The Interactive Effects of Chronic Attachment Anxiety and Acute Rejection on Belonging Regulation and Relationship Initiation Behaviours

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Abstract

Because individuals possess a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), being rejected is an extremely aversive experience. Rejected individuals are motivated to alleviate their social pain and fulfill threatened belonging needs by seeking sources of affiliation. However, rejected individuals are also motivated to avoid further rejection, and may withdraw from social situations. Regulating threatened belonging needs creates an internal approach-avoidance conflict within individuals where they simultaneously desire to approach sources of affiliation, while avoiding painful rejection. A review of the belonging literature supports both motivational outcomes, showing how individuals can react pro-socially or with withdrawal, and sometimes even aggression, when belonging needs are threatened. I propose that individual differences, particularly in regards to adult attachment style, play an important role in determining how individuals resolve the approach-avoidance conflict inherent in belonging regulation. Chronic attachment insecurity may impede the belonging regulation process, as the approach-avoidance conflict may be especially amplified in the anxiously attached and suppressed in avoidantly attached individuals. Because initiating a romantic relationship can be a highly effective way to satiate belonging needs, but comes at a high risk for rejection, I examined how differences in attachment style influence how individuals cope with threatened belonging needs in the context of romantic relationship initiation. In one study, participants experienced either rejection or inclusion in a ball-tossing game, or were assigned to a control condition. They then viewed photographs of potential dating partners, and rated how interested they would be.
in dating each individual. Results showed that attachment anxiety was positively associated with the motivation to affiliate with the potential dating partners when individuals were not rejected in the ball-tossing game. But when highly anxious individuals were rejected, they expressed significantly less desire to affiliate with the dating targets. In contrast, low anxious individuals worked to fulfill threatened belonging needs by rating the dating targets as significantly more dateable following rejection. The effects of being included in the ball-tossing game did not significantly differ from the control condition, suggesting that it is rejection that is responsible for the changes in the anxiously attached’s affiliative motivation.

Attachment avoidance was unrelated to how individuals regulated belongingness in the context of relationship initiation. Exploratory analyses revealed that self-esteem was highly correlated with attachment anxiety, but the effects of attachment anxiety remained even when controlling for self-esteem, suggesting that anxious attachment has a distinct influence on belonging regulation. The results of the study demonstrate that attachment style plays an important role in influencing how individuals regulate belonging needs following rejection, and the literature would benefit from taking a closer look at how chronic attachment style interacts with acute threats to belonging to predict belonging regulatory behaviours.
Résumé

Le rejet social étant une expérience extrêmement aversive puisque l’être humain possèdent un besoin fondamental d'appartenance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), certains individus venant d’être rejetés sont motivés à soulager leur douleur sociale et combler leurs besoins d’appartenance en trouvant de nouvelles sources d'affiliation. D’autres peuvent être motivés à éviter un second rejet, décidant ainsi de se retirer des situations sociales. Lorsque les besoins d’appartenance d’un individu sont menacés, la régulation de ces derniers crée un conflit interne d’approche-évitement. Ainsi, à la suite d’un rejet, une personne peut à la fois désirer approcher des sources d'affiliation, et éviter un rejet douloureux. Une revue de la littérature montre d’une part que les individus peuvent réagir de façon prosociale ou agressive, et d’autre part qu’ils peuvent simplement se retirer des situations sociales. Je propose que des différences individuelles, telles que le style d'attachement adulte, jouent un rôle important dans la façon dont les individus ressissentent le conflit approche-évitement inhérent à la régulation des besoins d’appartenance. Un attachement insécure chronique pourrait entraver ce processus de régulation, étant donné que le conflit approche-évitement pourrait être particulièrement amplifié pour les individus avec un attachement anxieux et supprimé pour les individus avec un attachement évitant. Par conséquent, j’ai décidé d’examiner la manière dont les différents styles d'attachement adulte influencent la réaction des individus dont les besoins d’appartenance sont menacés en contexte de rencontre amoureuse puisqu’uninitier une relation amoureuse peut être un moyen très efficace pour assouvir ses besoins d'appartenance, mais présente également un risque élevé de rejet. Dans la présente
étude, les participants étaient assignés à la condition de rejet ou d’inclusion par l’entremise d’un jeu de balle, ou au groupe contrôle. Ils devaient ensuite évaluer leur intérêt à rencontrer des partenaires potentiels en regardant des photographies de profil. Les résultats montrent que l’attachement anxieux est positivement associé à la motivation de s’affilier à des partenaires potentiels lorsque les individus n’ont pas été rejetés dans le jeu de balle. Toutefois, si ces personnes ont été rejetées durant le jeu de balle, ils expriment un désir nettement moins élevé de s’affilier à des partenaires potentiels. En revanche, suite à un rejet social, les individus peu anxieux tentent de combler leurs besoins d’appartenance menacés en indiquant qu’ils sont beaucoup plus intéressés à rencontrer un partenaire potentiel. De plus, la condition d’inclusion ne diffère pas significativement de la condition contrôle, suggérant que le rejet est à l’origine du changement de comportement d’affiliation des personnes anxieuses. L’attachement évitant n’est pas lié à la façon dont les individus régulent leurs besoins d’appartenance dans un contexte de rencontre de partenaires amoureux potentiels. Bien que des analyses exploratoires montrent que l’estime de soi est fortement corrigée à un attachement anxieux, les effets de l’attachement anxieux demeurent significatifs dans cette étude, même après avoir contrôlé pour l’estime de soi, ce qui suggère que l’attachement anxieux a une influence distincte sur la façon de réguler un besoin d’appartenance menacé. Les résultats de la présente étude démontrent que le style d'attachement joue un rôle important en influençant la façon dont les individus régulent leurs besoins d’appartenance à la suite d’un rejet, et les chercheurs gagneraient à examiner de plus près la façon dont le style d'attachement chronique
interagit avec des menaces aigües d’appartenance afin de prédire comment les individus régulent leurs besoins d’appartenance.
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Introduction

No man is an island. – John Donne

I am a rock / I am an island / And a rock feels no pain / And an island never cries. – Simon & Garfunkel

As John Donne implies, developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships is a particularly powerful and important human motivation. Indeed, research suggests that individuals possess a fundamental need to belong: they strive to seek out positive social interactions and form social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This need is as essential to an individual’s survival as eating and drinking. Just as hunger and thirst signal the need to replenish with food and water, threats to belonging, like social exclusion, facilitate social functioning, signaling the need to restore connections with others. The consequences of not fulfilling this need to belong can be detrimental, and in some cases devastating, to one’s psychological and physical health. In fact, social isolation is as much a threat to longevity as smoking, and mortality from all causes of death is significantly higher among individuals with poor quality relationships than among those with rich social lives (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Because of these deleterious consequences, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that individuals should be particularly motivated to satisfy unmet belongingness needs by seeking out social connections to restore feelings of belonging. And yet, there is a striking amount of evidence to suggest that in the face of belonging threats, individuals do the exact opposite, ignoring opportunities for reconnections, and even behaving antisocially (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). The present research aims to resolve why there are such varying
and contrasting responses to belonging threats by analyzing the important role that individual differences play in regulating belonging needs.

Perhaps the most obvious and acute threat to belonging is the experience of interpersonal rejection. Not only is rejection painful (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), but it also instills a potentially anxiety-provoking conflict within individuals. To reiterate, since belonging is a fundamental need, when this need is threatened, the most logical reaction is to work to restore belonging needs by seeking out other sources of affiliation. However, a host of research supports the notion that threatened belonging needs lead to antisocial responses. Anecdotally, it is easy to imagine a rejected person becoming despondent, and withdrawing from social situations. Indeed, research has shown how rejected individuals can act socially withdrawn (Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, & Knowles, 2009) and become less prosocial (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007), sometimes even acting out with aggression (e.g., Twenge et al., 2001). Yet at the same time, it is equally easy to imagine how being rejected could lead to the desire to affiliate, wanting to heal the pain by seeking closeness to and comfort from others. Sure enough, a wealth of recent research supports this idea that rejection leads to prosocial, belonging regulatory behaviours (e.g., Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). It appears then that rejected individuals simultaneously want to approach sources of belonging while avoiding further rejection. Thus, there is an approach-avoidance conflict inherent in experiences of rejection.

One way to interpret these dual motivations brought on by rejection is by bringing them in line with a larger framework of behaviour regulation. Indeed,
there is evidence to suggest that at least in the context of romantic relationships, threats to relational security activate a base regulatory system of broad approach and avoidance goals that can influence behaviour in both relational and non-relational domains, suggesting an inherent link between relational risk and a broader approach-avoidance system (Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009).

Gray and McNaughton (2000) created a model of behaviour regulation that proposes that there are three major physiological systems of basic human motivations. The first is the fight-flight-freeze system (FFFS) that is sensitive to aversive stimuli in the environment, producing fear and the motivation to avoid and escape the aversive source. The second is the behavioural approach system (BAS) that is sensitive to appetitive stimuli, producing anticipatory pleasure and the motivation to approach the rewarding source. In terms of regulating belonging needs, the FFFS appears to represent the fear and desire to avoid the danger of further rejection, whereas the BAS represents the desire to affiliate and approach new people, rewarding sources of need-fulfillment. What is most relevant to the present research is the third physiological system: the behavioural inhibition system (BIS). The main purpose of the BIS system is to resolve the conflict between competing approach and avoidance motivations brought on by the BAS and the FFFS, respectively. Thus, if an individual is motivated to avoid aversive stimuli, such as further rejection, but simultaneously wants to approach appetitive stimuli, such as new sources of affiliation, the BIS becomes activated, producing anxiety about the internal goal conflict. In this way, experiences of rejection are likely to elicit BIS activation. Furthermore, when the BIS is activated in response to belonging threats, individuals become even more sensitive to the negative
consequences of rejection, exhibiting increased social pain and decreased need satisfaction (Yanagisawa et al., 2011).

