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Citation for published version:
Campbell, L & Stanton, SCE 2019, 'Adult attachment and trust in romantic relationships', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 25, pp. 148-151. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.08.004

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.08.004

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Current Opinion in Psychology

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Download date: 12. Sep. 2026

Adult Attachment and Trust in Romantic Relationships

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Review to appear in a themed issue of *Current Opinion in Psychology* on Attachment in Adulthood, edited by Jeffry A. Simpson and Gery Karantzas

Article length (excluding references): 2,001

Abstract

Two theoretical perspectives guide much of the research on adult romantic relationships: attachment theory and interdependence theory. Each of these theoretical perspectives acknowledges the importance of *trust*, or perceptions of partners' dependability and faith in the future of the relationship. Whereas attachment theory conceptualizes trust as a component of individual differences in attachment representations, interdependence theoretical approaches conceptualize trust as a unique construct that develops within new relationships. In this article we discuss the importance of considering this difference in conceptualizations of trust for future research, highlighting the need for longitudinal research to properly assess the development of trust as an individual difference as well as uniquely within the dyadic context.

Keywords: Attachment, interdependence, trust, relationships

Highlights

- Briefly overview theories of attachment and trust.
- Discuss differences between theories on development of trust.
- Consider future research to test predictions stemming from these differences.
- Highlight importance of longitudinal designs to assess development of trust.

Adult Attachment and Trust in Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are among the most meaningful and complex social ties. Two theoretical perspectives largely guide research focusing on relationships: attachment theory and interdependence theory. Whereas attachment theory focuses more attention on the development, from infancy, of individual differences in secure or insecure working models of relationship functioning, interdependence theory focuses more attention on the development of relationship dynamics within each unique relationship. An important construct common to both theoretical approaches to relationship functioning is *trust*, perceptions of partners' dependability and beliefs regarding the future of the relationship [1]. In this article we briefly review how trust is conceptualized within each theoretical framework, discuss future research based on the differences in these conceptualizations, and highlight the importance of longitudinal designs to best test predictions regarding the development of trust.

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby [2,3,4] adopted a life-history approach when proposing attachment theory, suggesting that interactions with attachment figures throughout the lifespan, but particularly in infancy, shape how individuals perceive themselves, close others, and relationships. Over time, these interactions generate internal working models of the self and significant others that guide behaviors and perceptions about what relationships should be like [5]. These beliefs comprise "if-then" propositions that delineate the expected behavior of an attachment figure in particular situations (e.g., *if* one is distressed, *then* s/he can seek support from a significant other [6,7]). Working models of attachment predispose individuals to process social information in model-consistent and model-confirming ways [8], resulting in relatively stable attachment orientations over time [9]. Attachment orientations, however, are not immutable, and incremental changes

can be predicted by current relationship experiences [10, this issue]. Current research suggests that individuals have one global attachment representation of relationships, as well as specific attachment representations of other relationships nested therein [11].

Two dimensions constitute individual differences in adult attachment [12,13]. *Attachment anxiety* reflects the degree to which individuals are concerned with being rejected or abandoned by their partners, whereas *attachment avoidance* reflects the degree to which individuals feel comfortable relying on others, or being relied on, for comfort and reassurance. When the attachment system is activated by real or imagined stressful events, more anxiously attached individuals tend to use hyperactivating strategies to seek proximity with, and gain attention from, their partners, whereas more avoidantly attached individuals typically engage in deactivating strategies that inhibit seeking support from their partners [14].

Dyadic Trust

Trust is one of the most important features of a healthy and stable romantic relationship, yet on its own has received considerably less attention from researchers compared to attachment [15]. Drawing on interdependence theory, Holmes and Rempel [16] developed a dyadic model of trust, acknowledging that individuals bring a dispositional tendency to (dis)trust into a relationship, but it is activities within the relationship that calibrate levels of trust. Specifically, they suggested that the behavior and perceptions of partners in diagnostic situations (i.e., where partners' choices can prove helpful or detrimental to the relationship) throughout the relationship contributes to the development of one partner's trust for the other partner. Over time, the behavior of partners in these diagnostic situations, coupled with each other's perceptions of these behaviors, calibrates the degree to which partners believe each other to be dependable, as well as their faith in the future stability of the relationship [15]. Higher levels of dyadic trust indicate

certainty that a partner will behave in a pro-relationship manner in the future, whereas medium levels of trust reflect greater uncertainty regarding their partner's future behaviors, and lower levels of trust indicate certainty that a partner will *not* behave in a pro-relationship manner in the future.

