M. R., Springer, C., Negel, L., Ansell, E., & Evans, K. (1998). The causes, phenomenology, and consequences of hurt feelings. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*, 1225-1237.

- Leon, I. G. (2002). Adoption losses: Naturally occurring or socially constructed? *Child Development, 73*, 652-663.
- Levy, T. M., & Orlans, M. (2003). Creating and repairing attachments in biological, foster, and adoptive families. In S. M. Johnson & V. E. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp. 165-190). New York: Guilford.
- Nickman, S. L. (1985). Losses in adoption: The need for dialogue. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, 40*, 365-398.
- Noller, P., Feeney, J. A., & Peterson, C. (2001). *Personal relationships across the lifespan*. Hove, UK, & Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.
- Panksepp, J. (2003). Feeling the pain of social loss. *Science, 302*, 237-239.
- Pilkington, C. J., & Richardson, D. R. (1988). Perceptions of risk in intimacy. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 6*, 505-510.
- Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2002). Attachment-related psychodynamics. *Attachment & Human Development, 4*, 133-161.
- Shaver, P., Schwartz, J., Kirson, D., & O'Connor, C. (1987). Emotion knowledge: Further exploration of a prototype approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 1061-1086.
- Sobol, M. P., & Cardiff, J. (1983). A sociopsychological investigation of adult adoptees' search for birth parents. *Family Relations, 32*, 477-483.
- Sperling, M. B., & Lyons, L. S. (1994). Representations of attachment and psychotherapeutic change. In M. B. Sperling & W. H. Berman (Eds.), *Attachment in adults: Theory, assessment, and treatment* (pp.331-347). New York: Guilford.
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Young, S. L. (2000). When words hurt: The effects of perceived intentionality on interpersonal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17*, 393-424.
- van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1995). Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the Adult Attachment Interview. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*, 387-403.
- Verrier, N. N. (1993). *The primal wound: Understanding the adopted child*. Baltimore: Gateway Press.
- widely in the areas of marital and family relationships, interpersonal communication, and the link between personal relationship and health.

Correspondence to: Assoc. Prof. Judith Feeney
 School of Psychology
 McElwain Building
 The University of Queensland
 St Lucia, QLD, 4072
 Australia

Research Profile

Judith Feeney is an associate professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland. She has published