It is no wonder that the current belonging literature is divided on how individuals respond to rejection, as the experience of rejection in-and-of-itself creates an internal conflict within the individual between approach and avoidance motivations. Notably, this internal conflict is linked to anxiety, worry, and rumination (Corr, 2005). Thus, it is likely that people who are more prone to worry and anxiety may be especially affected by conflicting approach and avoidance motivations. In terms of the conflicting motivations of belonging regulation, more socially anxious people might respond to rejection in different ways. Those who chronically feel anxiety and concern about relationships might be particularly affected by acute belonging threats. Moreover, these individuals may react to acute belonging threats in striking and vastly different ways than less anxious individuals.

The overarching goal of the present research is to examine the role of individual differences in resolving the internal goal conflict brought upon by rejection. Specifically, I have chosen to focus on individual differences in adult attachment style. Because the primary motivation of the attachment system is to seek safety and security from threat by fostering relationships with close others (Bowlby, 1969), it is inextricably tied to belonging regulation. Attachment anxiety in particular is associated with both fears of rejection and a chronic need for affiliation, and thus in regards to belonging regulation, attachment anxiety is the approach-avoidance conflict manifested, and strongly tied to the BIS system (MacDonald & Kingsbury, 2006). On the other hand, attachment avoidance is
related to a general disinterest in close relationships and a focus on self-reliance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Avoidant individuals tend to devalue the importance of others, failing to see others as reliable sources of support and security, while holding negative expectations about relationships, expecting them to fail (Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009). Therefore, avoidants would be expected to experience little approach-avoidance conflict in the face of rejection, as they downplay the threat of rejection and are not especially motivated to approach new sources of affiliation.

The limited research on the interplay between attachment and belonging regulation suggests that exploring the unique ways in which anxious and avoidant individuals respond to belonging threats is a complex and novel research avenue to pursue. Because romantic partners frequently serve as attachment figures in adulthood, I have chosen to examine how acute belonging threats interact with chronic attachment style in the context of romantic relationship initiation. Relationship initiation is anxiety provoking, presenting individuals with the same internal goal conflict as regulating belonging needs. Is it wiser to risk being rejected and approach relationship initiation opportunities, or avoid these opportunities out of fear of rejection? Moreover, how do romantic initiation dynamics play out following an acute, but unrelated experience of rejection?

A review of the relevant literature makes it clear that thus far there has been little focus on the role of individual differences in resolving the approach-avoidance conflict of regulating belonging needs, particularly in regards to adult attachment style and in the context of romantic relationship initiation.

*Antisocial Responses to Rejection*
A large portion of the belonging literature focuses on the avoidance spectrum of the approach-avoidance conflict of rejection. Many rejected individuals tend to fearfully withdraw and sometimes even antisocially aggress following instances of exclusion. If belonging is a fundamental need then behaving antisocially is a dysfunctional response, as it prevents rejected individuals from satiating their threatened belonging needs. Whereas many studies have shown how rejected individuals behave antisocially and retaliate against those who had rejected them (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004), there is evidence that excluded people respond to innocent bystanders in the same antisocial manner.

For instance, participants were either included or excluded from a ball-tossing game, and then were given the option of aggressing against an innocent target. Participants were told that the targets did not like spicy food, but they could assign them to eat food with hot sauce. Participants who were excluded from the ball-tossing game gave innocent targets four times as much hot sauce as included participants (Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Rejected participants are also more likely than included participants to deliver unpleasant noise blasts to innocent third parties (Twenge et al., 2001). In a similar vein, excluded individuals behave less prosocially than their included counterparts, offering to donate less money to a worthy cause, and becoming less helpful towards and less willing to cooperate with innocent others (Twenge, Baumeister, et al., 2007). Although these are not overtly aggressive, antisocial behaviours, they certainly do not help rejected individuals win over new friends and fulfill threatened belonging needs.
Encouragingly, excluded individuals do not always aggress against innocent bystanders, as illustrated by studies showing that excluded participants will not retaliate against rejecters’ outgroup members (Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O’Mara, 2008) and will even behave prosocially towards confederates who gave them positive feedback (Twenge et al., 2001). One study provides a potential explanation for these inconsistent findings by demonstrating how positive social connections can eliminate the increase in aggression following belonging threats (Twenge, Zhang, et al., 2007). After anticipating a lonely future, participants were asked to write and think about either important people in their lives (i.e., close family members or favourite celebrities) or their most recent meal. Those who recalled people with whom they have good relationships—even parasocial relationships with cherished celebrities—were significantly less aggressive towards an innocent bystander compared to those who wrote about a meal. The mere thought of another person had the power to buffer against the threat to belonging and reduce aggressive tendencies. This finding suggests that believing that any type of acceptance, whether real or imagined, is a possibility, can help inhibit the negative, antisocial consequences of interpersonal rejection.

Perhaps following a belonging threat, rejected individuals expect that more rejection is on the horizon, and thus react accordingly, avoiding opportunities to behave prosocially and even trying to hurt others before others can further hurt them. Maybe by changing rejected individuals’ negative expectations, it is possible to inhibit their fear of further rejection, making them more likely to approach opportunities for affiliation. It is also possible that certain personality types may be more prone to negative expectancies of further rejection.
Because attachment anxiety is associated with ambivalence about interpersonal relationships, as anxious individuals both strongly fear rejection and desire affiliation (Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On, & Ein-Dor, 2010), it is likely that situational rejection will shift the balance in anxious individuals’ expectancies to the negative side, making them especially unlikely to behave prosocially following a threat to belonging.

Notably, the vast majority of studies that found increases in antisocial behaviour following social exclusion did not provide participants with an outlet for gaining acceptance nor did they examine the role of individual differences in determining behavioural outcomes. Although participants in these studies are given the opportunity to retaliate against their rejecters or hurt innocent bystanders, they are not given the opportunity to seek and establish meaningful social connections. But in the real world, exclusion experiences are often countered with opportunities to fulfill belonging needs, as individuals can seek social support from close friends or activate attachment figures. Many laboratory studies fail to capture these complex dynamics of the human social experience.

Perhaps when at least non-anxious individuals believe that gaining social acceptance is a viable option, instead of behaving aggressively, they work towards restoring belongingness needs. What may be missing from many social exclusion studies are explicit opportunities for affiliation. Because rejected people interpret the world as hostile (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009), they may need overt cues of acceptance to compete against contextually activated hostile cognitive biases. When excluded individuals are met with positive feedback (Twenge et al., 2001) or thoughts of close others (Twenge, Zhang, et al., 2007),
they may realize that the world is not such a hostile place, and that building social connections is more adaptive than seeking vengeance.

Depending on the nature of the exclusion experience, rejection in-and-of itself may act as a sign of potential acceptance. Molden and colleagues have shown that different types of rejection lead to varying interpersonal behaviours and opposing motivations for fulfilling belonging needs (Molden, et al., 2009). When individuals are explicitly and actively rejected (i.e., being told they are not part of a group or that they are not liked), they become prevention-focused, acting socially withdrawn as a way to prevent further social losses. Explicitly rejected individuals also exhibit stronger feelings of agitation and anxiety.

Taken together, these effects suggest that explicit rejection activates negative expectancies for further rejection, causing individuals to become hypervigilant for threat, as they are more concerned with preventing social losses than with reestablishing social connections. Perhaps explicit rejection is connected to the FFFS, in that it inspires fearful avoidance of the aversive rejection experience. If individuals are solely focusing on threat, negatively expecting to experience further rejection, and fearfully avoiding opportunities for social gain, they are likely downplaying positive social feedback, missing out on opportunities to fulfill threatened belonging needs. For them, there really is no approach-avoidance conflict at play, as antisocial withdrawal seems like the only viable response to exclusion.

In contrast, implicit rejection (i.e., being ignored) creates promotion-focused orientations in individuals, leading to increased efforts to restore social contacts. These individuals are less vigilant for threat and more aware of
opportunities for achieving social gains. Perhaps because being ignored is a less extreme, implicit form of rejection, it also reinforces the belief that restoring belonging is a real possibility. Implicit rejection experiences can signal the potential for further acceptance, motivating individuals to seek out social connections without activating negative expectancies of further rejection. In this way, implicit rejection may overlap with the BAS, in that it inspires approach motivation, leading to more attempts to satiate belongingness.

What is of pertinent interest of the present research however, is not how different types of rejection elicit different behavioural responses, but how different types of people respond to the same type of rejection. It is possible that certain individuals may be more prone to FFFS activation in the face of either explicit or implicit rejection, tending to, fearfully avoid opportunities for affiliation. But other individuals may see the opportunity for social gain after a rejection experience. While the abovementioned research suggests that rejection often leads to withdrawal and even antisocial behaviour, it also highlights the fact that giving rejected individuals a viable outlet for gaining acceptance may help curb antisocial tendencies. However, this may only be true for certain individuals, as it may be particularly difficult for an anxiously attached individual to believe that affiliation is a viable option following rejection. Fortunately, an encouraging line of research suggests that at least some rejected people will independently search for signs of social acceptance.

