An Attachment Perspective on Trust and Compliance: Secure and Insecure Forms of Compliance toward Romantic Partners and Governmental Institutions

Mario Mikulincer

Azrieli Israel Center for Addiction and Mental Health and Department of Psychology

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Shir Zur

Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology

Reichman University

Phillip R. Shaver

Department of Psychology

University of California Davis

Abstract

In this chapter, we apply attachment theory to explain individual variations in trust and compliance with requests from romantic partners and governmental institutions. We contrast normative, value-driven compliance with instrumental, fear-based compliance and argue that attachment orientations channel the same request into distinct motives. Secure individuals, benefiting from responsive partners and procedurally just authorities, perceive legitimacy and comply out of autonomous cooperation. Attached-anxious people, however, treat compliance as a defensive maneuver to forestall rejection; their willingness rises when exclusion threats are salient and compliance can soothe rejection concerns. Attachment-avoidant individuals, prioritizing autonomy, generally resist complying. Six experiments with Israeli adults corroborate these predictions. First, threat manipulations heightened compliance only among the highly anxious. Second, opportunities to comply reduced attachment-anxious people's accessibility to rejection-related thoughts, whereas failing to comply intensified their rejection-related concerns. Third, making salient the responsiveness of a relationship partner or the procedural fairness of governmental agent boosted legitimacy, compliance and broader cooperation mainly among attachment-secure participants. These findings reveal how attachment processes shape compliance-related dynamics from intimate dyads to civic life.

Compliance refers to altering one's behavior in response to an explicit or implicit request or demand from another person or social entity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). It is a fundamental component of social life: Every form of collective existence, whether small (e.g., a friendship or family) or large (e.g., a country), depends on informal and formal norms and rules that regulate behavior and sustain social order (Passini & Morselli, 2010). But while necessary and generally functional, compliance has a dark side. It can give rise to coercion, psychological and physical abuse, terrorism, and even genocide. Moreover, it can force people to suppress or relinquish their beliefs, opinions, and values, compromising their sense of integrity and autonomy (Feldman, 2011).

Although not equally evident at all levels of social organization, compliance occurs at every level from dyadic relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, to relations between individuals and large organizations and institutions, including governments. With reference to the higher levels of organization, compliance ensures adherence to established norms, rules, and directives, enabling a smooth-functioning and productive collective order (Passini & Morselli, 2010). In less formal, usually less hierarchical relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, compliance is important because it allows individuals to respond to each other's needs and preferences, furthering both people's goals and enhancing the quality and longevity of their relationship. Although the relational dynamics differ in the two kinds of relationships, with large organizations and institutions being more hierarchical than most informal dyadic relationships, the concept of compliance is still relevant because of the general need for people to align their behavior with the preferences and expectations of others.

In the present chapter, we explore compliance through the lens of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). This now-familiar theory, with origins in the study of infant-parent relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and subsequently employed in the study of various

kinds of adolescent and adult relationships (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, 2023, for reviews), can be summarized briefly, as we do in the following section. The goal of the chapter is to consider how individual differences in attachment may play a role in the occurrence and subjective experience of compliance. In particular, we focus on the extent to which compliance is experienced as a comfortable, autonomous, and authentic form of cooperation or as an anxiety-ridden instrumental strategy to obtain care and validation while avoiding rejection. We examine this issue in the context of both romantic relationships and relationships between individuals and governmental institutions, and we summarize relevant preliminary experiments.

Overview of Attachment Theory and Research

According to Bowlby (1982), human infants are born with an innate psychobiological system (the attachment behavioral system) that motivates them to seek proximity to protective attachment figures to increase their sense of safety and security. Any available person perceived as "stronger and wiser" (Bowlby, 1982) can become an attachment figure to the extent that they fulfill three functions (Ainsworth, 1991). First, an attachment figure is someone to whom one turns for physical proximity in the face of threats or challenges. Ideally, this person is both available and sensitively responsive. Second, this figure is able to serve as a safe haven, offering comfort, reassurance, and protection in times of threat, stress, or need. Third, the figure is able to act as a secure base from which one can pursue personal interests and goals, confident that support will be available if needed.

At the heart of attachment theory is the concept of security dynamics (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023), which can be summarized in four propositions. The first proposition is that when people feel unsafe or insecure, they tend to cope with threats and challenges by seeking closeness to and support from attachment figures. In such instances, they temporarily halt other activities and focus on proximity-seeking behavior until distress is alleviated and

comfort and security are restored. These behaviors can be directed to any figure in the environment who is perceived to be benevolent and competent in providing protection and support (Bowlby, 1982).