Trust is a core component of the attachment system [17]. The development of more anxious or avoidant attachment orientations arise from interactions with caregivers that make individuals unconfident in the availability, acceptance, and responsiveness of attachment figures, undermining felt trust. The first measure of adult attachment created by Hazan and Shaver [18] contained both indirect and direct references to trust (e.g., "I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me." [anxious], "I find it difficult to trust them [partners] completely…" [avoidant]), highlighting its theoretical importance to conceptualizing individual differences in attachment. The current consensus in the literature is that greater levels of anxious and avoidant attachment are associated with lower self-reported dyadic trust, and this association is very robust [19, 20]. Furthermore, individuals reporting higher levels of insecure (anxious and avoidant attachment) relative to secure attachment also demonstrated greater accessibility of negative trust-related memories, less positive trust episodes over a 3-week period, and less constructive coping strategies when faced with trust violations [20].

Dispositional and Contextual Perspectives of Attachment and Trust

Attachment theory conceptualizes trust as a component of an attachment representation (i.e., a dispositional perspective). The dyadic model of trust [16], however, focuses more attention on interactions between partners in a given relationship to explain the calibration of trust (i.e., a contextual perspective). This conceptual distinction is illustrated in Figure 1. The key

difference between these perspectives is that trust is either conceptualized as a component of attachment, or as a unique construct that shares some overlap with attachment representations.

How trust is conceptualized in relation to attachment plays an important role in determining the hypotheses proposed by researchers. Consider, for example, research assessing the development of trust in newly established adult romantic relationships. Is trust established by individuals interpreting their partner's behaviors in a manner consistent with existing attachment representations? Or do attachment representations play a relatively small role, with trust largely stemming from unique dyadic experiences? In the former instance the research would assess, for instance, differences in responses to the partner's behaviour between individuals more/less anxiously and avoidantly attached. In the latter instance, the research would assess, for instance, how different types of partner behavior (positive or negative) shape feelings of trust. We now discuss the implications of these conceptual models for the measurement of trust, as well as the factors that should, or should not, be associated with the calibration of trust at different life stages.

Roadmap for Future Research

The dispositional and contextual perspectives of attachment representations and trust presented in Figure 1 suggest competing hypotheses for the associations between changes in attachment and trust over time. According to the dispositional perspective, changes in felt trust for a partner should correspond very closely with changes in attachment representations for the partner. The contextual perspective, on the other hand, would predict a much smaller correspondence between changes in these two constructs because relationship events can uniquely influence changes in trust but not attachment representations. This perspective would also predict that some factors should uniquely predict changes in attachment representations for a

partner but not trust, and that some factors would predict both changes in attachment representation and trust simultaneously.

Scores on measures of attachment or trust at one time do not reflect the actual development of each construct as specified by each theoretical perspective. Testing theoretically-derived hypotheses regarding the development of attachment orientations, as well as dyadic trust, require longitudinal designs, something that is challenging given the timeframe of the development of attachment from infancy to adulthood (but see [21]); however, studies of attachment processes through the lifespan are beginning to emerge thanks to valuable longitudinal datasets (e.g., the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, spanning childhood-adolescence-adulthood). Research focusing on the development of dyadic trust within relationships is also challenging (e.g., tracking relationship experiences, perceptions, and trust in new relationships over time), and data on this process does not yet exist [22]. When making use of existing longitudinal data or designing new studies to track the development of trust within relationships, scholars should consider what the consequences of the dispositional and contextual aspects of perspectives on attachment and trust should mean in terms of the above suggestions.

Future studies may also wish to consider how trust may develop and manifest differently for more anxiously versus avoidantly attached individuals. As argued in attachment theory and implied in early measures of adult attachment, the links between trust and attachment anxiety involve uncertainty as to whether a partner will be reliable and trustworthy—they want to be able to trust their partner, but are not convinced that they should, and therefore consistently seek evidence in their partner's behaviour to calibrate their degree of trust. Conversely, the links between trust and attachment avoidance involve confidence that a partner will be unreliable and untrustworthy. Anxious individuals' lower levels of trust, then, are more likely to fluctuate over

short periods of time as they yoke felt trust to daily relationship events, whereas avoidant individuals' lower levels of trust are likely to be consistently low over the same periods of time. Given that low, but uncertain, trust may be more harmful for relationships than low, but certain, trust [23], research would benefit from more in-depth investigations of the potentially unique downstream consequences of lower trust for anxious and avoidant persons' relationships. In other words, although the correlations between trust and attachment anxiety and avoidance are often similar in magnitude, how trust informs cognition, affect, and behavior within anxious and avoidant individuals' relationships may vary in important ways.