**Belonging Regulation**

Although individuals may become hypervigilant for threat when they are excluded, they also actively look for ways to fulfill threatened belonging needs.
One study found that acute experiences of social exclusion are associated with an enhanced sensitivity to social cues (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Specifically, individuals who were randomly assigned to experience exclusion displayed a heightened ability to attend to and identify the emotional valence of vocal tones and emotional expressions in faces. These individuals were also better at understanding and interpreting other people’s thoughts and feelings, suggesting that they were paying more attention to social information. Similarly, lonely individuals, who experience chronic deficits in belonging, exhibit the same enhanced ability as experimentally rejected individuals at decoding vocal tones and have a superior memory for socially relevant information and interpersonal events (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005). Notably, the enhanced performance of those with unmet belonging needs is specific to social perception and does not extend to more general cognitive skills (Pickett et al., 2004). These findings suggest that following threats to belonging, individuals pay special attention to their social environment in an effort to find ways to procure acceptance and restore threatened needs.

Socially excluded individuals’ enhanced ability to decode, interpret, and attend to social information is evident at all stages of perceptual processing. The abovementioned studies focused on downstream cognitive processes, such as memory and social judgments, but there is evidence that excluded individuals exhibit selective attention to signs of acceptance at the level of basic, early-stage perceptual processing (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). Following a threat to belonging, individuals are faster to identify smiling faces, suggesting that they selectively attend to social acceptance cues. Furthermore, eye-tracking and dot
probe tasks reveal that rejected people fixate the majority of their attention on smiling faces and are slower to disengage their attention from such faces (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). Moreover, even individuals who have not experienced a direct belonging threat can become less sensitive to rejection by modifying their early stage perceptual processing of social information. Specifically, when trained to direct attention away from socially threatening material and to fixate attention on signs of acceptance, some individuals become less hypervigilant for threats to belonging (Dandeneau, Baldwin, Baccus, Sakellaropoulo, & Pruessner, 2007).

DeWall and colleagues argue that compared to downstream processes, these early-stage perceptual processes are the more fundamental mechanisms, underlying the complex processes like enhanced social memory and social judgments displayed by excluded individuals (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). The fact that excluded individuals engage in such basic processing of signs of acceptance suggests that the need to fulfill unmet belonging needs is hardwired and outside of conscious control. These early perceptual processes set the stage for the more controlled behavioural mechanisms of regulating belongingness.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that excluded individuals do take behavioural measures to restore belonging needs. For instance, socially excluded individuals are more likely to conform, modifying their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours in an attempt to ingratiate themselves to new social groups and gain social acceptance (e.g., Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). In one study, participants were either included or ostracized from an online ball-tossing game, and were then asked to perform a perception task. Before making their perceptual judgments, participants viewed the responses of five other people who gave
unanimously incorrect answers. Ostracized participants conformed to the incorrect answers significantly more than included participants, suggesting that ostracized participant were attempting to restore their threatened need of belonging by winning over the group (Williams et al., 2000).

Similarly, individuals with unmet belonging needs are highly susceptible to social influence, forming attitudes that are consistent with their peers, who they likely see as potential sources of affiliation (DeWall, 2010). When excluded individuals are not given the opportunity to conform, they will engage in other belonging regulation strategies. Specifically, excluded individuals will activate and amplify their social identities, spontaneously thinking of themselves as members of larger social groups (Knowles & Gardner, 2008). In turn, their social identities and social connections become more salient (Pickett & Gardner, 2005), and they view these social connections as more important and meaningful (Knowles & Gardner, 2008).

Clearly, threats to belonging prompt individuals to seek out potential avenues to alleviate such threats. One theory of threat reduction, the self-esteem maintenance model, posits that threats to self-esteem can be alleviated by affirming unrelated cherished aspects of the self (Tesser, 2000). Thus, following a threat to belonging, individuals should attempt to restore their threatened needs by seeking self-affirmation in domains unrelated to belonging and social connection. However, recent evidence suggests that belonging regulation is distinct from self-esteem maintenance, as loss of belonging acts as a unique threat to self-esteem (Knowles, Lucas, Molden, Gardner, & Dean, 2010). This belonging maintenance model asserts that the most effective way to restore self-esteem following a threat
to belonging is by affirming belonging needs over other unrelated affirmation strategies.

Knowles et al. (2010) demonstrated the belonging maintenance model through a series of studies, where individuals were either faced with a belonging threat (i.e., social exclusion) or a threat to intellectual abilities. Those who experienced the belonging threat preferred direct affirmation strategies designed to enhance belongingness. Additionally, although indirect, unrelated affirmations repaired intelligence threats, they were not effective at repairing threats to belonging, suggesting that people with threatened belonging needs feel better about themselves not when they bolster esteem in unrelated areas, but when they specifically seek to restore social bonds. This theory of belonging regulation is consistent with Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) model of belonging as a fundamental need. Just as eating food will not replenish the dehydrated, nonsocial affirmation strategies will not satiate threatened belonging needs.

Following the belonging maintenance model, socially excluded individuals should not only inhibit aggressive tendencies, but they should actively seek out new social connections. Although the aforementioned studies provide evidence that excluded individuals engage in cognitive and behavioural strategies to deal with unmet belonging needs, these studies fail to show that social exclusion leads to the active search for new sources of affiliation. However, Maner and colleagues (2007) propose that under certain circumstances, socially excluded people may be motivated to forge new social bonds. Specifically, following a threat to belonging, individuals behaved prosocially, forming positive impressions and behaving generously towards others, suggesting that they were
interested in affiliating with other people. Yet, these excluded individuals only behaved generously toward people with whom they anticipated a future interaction and only when these people were not the original perpetrators of rejection (Maner et al., 2007). However, while rejected participants’ positive impressions and generous behaviour suggests that they may have been interested in affiliating with others, they only expressed a general interest in people, never showing direct motivation to affiliate. Thus, it is still unclear whether or not individuals would capitalize on opportunities for affiliation following rejection. What the findings do indicate is that when belonging needs go unmet, people can react prosocially, and at least to a certain extent, will express interest in other people.

Social exclusion creates two conflicting motivations: rejected individuals actively try to avoid further threats to belonging, all while cautiously seeking fulfillment of unmet belonging needs. But what the vast majority of the belonging literature fails to capture is how individual differences interact with acute experiences of social exclusion. To reiterate, it is possible that certain people are more fearful and avoidant of further threats to belonging, and more cautious in their search for need fulfillment.

*The Role of Individual Differences in Regulating Belongingness*

Although there is clear evidence that excluded individuals are interested in other people (e.g., Maner et al., 2007), their interest in others comes with one caveat: in order for rejected individuals to seek out new social bonds, they must be low in fear of negative evaluation (Maner et al., 2007). Individuals who are high in fear of negative evaluation chronically anticipate negative social
evaluation, approaching social interactions with pessimism and viewing others as threatening rather than as sources of belonging. Following a threat to belonging, these highly fearful individuals do not express an interest in affiliation, and instead, view new sources of affiliation with negative attitudes and disdain. Furthermore, compared to less socially anxious people, after a rejection experience, these individuals engage in less eye contact and have a distant and unenthusiastic vocal quality to their speech, exhibiting behaviours consistent with social withdrawal (Mallott, Maner, DeWall, & Schmidt, 2009). For individuals high in negative evaluation, belonging threats likely confirm their pessimistic view of social situations, prompting antisocial responses rather than adaptive affiliative behaviours. These individuals are more concerned with preventing further social losses than with achieving social gains and restoring threatened belonging needs.

A similar argument can be made for people with low self-esteem. The sociometer theory of self-esteem asserts that feelings of belonging and self-esteem are inextricably linked (Leary, 2005). According to this theory, self-esteem is a subjective gauge that measures the quality of individuals’ relationships with others (Leary & MacDonald, 2003). The way people respond to their present interpersonal circumstances is influenced by their overall trait self-esteem. Low trait self-esteem is associated with chronic feelings of exclusion, and develops from a history of perceiving rejection from others. Therefore, individuals with low self-esteem exhibit hypervigilance for threat, and will be especially hurt when socially excluded. Indeed, individuals with low self-esteem experience even mild rejection as extremely threatening (Ford & Collins, 2010). These individuals are
also more vulnerable to belonging threats within romantic relationships. In the face of threats to their romantic relationships, low self-esteem individuals’ extreme sensitivity to rejection lead to feelings of uncertainty about the quality of their relationship and their relationship partners (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). Even when their romantic partners love, value, and accept them, low self-esteem individuals are unable to recognize obvious signs of acceptance (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001).

Perhaps low self-esteem individuals are unable to recognize acceptance cues and adequately restore belonging needs when threatened because they prioritize self-protection goals in close relationships (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). When individuals’ belonging needs are threatened, they experience a conflict between the desire to restore belongingness by connecting with others, and the goal of protecting the self from further social threats. Murray et al. (2008) argue that when individuals experience threat within the context of close relationships, high self-esteem people resolve the conflict by downplaying self-protecting goals, and seeking out interdependence and closeness within their relationships. In contrast, low self-esteem people fear further threats to belonging and therefore do not want to take the risk of connecting with others. Instead, they prioritize self-protection goals, feeling less close to their partners, and failing to satiate their already threatened belongingness needs (Murray et al., 2008). There is evidence that low-self-esteem individuals prioritize self-protection even in non-relational domains, as following a belonging threat, they tend to make more conservative nonsocial decisions, suggesting that belonging regulation may be inextricably tied to broader basic regulatory systems of approach-avoidance.
motivation (Cavallo et al., 2009).