The second proposition is that interactions with attachment figures who are responsive to one's bids for proximity and support in times of need contribute to the formation of positive beliefs about oneself and others (internal working models) and the consolidation of a sense of attachment security (felt security). This felt security – confidence that the world is a safe place, that support will be available when needed, and that one is worthy and esteemed – facilitates effective emotion regulation and psychological growth (Bowlby, 1988). Specifically, felt security sustains what we (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) refer to as a broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security, which increases resilience and broadens perspectives and capabilities.

When distress is alleviated through interactions with supportive attachment figures, felt security helps a person remain relatively composed during episodes of threat and stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This resilience is further bolstered by a reservoir of positive mental representations, or internal working models. Through supportive interactions, people learn that distress is manageable and that they are valuable, lovable, and special because they are regarded that way by caring others. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), these positive representations bring about a dual transformation in motives. Rather than focusing solely on self-protection, people who hold a solid sense of felt security can attend to both their own and others' needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. As a result, they are likely to adopt pro-relational, prosocial orientations and engage confidently in exploration, learning, and growth-oriented activities.

The third proposition is that non-responsive attachment figures fail to sustain felt security, arousing attachment-related worries and defensive reactions. Negative interactions

with frustrating, rejecting, or unreliable attachment figures intensify doubts about both the goodwill of others and one's own lovability (Bowlby, 1973), indicating the need to either hyperactivate or deactivate attachment needs and behaviors. Hyperactivation manifests in anxious, coercive, and sometimes aggressive demands for love and care, whereas deactivation manifests in the defensive denial of attachment needs and a reliance on oneself (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These two different kinds of defensive, self-protective strategies are what we hypothesize to affect the process of compliance, as explained below.

The fourth proposition is that an attachment figure's responsiveness gradually produces lasting changes in one's working models and behavioral tendencies toward that figure and, by projection and generalization, to others. In this way, a person's *attachment orientation* or *attachment style* (i.e., a relatively stable pattern of relational expectations, needs, emotions, and behaviors; Fraley & Shaver, 2000) is formed. Extensive research on individual differences in attachment indicates that fairly stable attachment orientations are organized around two orthogonal dimensions (Brennan et al., 1998): attachment-related anxiety (concerns about one's lovability, along with efforts to secure or coerce love) and attachment-related avoidance (distrust of others' goodwill and deactivation of attachment needs and behaviors). People who score low on both dimensions possess a strong sense of security. Extensive research has shown that high scores on either anxiety or avoidance are detrimental to mental health, interpersonal functioning, and social adjustment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, 2023).

Although attachment orientations are initially established during early parent-child interactions (Ainsworth, 1991), Bowlby (1988) maintained that significant experiences with other attachment figures throughout life can still reshape a person's working models. During adolescence and adulthood, close friends and romantic partners typically serve as principal attachment figures (Bowlby, 1988). However, teachers and supervisors in academic settings,

therapists in clinical settings, managers in organizational settings, and even symbolic figures (e.g., God) can also offer comfort and support (Granqvist, 2020; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023). Bowlby (1982) further suggested, in comments we are pursuing in this chapter, that adolescents and adults may seek protection and support from the groups and organizations to which they belong (e.g., workplaces, social clubs), as well as from larger social institutions (e.g., universities, hospitals, governments). He observed:

> A school or college, a work group, a religious group or a political group can come to constitute for many people a subordinate attachment "figure," and for some people a principal attachment "figure." In such cases, it seems probable, the development of attachment to a group is mediated, at least initially, by attachment to a person holding a prominent position within that group. Thus, for many, a citizen attachment to his state is a derivative of and initially dependent on his attachment to its sovereign or president. (p. 207).

Mayseless and Popper (2007) offered a related perspective, emphasizing the protective role of governmental institutions, and Granqvist (2020) described how individuals (in Sweden) look to their public welfare system for protection, support, and material security in times of crisis or need. Empirical studies indicate that experimentally induced threats amplify reliance on governmental structures and foster more favorable attitudes toward sociopolitical organizations. For instance, Kay et al. (2008) showed that participants who faced a threat to their sense of control were more likely than control-group participants to explicitly request that the government take care of them. Likewise, Jonas et al. (2011) demonstrated that participants reminded of their mortality were more inclined to endorse their workplace culture compared to those in a control condition.