Finally, attachment and trust dynamics have implications for longitudinal changes in security [24,25]. The interplay of attachment and trust has the potential for creating either virtuous cycles of security or vicious cycles of insecurity within the relationship. For example, improving perceptions of trust between partners may helpfully enhance attachment security [26], and enhancing attachment security in other ways (e.g., via intimacy promotion, [27]) may improve perceptions of trust. Alternately, undermining perceptions of trust between partners may harmfully reduce attachment security, and reducing attachment security may undermine perceptions of trust (see [28]); in other words, a lower-trust partner may drag the other partner down [29]. In all cases, changes in attachment and trust likely feed into each other to influence relationship quality, conflict, and success.

Conclusions

Considering the consequences of differences in conceptualizations of trust across theoretical perspectives can be very valuable for generating hypotheses that more directly test the assumptions of each theory vis-à-vis the construct of trust. Existing research cannot conclude with certainty that trust is either a part of attachment representations (as implied by attachment

theory), or if it is a unique construct that shares some overlap with dispositions to (dis)trust (as implied by interdependence theoretical approaches). The development of trust over time and in different contexts has also not satisfactorily been documented, partly because this requires the use of complex longitudinal designs. The next wave of research investigating attachment and trust dynamics within romantic relationships will likely yield interesting and important distinctions in how attachment and trust develop and change throughout life.

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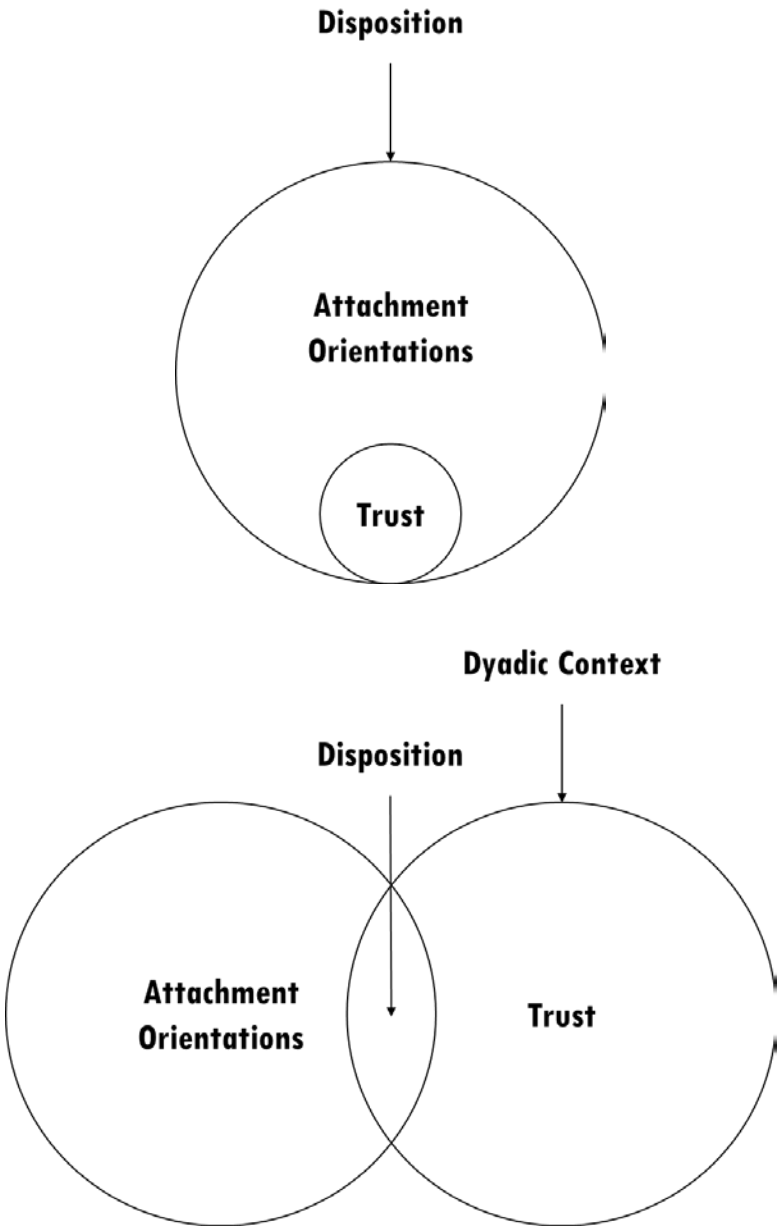

Figure 1. Conceptual representation of dispositional (top) and contextual (bottom) perspectives of attachment and trust in relationships.