Although the above research examines how low self-esteem and social anxiety interact with acute experiences of rejection to predict belonging regulatory behaviours, the literature has largely overlooked perhaps the most important individual difference in regards to belonging regulation: one’s adult attachment style. Adult attachment theory posits that individual differences in attachment are generally organized around two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety is characterized by a preoccupation with establishing and maintaining closeness with others, while chronically fearing interpersonal rejection (e.g., Fraley & Davis, 1997). In contrast, attachment avoidance is associated with low levels of closeness and intimacy in relationships (e.g., Fraley & Davis, 1997). Individuals who are high in avoidant attachment endorse independence, prefer to keep others at a distance, and believe that seeking proximity is a dangerous pursuit (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988).

Because attachment anxiety is linked to intense and chronic fears of rejection and abandonment (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), individuals who are high in attachment anxiety will likely engage in behaviours similar to those of low self-esteem individuals and the socially anxious. Indeed, current research suggests that anxiously attached individuals exhibit hypervigilance for belonging threats, as they are particularly perceptive of social threats in their environment, specifically attending to negative social information (MacDonald, Tackett, & Borsook, 2009). Moreover, attachment anxiety has been shown to be strongly and positively correlated with the BIS scale, and thus, related to the anxiety inherent
in all approach-avoidance conflicts (Meyer, Olivier, & Roth, 2005). But an experience of rejection may confirm anxiously attached individuals’ intense fears of abandonment, forcing them to solve their internal goal conflict with avoidance. It is reasonable to expect that regardless of whether there are opportunities for acceptance available, anxiously attached individuals will react defensively, seeing only the threat of social loss, and socially withdrawing from the situation.

However, anxiously attached individuals also possess a strong need for closeness and intimacy, and a heightened desire to affiliate (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As much as the anxious are focused on avoiding rejection, they are equally concerned with finding and maintaining close relationships. Their heightened desire for closeness and intimacy makes them dependent on others to the extent that they remain committed to unfulfilling relationships that fail to meet their core psychological needs for relatedness (Slotter & Finkel, 2009). Thus, anxiously attached individuals have chronically unmet belongingness needs. While they may be likely to socially withdraw in the face of rejection, they may be equally likely to persist in their pursuit of belonging, continually striving to satiate unmet needs. With their dueling fears of rejection and their desires for affiliation, anxious individuals have an amplified approach-avoidance conflict that likely becomes even more intense following an instance of acute rejection. For this reason, it is incumbent upon future research to examine the specific role that anxious attachment plays in resolving the approach-avoidance conflict of belonging regulation.

Similarly, attachment avoidance has been understudied in the belonging literature; although the lack of research on attachment avoidance and belonging
may be because it is particularly difficult to study the unique interplay between attachment avoidance and belonging regulation. Attachment avoidance is characterized by a defensive deactivation of the attachment system, such that avoidant individuals suppress attachment-related thoughts, inhibiting proximity seeking, and relinquishing any desires to form close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As a result of deactivating the attachment system, avoidant individuals tend to downplay threats, coping with distressing events with suppression and denial (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). For these reasons, avoidants are unlikely to express interest in affiliation, while suppressing any negative feelings brought on by the rejection. If attachment anxiety is associated with an amplified approach-avoidance conflict then attachment avoidance is associated with little conflict at all, neither outwardly fearing rejection nor desiring closeness with others. Unfortunately, by downplaying the importance of close relationships and failing to respond to rejection, avoidant individuals are preventing themselves from reaping the benefits of something that they truly need, resulting in chronic unmet belongingness needs.

**Belonging and Relationship Initiation**

Arguably, romantic relationships are one of the most powerful sources of belonging, as they offer ample opportunity for closeness and interdependence (Le & Agnew, 2001) and satisfy individuals’ basic need for relatedness (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). Yet initiating romantic relationships present individuals with a very similar approach-avoidance conflict as the one inspired by rejection. Although initiating a relationship is a way to fulfill belonging needs and reap the positive outcomes associated with being involved in a relationship.
It comes at a high risk of being rejected. Individuals are not unanimously popular amongst potential dating partners, and there is always the chance that their advances will not be reciprocated. Moreover, even if a relationship is successfully initiated, the union may eventually fall apart, setting the stage for a painful breakup. Before initiating any relationship, individuals must decide if it is worth it to wager the risk of rejection and approach desirable others, or if it is better to give up, avoiding both initial rejection and painful future relationship dissolution.

As with belonging regulation, how individuals resolve the approach-avoidance conflict inherent in relationship initiation is likely heavily influenced by individual differences, specifically in regards to adult attachment style. A good deal of research has focused on the role of attachment anxiety in relationship initiation. Indeed, it has been argued that attachment anxiety becomes activated in even non-anxious individuals during relationship initiation (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). In the relationship initiation phase, this state attachment anxiety is associated with increased approach behaviours, mainly proximity seeking towards the desirable potential partner. Given that attachment anxiety is related to a hyperactive attachment system and strong motivation to affiliate (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), state attachment anxiety serves a functional purpose during the earliest stages of romantic relationships. However, chronic trait attachment anxiety may impede the relationship initiation process, as the approach-avoidance conflict of relationship initiation may be especially amplified in the anxiety attached.

Although anxiously attached individuals benefit from thinking
optimistically about forming bonds with potential new partners (Spielmann, MacDonald, & Wilson, 2009), it may be particularly difficult for them to initiate a relationship in the first place. Given their chronic fears of rejection and hypervigilance for threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), anxiously attached individuals may be especially likely to avoid opportunities for initiating relationships. These individuals are incapable of inhibiting thoughts of rejection even when presented with signs of acceptance (Baldwin & Kay, 2003). In a context like initiating a relationship, where signs of acceptance are often ambiguous at best, these individuals could become overwhelmed with fears of rejection. Furthermore, anxiously attached individuals have chronic negative expectations about future relationships (Whitaker, Beach, Etherton, Wakefield, & Anderson, 1999) and are more likely to emphasize potential losses rather than rewards when thinking about relationships (Boon & Griffin, 1996), so they may not see the point of risking rejection to approach attractive, but ultimately potentially disappointing others.

While many individuals admit that fear of rejection has prevented them from initiating relationships in the past (Vorauer & Ratner, 1996), this fear may be especially pronounced in the anxiously attached. Indeed, due to chronic fears of rejection, when anxiously attached individuals are romantically interested in potential partners, they become inhibited, failing to accurately signal their romantic interest (Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes, & Pearce, 2003). Because of their chronic fears of rejection and focus on negative relational outcomes, it seems unlikely that anxiously attached individuals would be willing to initiate romantic relationships. However, given their hyperactivated attachment system and chronic
desire for affiliation, there is also evidence to suggest that the anxiously attached solve the approach-avoidance conflict through increased relationship initiation.

In an innovative speed-dating study, where participants met briefly with a variety of potential partners and then decided whether or not they were interested in seeing them again, it was found that anxiously attached individuals actually made more relationship initiation attempts than less anxious participants (McClure, Lydon, Baccus, & Baldwin, 2010). Specifically, the anxiously attached were less selective than other participants, meaning that they indicated that they were interested in dating a greater number of potential partners. This finding suggests that anxiously attached individuals may in fact be more inclined to approach potential partners and initiate relationships than what would be expected from their chronic fears of rejection.

However, speed dating is a particularly low-risk setting for relationship initiation, and may not capture the extent of the threat that anxious individuals feel during real-world dating scenarios. Notably, speed daters do not directly initiate dates with fellow speed daters. Instead, they indicate to the organizers who they would like to see again, making the potential for rejection much less immediate. Moreover, everyone who signs up for a speed-dating event is single and interested in meeting new partners. Thus, initiating a relationship at a speed-dating event is less risky than approaching an attractive person in a different context, as there is a greater chance for reciprocation. But what would happen if anxiously attached individuals were reminded of the risks involved in relationship initiation before entering the speed-dating event? What if they were rejected by a third party prior to attending the event? What if something in their immediate
environment triggered a memory of a past rejection? What about the experience of seeking a new relationship after a rejection? What happens when the recent rejection is still ‘in the air’? Would this strengthen activation of expectancies about rejection and shift the motivational conflict from approach to avoidance? Would anxiously attached individuals become more selective?

Given that anxiously attached individuals have an intensified desire to affiliate, resulting in chronic unmet belonging needs, it seems likely that they would work to satiate such needs by seizing any opportunity to affiliate. Thus, as was found in the McClure et al. (2009) study, anxious individuals are less selective, and under low-risk circumstances, would be expected to particularly interested in affiliating with potential dating partners. However, as attachment anxiety is also characterized by chronic fears of rejection, the anxious have the precarious task of balancing the desire to affiliate with the strong need to avoid rejection. When anxiously attached individuals initiate new relationships, they must run the risk of rejection in order to affiliate with others. While anxious individuals may typically resolve the approach-avoidance conflict of relationship initiation in favor of hyperactivated approach, jumping on opportunities to affiliate, any reminder of their fears of rejection may shift their behaviour towards avoidance. If there is anything in the immediate environment that reminds anxiously attached individuals of their chronic insecurities about rejection, they may become avoidant and withdraw from social opportunities. It is likely that situational rejection would intensify anxious individuals’ preexisting fears of rejection, making them particularly unlikely to risk further rejection by expressing the desire to affiliate with others.
The present research attempts to explore how anxiously attached individuals resolve the approach-avoidance conflict of belonging regulation following situational rejection. Specifically, this research examines how acute experiences of rejection influence relationship initiation, and how such rejection experiences interact with chronic fears of rejection in predicting relationship initiation behaviours.

The Present Study

Whereas the abovementioned research highlights the need to take individual differences into account when examining belonging regulation, these differences, particularly in regard to adult attachment style, are a largely unexplored avenue in the belonging literature. Moreover, little research to date has examined how acute belonging threats impact the decision to initiate new romantic relationships. The present study examines the role of individual differences in regulating belonging needs with a particular focus on the moderating effects of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance on responses to belonging threats. The purpose was to examine how acute experiences of rejection interact with chronic attachment style to predict belonging regulation behaviours in the context of romantic relationships. Because romantic relationships provide individuals with an outlet to satiate belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), provide opportunity for need fulfillment (LaGuardia et al., 2000), and comprise the bulk of the literature on adult attachment theory, this study explores how threats to belonging impact people’s decisions to initiate new romantic relationships. Moreover, initiating relationships involves a similar approach-avoidance conflict as that involved in regulating belongingness, and
thus, while the connection between both experiences is understudied, they are integrally related.

Belonging was manipulated with a computerized ball-tossing game, where participants were either rejected or included by other players in the game. Past research using the same ball-tossing paradigm have proven it to be a reliable method of manipulating belonging, finding robust effects across a variety of studies (Williams & Jarvis, 2006). Following the game, participants were presented with a series of photographs of potential dating partners and were asked to indicate how attractive and dateable they found each potential mate, and how happy they would be upon being asked out by each mate, creating a composite score of their affiliative motivation towards the dating targets. In addition, participants indicated how likely they would be to initiate a date with the target dating partners. Date initiation was analyzed separately from the affiliative motivation composite score because it involves a more active role on the part of the participant, and thus, may be more threatening, resulting in a different response pattern. A control group of participants rated the photographs before playing the ball-tossing game. Participants also completed a measure of self-esteem (completed before beginning the manipulation) in order to control for self-esteem and to examine the connections between self-esteem, attachment, and belonging regulation.

Hypotheses

I expected to find an interaction between chronic attachment and the belonging manipulation in predicting relationship initiation behaviours.

1. In terms of affiliative motivation, I expected that:
a. Attachment anxiety would be positively associated with affiliative motivation in the control and inclusion condition, such that when not rejected, highly anxious individuals would express more affiliative motivation toward the potential dating targets. However, in the belonging threat condition, attachment anxiety would be negatively associated with affiliative motivation, as rejection in the game would activate the highly anxious’ chronic fears of abandonment, resulting in the highly anxious expressing less affiliative motivation toward the dating targets.

b. Due to avoidants’ chronic deactivation of the attachment system, attachment avoidance would not be associated with affiliative motivation in either the belonging threat condition or the inclusion and control condition. Avoidants would defensively suppress attachment-related thoughts in response to both rejection and the relationship initiation dependent measures, and thus, would be unaffected by the manipulation.

2. In terms of date initiation, I expected that:

   a. There would be a positive association between attachment anxiety and date initiation in the inclusion and control condition, such that higher levels of anxious attachment would be related to a greater likelihood to want to initiate dates with the potential dating targets. This finding would be in line with past research showing how anxiously attached individuals are
less selective (and thus more likely to initiate dates) at speed-dating events (McClure et al., 2009). However, rejection would activate anxious individuals’ chronic fears, decreasing their approach behaviour. Therefore, the association between attachment anxiety and date initiation would disappear in the belonging threat condition and possibly even reverse.

b. Given their defensive deactivation of the attachment system, attachment avoidance would not be associated with date initiation in any of the three conditions.

3. For exploratory purposes, I examined whether there was anything distinctive about the three individual components of affiliative motivation, namely attractiveness, dateability, and happiness, but made no firm predictions.

4. Because low self-esteem is correlated with attachment anxiety (Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996), I expected that low self-esteem individuals would follow a similar pattern as the anxiously attached, showing affiliative motivation toward the target photos when included and disinterest when rejected.

5. Because attachment anxiety is inextricably tied to regulating belongingness and forming and maintaining close relationships, I expected that any interactions between attachment anxiety and the belonging manipulation would remain significant even when controlling for self-esteem, suggesting that attachment anxiety has a
unique and distinct effect on belonging regulation in the context of relationship initiation.

**Method**

*Participants*

Participants were 129 undergraduate students (90 females, 29 males) from McGill University who completed the study for course credit or $10 compensation. In order to be eligible to participate, individuals were required to be single (i.e., not currently involved in a romantic relationship) and heterosexual. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 30 years old ($M = 19.84$, $SD = 2.21$).

*Procedure*

Participants, who met inclusion criteria, were recruited from introductory-level psychology courses or over the phone to participate in a laboratory-based study ostensibly examining how people with different personality types engage in mental visualization. Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were given a general overview of the cover study, notified of their right to withdraw at any time, and given time to thoroughly read and sign consent forms. The experiment was run on personal computers using Inquisit 3.0.5.0 software (Inquisit 3.0.5.0, 2011). Participants were randomly assigned to an exclusion, inclusion, or control condition. All participants completed demographic questions and a measure of self-esteem. They then began the experimental manipulation, playing an online ball-tossing game, and rating a series of photographs of potential dating targets. After the ball-tossing game, photograph rating exercise, and a filler task where participants completed more demographic questions, participants made self-judgments about their own dateability. They also completed a measure of adult
attachment style. Because this study involved deception, after study completion, participants were individually and carefully debriefed by the experimenter.

Materials

Self-esteem.

Before beginning the experimental manipulation, participants completed a battery of demographic and personality questionnaires, including a 10-item measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants indicated how much they agreed with each item on a 4-point scale (0 = Strongly disagree to 4 = Strongly agree). Sample items include, “I am able to do things as well as most other people” and “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure” (reverse-coded).

Cyberball paradigm.

I used an adapted version of the original Cyberball paradigm, a computerized ball-tossing game, to manipulate belongingness (Williams et al., 2000). Before beginning the game, the experimenter informed each participant that the same study was going on in a different room, and that they would be playing the ball-tossing game against these other participants. In actuality, there were no other participants in a different room, but this deception was necessary for participants to experience the full psychological effects of the Cyberball game. Once participants logged onto the computer, they were presented with a description of Cyberball, and in line with the cover story, were told that I needed them to engage in a mental visualization exercise, and that the best way to do this was by playing an online ball-tossing game. To increase the realism of the study, I changed the name of Cyberball to McGill Ball-Toss, explaining that participants would be playing with other students who were logged on at the same time,
presumably the ostensible participants in the different room. In fact, these other students were computer-generated players, whose moves in the game were preprogrammed, and dependent upon which condition participants were assigned. These computer-generated players were represented onscreen by animated figures that threw and caught the ball. The players were named ‘Alex’ and ‘Robin,’ which were purposely chosen to sound gender ambiguous, so participants would not know if they were playing against male or female players. Participants were told that they would be tossed the ball, and that afterwards they were to click on the name of the player that they would like to throw the ball to. In line with the cover story, participants were also instructed to mentally visualize the entire experience, creating in their minds a complete mental picture of what might be going on if they were playing the game in real life.

*Independent variable.* After getting a chance to throw and catch the ball twice, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the inclusion condition, participants continued to be tossed the ball from the other two players, receiving it about 50% of the time. In the belonging threat condition, participants received the ball 0% of the time, being completely excluded from the game as the two other players passed it back and forth between themselves. In both conditions, the game ended after the ball was thrown and caught thirty times. I also included a control condition, where participants were included in the game, but played Cyberball after completing the dependent measures, and thus, the game should have no effect on their responses to those measures.

*Dependent measures.*
Once the Cyberball game ended, the computer screens of participants in the two experimental conditions were replaced with instructions for another ostensible mental visualization task. Participants were informed that they would be shown a series of visual images and asked to make a judgment about each one. Specifically, participants were told that the experimenters had enlisted the cooperation of single McGill students who allowed their pictures to be taken, and that they would be presented with a subset of those of the opposite sex. In order to maintain the believability of the mental visualization cover story, participants were also told that young people naturally judge members of the opposite sex, and thus, viewing images of such individuals and making judgments about them was a natural and common mental visualization process. In actuality, participants’ judgments of the photos were the dependent measures of the study. Because I was interested in measuring if the experience of the Cyberball game would influence participants’ attraction to and desire to date the students in the photographs, it was important that participants believed that the people in the photographs were proximal and available. Therefore in order to make the photos particularly relevant to participants, getting the most accurate judgments as possible, participants were explicitly informed that these were photographs of single McGill students who they could potentially meet. Participants were shown thirty photographs of members of the opposite sex. Each photographed individual was an undergraduate student at McGill University, close in age to the participants, who consented to having his or her picture used in the study. The photographs were selected through extensive pre-testing, and were carefully calibrated to differ in physical attractiveness. Each photo featured a smiling individual against a
white background. Participants viewed each photograph in a randomized order, and were asked to answer a series of questions about each one. Specifically, participants were instructed to indicate on how attractive and dateable they found each person, how happy they would be if they were asked out by each person in the target photos, and how likely they would be to initiate a date with each person. Each question was answered on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Participants’ ratings of attractiveness, dateability, and happiness upon being asked out by the dating targets were highly correlated (range = .70 to .80), and therefore, I created a composite measure of affiliative motivation by averaging participants’ attractiveness, dateability, and happiness ratings. Participants’ likelihood to initiate dates with the targets was less correlated with the other three measures (range = .34 to .45), and thus, was analyzed separately. The correlations between all four measures are presented in Table 1.

Self-judgments.

In order to control for participants’ own level of attractiveness and dateability, before finishing the study, participants were asked to make judgments about themselves. This task was also conducted under the guise of a mental visualization exercise, as participants were told that they would need to create mental images of themselves in order to make accurate self-judgments. After a few filler questions, participants were asked to indicate on an 11-point scale how dateable they thought potential romantic partners would find them (0 = Not at all dateable to 10 = Extremely dateable).

Attachment.

Participants also completed a measure of attachment style, which was
assessed with the 36-item Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998). The ECR is designed to measure the two attachment dimensions, anxiety and avoidance. Both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are measured with 18 items each. Sample items include, “I worry about being abandoned” (anxiety) and “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close” (avoidance). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). The reliability for both anxiety and avoidance was high (α = .90 for attachment anxiety and α = .91 for attachment avoidance). The correlations between attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, the subcomponents of the affiliative motivation dependent measure, and the date initiation dependent measure are presented in Table 1.

Results

Affiliative Motivation

To test how acute belonging threats interact with chronic attachment style to predict participants’ affiliative motivation toward the potential dating targets, I conducted a multiple regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) where the dependent measure was the composite score of participants’ ratings of attractiveness, dateability, and happiness upon being asked out by the targets. Attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and participants’ self-judgment were all centered. Experimental conditions were dummy coded such that for dummy 1, the belonging threat condition was coded as 1, and the inclusion and the control condition were coded as 0. For dummy 2, the inclusion condition was coded as 1,
and the belonging threat and control condition were both coded as 0. In Step 1 of the regression equation, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and participants’ self-judgments were simultaneously entered. Participants’ self-judgments were included to control for how dateable participants found themselves to be. In Step 2, I entered the two dummy coded variables in order to test for the main effect of condition. In Step 3, I entered the product of the attachment measures and the dummy coded variables to test for all two-way interactions. In Step 4, I included product terms that tested three-way interactions.

There was no main effect of condition, $R^2 = .01, F(2, 113) = .66, p = .52$. Moreover, there were no significant effects for either dummy variable (dummy 1, $B = -.08, SE = .27, \beta = -.03, t(113) = -.29, p = .77$; dummy 2, $B = -.30, SE = .27, \beta = -.12, t(113) = -1.10, p = .27$). The main effects of attachment anxiety, $B = .16, SE = .10, \beta = .15, t(115) = 1.55, p = .12$, attachment avoidance, $B = -.04, SE = .11, \beta = -.04, t(115) = -.39, p = .70$, and participants’ self-judgments, $B = .05, SE = .06, \beta = .09, t(115) = .90, p = .37$, on participants’ affiliative motivation toward potential dating partners were nonsignificant. In the second step of the regression equation, I detected a significant interaction between dummy 1 and attachment anxiety, $B = -.61, SE = .24, \beta = -.34, t(109) = -2.56, p = .01$. No other interactions were significant.

I explored the Dummy 1 x Attachment Anxiety interaction effect further by plotting regression lines at +1 and -1 standard deviations for attachment anxiety (Figure 1). Simple slopes analyses revealed that attachment anxiety was positively associated with affiliative motivation toward potential dating targets in the control condition, $B = .39, SE = .13, \beta = .36, t(112) = 3.06, p < .01$; however,
there was no relationship between attachment anxiety and affiliative motivation in the belonging threat condition, $B = -.20, SE = .16, \beta = -.19, t(109) = -1.27, p = .21$.

Low anxious individuals tended to express more affiliative motivation toward the dating targets following a belonging threat than they did when assigned to the control condition; however, this trend was not significant, $B = .62, SE = .39, \beta = .25, t(109) = 1.60, p = .11$. The opposite pattern was true of the high anxious, such that those high in attachment anxiety expressed significantly less affiliative motivation toward the dating targets following a belonging threat than they did while in the control condition, $B = -.71, SE = .36, \beta = -.29, t(109) = -1.96, p = .05$.

An exploratory analysis of the individual components of affiliative motivation, namely attractiveness, dateability, and happiness, revealed that the two-way interactions were consistent across the three separate components. The two-way interactions between dummy 1 and attachment anxiety were significant for dateability, $B = -.72, SE = .25, \beta = -.38, t(109) = -2.89, p < .01$, and happiness, $B = -.67, SE = .31, \beta = -.29, t(109) = -2.17, p < .05$, and marginally significant for participants’ ratings of attractiveness, $B = -.42, SE = .22, \beta = -.26, t(109) = -1.91, p = .06$. These interactions on dateability, happiness, and attractiveness are illustrated in Figure 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Notably, the pattern for highly anxiously attached individuals was also consistent across the three individual components of affiliative motivation, such that the highly anxious rated dating targets as significantly less attractive, $B = -.66, SE = .34, \beta = -.29, t(109) = -1.97, p = .05$, and less dateable, $B = -.76, SE = .40, \beta = -.20, t(109) = -1.99, p = .05$, after a belonging threat that they did in the control condition. Highly anxious individuals were also less happy about being asked out by the dating targets.
following a belonging threat than they were while in the control condition, however, this trend did not reach significance, $B = .77, SE = .51, \beta = .28, t(109) = 1.51, p = .13$. Although there were no significant simple effects for low anxious individuals on either attractiveness ratings of the dating targets or feelings of happiness upon being asked out by the targets, there was a unique finding for low anxious individuals’ dateability ratings of the targets.

**Dateability.**

A simple slopes analysis revealed that those low in attachment anxiety rated potential dating partners as significantly more dateable after a belonging threat compared to the low anxious who were in the control condition, $B = .83, SE = .41, \beta = .31, t(109) = 2.03, p < .05$. This is the opposite pattern of those high in attachment anxiety. Furthermore, attachment anxiety was positively associated with dateability ratings in the control condition, $B = .41, SE = .13, \beta = .36, t(112) = 3.07, p < .01$, but was negatively associated with dateability ratings in the rejection condition, although this association was not significant, $B = -.22, SE = .17, \beta = -.19, t(109) = -1.30, p = .20$.

**Date Initiation**

In order to investigate whether threats to belonging would interact with attachment style to predict date initiation behaviour, I conducted a multiple regression analysis. In Step 1, attachment anxiety (centered), attachment avoidance (centered), and participants’ self-judgments (centered) were entered. In the second step of the regression equation, I simultaneously entered the two dummy variables to test for the main effect of condition. In Step 3, all two-way interactions were entered. In Step 4, I included product terms that tested three-
way interactions.

There were no main effects for condition, $R^2 = .00$, $F(2, 113) = .24$, $p = .79$, nor were there any main effects for either dummy variable (dummy 1, $B = -.01, SE = .35, \beta = -.00, t(113) = -.02, p = .99$; dummy 2, $B = -.21, SE = .35, \beta = -.07, t(113) = -.60, p = .55$). There were also no main effects for attachment anxiety, $B = -.12, SE = .13, \beta = -.09, t(115) = -.96, p = .34$, attachment avoidance, $B = -.09, SE = .14, \beta = -.06, t(115) = -.61, p = .55$, or self-judgments, $B = .05, SE = .08, \beta = .06, t(115) = .63, p = .53$. However, there was a significant interaction between dummy 1 and attachment avoidance, $B = -.66, SE = .32, \beta = -.26, t(109) = -2.04, p < .05$. Because self-esteem would arguably affect individuals’ likelihood to initiate dates, before exploring the interaction effects further, I controlled for self-esteem by adding participants’ self-esteem score (centered) to the first step of the regression equation. While there was no main effect for self-esteem, the Dummy 1 x Attachment Avoidance remained significant, $B = -.66, SE = .32, \beta = -.26, t(108) = -2.05, p < .05$, and a new marginally significant interaction between dummy 1 and attachment anxiety was revealed, $B = -.52, SE = .30, \beta = -.23, t(108) = -1.73, p = .09$. However, decomposing these interactions did not reveal any significant simple effects.

**Self-Esteem**

In line with previous research suggesting attachment anxiety and low self-esteem are related constructs (i.e., Roberts et al., 1996), there was a significant negative correlation between attachment anxiety and self-esteem, $r(117) = -.54, p < .001$. Similarly, there was also a significant negative correlation between attachment avoidance and self-esteem, $r(117) = -.27, p < .01$. In order to test
whether self-esteem would have similar effects as attachment anxiety on interest in the potential dating targets, I conducted two multiple regression analyses using the same dependent measures as described above, namely, the affiliative motivation composite measure and date initiation. In the first step of each regression equation, I entered participants’ self-esteem score (centered) and participants’ self-judgments (centered). In the second step, the two dummy coded variables were entered. In Step 3, I entered both two-way interactions between self-esteem and the dummy coded variables.

There was no main effect of self-esteem on participants’ affiliative motivation towards the potential dating targets, $B = -.24, SE = .27, \beta = -.09, t(116) = -.87, p = .39$. However, there was a significant main effect of self-esteem on participants’ likelihood to initiate dates with the targets, as higher self-esteem was associated with a greater likelihood to ask out potential dating partners, $B = .67, SE = .34, \beta = .19, t(116) = -1.97, p = .05$. As with attachment anxiety, self-esteem did interact with the dummy 1 variable to predict affiliative motivation toward the dating targets; although this interaction was marginally significant, $B = 1.05, SE = .58, \beta = .24, t(112) = 1.79, p = .08$, and none of the simple effects tests were significant. Moreover, there were no interactive effects of self-esteem and condition on interest in initiating dates with the targets.

Because self-esteem was highly correlated with attachment anxiety, I conducted an additional multiple regression analysis controlling for self-esteem in order to ensure that attachment anxiety was responsible for the abovementioned findings for affiliative motivation. In Step 1 of each regression equation, attachment anxiety (centered), attachment avoidance (centered), self-judgments
(centered), and participants’ self-esteem (centered) was entered. In Step 2, the two dummy coded variables were entered. In Step 3, I entered all of the two-way interactions. In Step 4, the product terms that tested three-way interactions were entered. Even when controlling for self-esteem, the previously found interaction between dummy 1 and attachment anxiety on affiliative motivation remained significant, $B = -.60, SE = 242, \beta = -.34, t(108) = -2.54, p < .05$, suggesting that attachment anxiety had a distinct interactive effect above and beyond self-esteem on participants’ affiliative motivation toward potential dating targets.

**Discussion**

Rejection is a highly aversive experience. When individuals are rejected, they seek to both avoid further rejection and approach sources of affiliation in order to satiate threatened belonging needs. Initiating a romantic relationship is one way to satisfy the need to belong; however, initiating a relationship comes at a huge risk for rejection, as romantic feelings are not always reciprocated. In this way, individuals are dually motivated to approach attractive others, while avoiding painful rejection. This internal goal conflict may be especially amplified following an acute instance of rejection, as individuals will have an immediate need to restore their threatened belonging needs, but will be especially fearful of experiencing even more rejection. Past experience and current interpersonal expectancies summarized by individual differences in adult attachment may moderate how individuals solve this approach-avoidance conflict.

I found that when individuals were not rejected, attachment anxiety was associated with heightened motivation to affiliate with potential dating targets, such that greater attachment anxiety predicted higher ratings of attractiveness and
dateability of the dating targets, as well as more happiness upon being asked out by the targets. However, this association between attachment anxiety and affiliative motivation completely disappeared following rejection in the ball-tossing paradigm. Accordingly, highly anxious individuals expressed significantly less affiliative motivation toward the potential dating targets when rejected than when in a control state, where they were neither included nor rejected. Individuals low in attachment anxiety had an opposite response pattern to those high in anxiety. Specifically, low anxious individuals tended to express more affiliative motivation toward the dating targets when rejected compared to when they were in the control condition; although this trend was not significant.

Notably, when just looking at the dateability component of affiliative motivation, there was a significant effect for the low anxious, such that those low in attachment anxiety found the target dating partners to be significantly more dateable following a belonging threat than when not rejected. The opposite pattern was true for high anxious individuals, as they found the targets to be less dateable when rejected than when not. As with the composite affiliative motivation measure, anxious attachment was positively associated with dateability ratings in the control condition; however, this association went away in the belonging threat condition.

Attachment avoidance on the other hand was unrelated to affiliative motivation, as there were neither main effects nor interactive effects with the belonging manipulation in predicting participants’ affiliative motivation towards the dating targets. Although there was a significant interaction between attachment avoidance and the belonging manipulation on date initiation, none of
the simple effects reached significance.

Date initiation was associated with self-esteem, in that higher self-esteem predicted a greater likelihood to initiate dates with the targets. Additionally, as with attachment anxiety, self-esteem interacted with the belonging manipulation to predict affiliative motivation toward the potential dating partners; however none of the simple effects were significant. Poignantly, even though self-esteem and attachment anxiety were highly negatively correlated, the interaction between attachment anxiety and the belonging manipulation remained significant even when controlling for self-esteem, suggesting that attachment anxiety has a distinct effect on belonging regulation in the context of relationship initiation.

It is important to note that in comparison to the control condition, inclusion in the ball-tossing game did not significantly influence individuals’ interest in the potential dating targets. This finding suggests that above and beyond the control condition, inclusion did not have an effect on anxiously attached individuals’ affiliative motivation. In other words, it is not the positive experience of inclusion that influences anxiously attached individuals’ affiliative motivation toward potential partners. Rather, it is rejection that undercuts the anxiously attached’s affiliative motives, resulting in a shift towards more avoidant behaviours.

*Attachment Anxiety*

The finding that attachment anxiety is associated with an increased motivation to affiliate with the dating targets when not rejected supports my hypothesis that due to a chronic focus on relationships, highly anxious individuals would express more affiliative motivation when in the inclusion and control
condition. Moreover, this finding replicates the results of the aforementioned speed-dating study, showing that anxiously attached individuals are less selective, and thus, more likely to want to affiliate with or date the other speed-daters (McClure et al., 2009). Speed dating is congruent with the control condition of the present study, as participants likely did not experience acute rejection before entering the speed-dating event. When threat of rejection is not highly salient, anxiously attached individuals appear to resolve the approach-avoidance conflict of relationship initiation with approach, as their hyperactivated attachment system inspires them to affiliate with available others.

Although anxious individuals’ chronic relational ambivalence (Mikulincer et al., 2010), dually desiring affiliation and fearing rejection, amplifies the approach-avoidance conflict, it is likely that when not under direct threat of rejection, these individuals will be focused on appetitive stimuli and approach-based behaviour. Because attachment anxiety is strongly linked to the BIS scale (Meyer et al., 2005), anxiously attached individuals must also experience BAS activation. Recall that the BIS is activated in response to the competing approach and avoidance motivation of the BAS and FFFS system, respectively. Therefore, before the BIS is activated, anxiety attached individuals must also experience both BAS and FFFS in the context of close relationships (MacDonald & Kingsbury, 2006). Due to their strong desires for intimacy, it is likely that highly anxious individuals would experience pronounced BAS activation when in the presence of potential dating partners, as affiliating with them would be particularly rewarding. However, potential dating partners would seem more threatening following an experience of rejection, and thus, as was found in the present study, the
association between affiliative motivation and attachment anxiety would disappear following a threat to belonging.

Indeed, there is research to support the notion that certain individuals are more inclined to experience heightened BIS or BAS activation, and that this inclination affects how they respond to rejection and inclusion. In a study employing the same ball-tossing paradigm as the present study, it was found that individuals who experience greater BIS activation, suffer greater levels of social pain in response to rejection (Yanagisawa et al., 2011). Perhaps even more striking was the finding that those who exhibit greater BAS activation feel more social pleasure during inclusion. Anxiously attached individuals’ greater BAS activation may lead them to experience more social pleasure when thinking about the prospect of establishing new relationships, assuming that they are not under direct threat of rejection.

Because positive affect engenders risk taking, as long as the stakes are not too high (Isen & Geva, 1987), it is likely that the pleasurable feelings associated with thinking about future relationships led anxiously attached participants to express greater motivation to want to affiliate with the dating targets when not recently rejected. While participants in the study were unlikely to ever actually meet or begin relationships with the dating targets, it is possible that for highly anxious individuals, the rating exercise activated their chronic attachment-related concerns, making them think about the potential for future relationships in general, which may be a particularly positive experience for the anxious. Future research could examine the mediating role of affect on anxiously attached individuals’ decision to initiate relationships, particularly following rejection or
inclusion.

Although highly anxious individuals were significantly less likely to express affiliative motivation toward the dating targets following rejection than when in the control condition, attachment anxiety was not significantly associated with affiliative motivation in the belonging threat condition. While anxious individuals’ tendency to want to affiliate with others disappeared when rejected, both high anxious and low anxious individuals in the belonging threat condition responded to the dating targets in similar ways. The fact that both highly anxious and non-anxious individuals who were rejected reacted similarly suggests that the target dating photos may not have been threatening to the highly anxious. Even by expressing affiliative motivation towards the dating targets, high anxious individuals were at little risk for further rejection. While participants were told that the dating targets were members of their community that in theory they could meet, it was unlikely that participants would ever meet the targets, let alone have their romantic advances rebuffed by the targets.

However, even behind the safety of a computer screen, viewing photos of people they would likely never meet, highly anxious individuals still rated the dating targets as less dateable, expressing less affiliative motivation towards them when in the belonging threat condition than when in the control condition. What would happen to rejected anxiously attached individuals in the real-world when their approach-avoidance conflict is intensified, but there is no appetitive, nonthreatening stimuli to approach? Future research could increase ecological validity by making the threat of further rejection more real. Instead of simply rating photographs, participants could be told that they would actually meet each
dating target after making ratings. Alternatively, following the belonging
manipulation, participants could meet with a confederate, and be asked to express
whether or not they would be interested in seeing the confederate again.

While the belonging manipulation affected how the high anxious
responded to the dating targets, there was no effect for the low anxious, as these
individuals expressed similar levels of affiliative motivation toward the dating
targets in the belonging threat condition and the control condition. I hypothesized
that attachment anxiety would be negatively associated with affiliative motivation
in the belonging threat condition, such that low anxious individuals, who are not
as fearful of rejection as the highly anxious, would work to restore threatened
belonging needs by expressing more affiliative motivation toward the dating
targets following rejection. It is possible that expressing affiliative motivation
towards people they likely would never meet was not enough to satiate threatened
needs. Increasing the ecological validity of the study by using confederates or by
making participants believe that they would actually meet the dating targets would
help resolve this issue. However, it is also possible that certain aspects of
affiliative motivation were more resistant to change for low anxious individuals.

When examining the individual components of the affiliative motivation
composite measure, there was an effect of the belonging manipulation on
dateability ratings, such that in line with my hypothesis, low anxious individuals
rated the dating targets as significantly more dateable when in the belonging
threat condition. Out of the three individual components of affiliative motivation,
namely attractiveness, dateability, and happiness, the dateability measure is the
closest to behaviour. Making attractiveness or happiness ratings does not really
capture behaviour, and thus, at least for low anxious individuals, these ratings may be the least likely to change following rejection. Attractiveness ratings say more about the target, and less about the behaviour of the rater. Similarly, perceived happiness upon being asked out by the dating targets is not a behavioural measure. Instead, it taps into participants’ emotions.

For low anxious individuals, the dateability measure may be unique and distinct from the other two components of affiliative motivation in that it captures behavioural intentions. Regulating belongingness may have less to do with perceiving others as attractive and changing internal emotional states, and more to do with directive and intentional action. Individuals need to work to restore threatened belonging needs, and viewing others as more dateable may be one way to achieve this end. Asking participants to make dateability ratings of the targets is another way of asking them how much they would like to date each target, but without the threat of actually having to initiate a date.

Notably, attachment anxiety was not associated with the likelihood to initiate dates in either the belonging threat or inclusion and control condition. Initiating dates may have been too threatening for most participants regardless of condition or attachment style. But moreover, it may be something that many individuals are not likely to do even outside of an experiment. Indeed, date initiation was positively associated with self-esteem, suggesting that it takes a certain level of self-confidence and maybe a particular personality type to initiate dates. Additionally, initiating a date after only having seen the person’s photograph is superficial and unrealistic. Low anxious individuals may want to restore belonging needs following rejection, as evidenced by their increased
dateability ratings, but they may not be willing to actually initiate dates with the target photos. Again, future research would require a more ecologically valid measure of investigating date initiation, specifically one where participants actually meet with the potential dating partners.

Although an extensive meta-analysis of the belonging literature found that inclusion often yields larger effects than rejection, as compared to neutral control groups, acceptance produces more changes in self-esteem and behaviour than rejection (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009), the present research found the opposite effect. In the present study, participants in the inclusion and control condition did not reliably differ from one another, but those in the belonging threat condition showed markedly different affiliative motives than control participants. This finding suggests that in this study, it was the experience of rejection and not inclusion that was driving the effects, and may have important implications for the anxiously attached.

The highly anxious participants in the control condition were particularly approach-oriented in their behaviour, rating the dating targets as significantly more dateable, and expressing more affiliative motivation towards such targets. Because even in a control state, the anxious were already approach-oriented, it may have been difficult for inclusion to produce changes in affiliative motivations above and beyond those found in the control condition. Perhaps the task of rating potential dating partners without actually meeting them was non-threatening enough that anxious individuals did not need an inclusion manipulation. If the threat of further rejection was looming, whether it be from actually meeting the dating targets or potential rejection from a confederate, it is possible that inclusion
would be needed to heighten the anxious’ affiliative motivations. Future research
could explore how increasing the threat of further rejection would produce larger
changes in affiliative motivation in the inclusion condition compared to the
neutral control condition.

Attachment Avoidance

As predicted, there really were no interactive effects of attachment
avoidance and the manipulation on individuals’ affiliative motivation toward the
dating targets. While there was a significant interaction between attachment
avoidance and condition on date initiation, none of the simple effects were
significant. Previous research has also failed to find effects for attachment
avoidance on relationship initiation behaviour (e.g., McClure et al., 2009), as
avoidantly attached individuals are unlikely to sign up for relationship studies.
The present study however was not advertised as a relationship study, and there
was a reasonable number of avoidantly attached individuals who participated. The
issue may not be that avoidants are underrepresented in relationship research, but
that they are unwilling to actively engage in belonging regulation and relationship
initiation.

Given that avoidantly attached individuals tend to defensively deactivate
the attachment system in response to relational threats (Mikulincer & Shaver,
2007), it is not surprising that the belonging manipulation had little effect on
avoidants’ relationship initiation behaviours. Notably however, deactivating the
attachment system requires cognitive effort. Past research has shown that when
avoidant individuals are put under cognitive load, they are no longer able to
inhibit attachment-related information, and avoidants’ suppressed inner
vulnerabilities about belonging and relationships come to the surface (Edelstein & Gillath, 2008). Perhaps if avoidant individuals were put under cognitive load while making judgments of the dating targets, they would have expressed markedly different amounts of affiliative motivation towards the targets. Because making judgments takes time and requires conscious, deliberative effort, it is likely that avoidants were able to suppress feelings of attraction or threat toward the photographs. However, under cognitive load, they would be unable to suppress their attachment-related concerns, and their underlying affiliative motives would emerge. Indeed, research has shown that under high cognitive load, avoidant individuals react to attachment-related information in the same way as the anxiously attached, activating intrusive worries about separation from close others (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000). Because avoidantly attached individuals under cognitive load act more like anxious individuals, they likely do experience fears of rejection and desires for affiliation. But instead of actively engaging with their fears and actively seeking closeness, they defensively suppress them.

Even when not under cognitive load, there is evidence that avoidant individuals are not immune to the consequences of rejection nor to the appeal of affiliation. Neuroimaging studies have shown that avoidants experience particularly high levels of distress during rejection, suggesting that despite their claims to the contrary, these individuals are strongly affected by their close relationships (White et al., 2012). Strikingly, when avoidant individuals learn that others accept them, they exhibit the highest levels of positive affect and state self-esteem (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). Similarly, avoidants in particular benefit from
interactions with friendly individuals, as compared to other individuals, those who are high in avoidance experience the strongest feelings of social connectedness towards others who treat them warmly (MacDonald & Borsook, 2010). Because avoidants respond particularly positively to warmth and acceptance, they likely do possess a desire to affiliate. While the present study did not capture avoidant individuals’ affiliative motivation, had participants actually interacted with warm and friendly potential dating targets, it is possible that avoidants may have particularly enjoyed the interaction, expressing increased interest in the targets. Future research could examine how positive interactions influence avoidantly attached individuals’ affiliative motivation following rejection.

Future Directions and Limitations

When regulating threatened belonging needs or deciding to initiate a new relationship, the main dilemma is whether or not it is advisable to approach, rewarding sources of affiliation, or if it is better to avoid others, decreasing the threat of rejection. In order to wager the risk of rejection in favour of approach, the source of affiliation must be particularly rewarding. In terms of more base regulatory systems, individuals are inclined to approach appetitive stimuli (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Although in the present study, I provided participants with potential sources of affiliation in the dating targets, these targets may not have been especially appetitive stimuli, considering that participants were unlikely to ever meet the targets, and the targets’ pre-tested ratings of attractiveness ranged considerably. In order to make participants more likely to want to approach the dating targets, future research could vary their level of attractiveness. Perhaps, following rejection, low anxious individuals would
express increased affiliative motivation toward highly attractive dating targets, but not toward less attractive targets. Furthermore, when not rejected, highly anxious individuals may remain unselective, wanting to affiliate with attractive and unattractive targets. But following rejection, the high anxious may be particularly threatened by the attractive targets, and become even less likely to express affiliative motivation.

Another way to increase both appetitive appeal of the dating targets as well as improving ecological validity, would be to provide descriptions of the targets along with their photographs. In real life, individuals do not initiate dates with photographs. Moreover, providing photographs and descriptions of the dating targets may capture the dynamics of an emerging type of dating, namely, online dating. For many participants, reading biographies and viewing photographs of potential dating targets may seem like a very realistic dating experience, and it would be interesting to examine how this experience is affected by acute rejection.

Despite the issues with ecological validity, there were effects for attachment anxiety. Moreover, the effects for attachment anxiety remained significant even when controlling for self-esteem, a measure that is highly correlated with anxious attachment. This finding suggests that attachment anxiety is uniquely associated with belonging regulation in the context of romantic relationship initiation. This present study captured something distinctive about how anxiously attached individuals resolve the approach-avoidance conflict of belonging regulation, suggesting that chronic attachment style plays an important role in regulating belonging needs following acute rejection.
Conclusion

As social beings who depend on others for support and fulfillment of fundamental belonging needs, individuals are continually met with interpersonal challenges, having to reconcile the desire to affiliate with others with the fear of being rejected. Yet certain individuals, particularly anxiously attached individuals, may experience even more challenges when navigating their social world. The present study found support for the idea that chronic fears of rejection interact with acute rejection to predict belonging regulation behaviours, and that anxiously attached individuals in particular may have an especially difficult time dealing with social dilemmas. When anxious individuals are not rejected, they express heightened desires to affiliate with available others. However, when these individuals experience rejection, their affiliative desires are dampened, and they shift towards more avoidance-oriented behaviour. The problem is that the social environment is not static, and individuals are faced with daily fluctuations in how much they are accepted or rejected. Even outside of a romantic relationship initiation context, the social landscape is ripe with both opportunities to gain acceptance and the threat of painful rejection. The present research suggests that for anxiously attached individuals, experiences of rejection in one situation will carry over and influence behaviour in another context. While the anxiously attached have amplified hopes for affiliation, such experiences of rejection serve as reminders of their chronic vulnerabilities to rejection, bringing old wounds to the surface, and shifting their approach-avoidance conflict towards fearful avoidance, dampening future hopes for affiliation.
References


York: Oxford University Press.


Table 1

*Means, standard deviations, and correlations between measures*

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<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>3. Attractiveness (0,10)</td>
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<td>0.70**</td>
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<td>0.34**</td>
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N = 119. **p < .01
Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Interaction of dummy 1 and attachment anxiety on participants’ affiliative motivation toward the potential dating targets.

*Figure 2.* Interaction of dummy 1 and attachment anxiety on participants’ dateability ratings of the potential dating targets.

*Figure 3.* Interaction of dummy 1 and attachment anxiety on participants’ happiness upon being asked out by the potential dating targets.

*Figure 4.* Interaction of dummy 1 and attachment anxiety on participants’ attractiveness ratings of the potential dating targets.
Attractiveness

Low Anxiety  High Anxiety

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- **Control**
- **Belonging Threat**