The Attachment-Compliance Link

For purposes of this chapter we wish to focus on a particular relational dynamic within the broaden-and-build cycle of security; that is, the way in which positive working models of others' benevolence foster a cooperative stance and shape an affection-based form of compliance. According to Ainsworth et al. (1974), a responsive attachment figure generally does not need to rely on punishments or rewards to obtain a child's compliance with behavioral rules. Rather, secure children typically internalize and identify with their parents' norms because they hold positive working models of parents as benevolent and caring, which leads them to trust that parental demands stem from love and goodwill. Moreover, through experiences of feeling understood, validated, and cared for by kind and loving parents, a secure child learns that attentiveness and responsiveness to another's needs are the norm, prompting reciprocal attentiveness to parents' feelings and needs in what Kochanska (2002) describes as "mutually responsive relationships."

This mutual responsiveness is closely tied to the concept of *epistemic trust*, a state that loving, caring parents foster in their children. As Fonagy and Allison (2014) explain, by consistently serving as a safe haven and secure base, parents not only enhance a child's confidence in their availability (*emotional trust*) but also bolster the child's tendency to view parental information as trustworthy, reliable, and personally relevant (*epistemic trust*). In other words, secure children come to see their parents as dependable sources of knowledge because that knowledge is offered in the context of genuine care and affection. Granqvist (2021) similarly notes, "secure children naturally come to trust the goodwill and competence of their caregivers, and they can, therefore, use ostensive parental cues as reliable short-cuts to navigate the environment. … For these reasons, the default position may become one of cooperation" (p. 13).

Developmental studies have documented a robust link between felt security in infancy and later cooperation with mothers. For instance, Matas et al. (1978) found that infants

classified as securely attached to their mothers at 18 months were more cooperative and compliant with maternal requests in a problem-solving task six months later than those classified as insecurely attached. Similarly, Londerville and Main (1981) reported that infants classified as secure at 12 months were more likely to follow their mothers' instructions and cooperate with another adult at 21 months compared with infants classified as insecure. Based on such findings, Waters et al. (1990) concluded that interactions with a responsive caregiver foster "a positive orientation toward parental socialization goals and internalization of family values in early childhood" (p. 229).

In a series of longitudinal studies following children from infancy through adolescence, Kochanska and colleagues found that maternal responsiveness and the resulting felt security promote a willing, receptive attitude toward parental influence. This in turn fosters children's adoption of parental values and respect for rules, all while preserving a warm parent-child relationship (e.g., Goffin et al., 2018; Kochanska et al., 2010). For example, Kochanska et al. (2010) reported that attachment security at 14-15 months predicted greater compliance with parental instructions at 14 and 22 months; higher responsiveness to parents' and teachers' demands at 25 and 67 months; and more thorough internalization of parental prohibitions at 33, 45, and 56 months. It is important to note that this does not mean that secure children exhibit blind trust or absolute obedience. Corriveau et al. (2009) found that while secure children were generally more receptive to parental claims than avoidant children, they still disagreed when those claims were demonstrably incorrect (e.g., insisting that a somewhat horse-like cow was indeed a horse during a researcher's demonstration).

Although the attachment-compliance link in childhood is well established, systematic research on this link in adulthood is relatively rare. Nonetheless, existing findings suggest that individuals who are more secure with respect to attachment are generally more willing to cooperate with a romantic partner and to integrate both partners' perspectives when faced

with hurtful behavior or relational conflict. For instance, Perunovic and Holmes (2008) reported that individuals who scored lower on attachment insecurity (i.e., were more secure) managed relational conflicts more effectively by considering both their own needs and their partners' needs. In addition, felt security has been associated with a more cooperative orientation in social dilemma tasks, such as the Prisoner's Dilemma (Taheri et al., 2018).

Other studies indicate that interactions with a responsive, sensitive romantic partner can promote cooperation and reduce attachment-insecure individuals' resistance to a partner's requests. For example, Overall et al. (2013) found that avoidant individuals—who typically respond with anger and emotional distancing when asked to change an attitude or behavior— were significantly less reactive when their partner acknowledged the avoidant person's desire for self-reliance. Similarly, Farrell et al. (2016) observed that more avoidant individuals were more likely to reject a request to make a sacrifice for their partner's goals unless the requesting partner recognized the avoidant person's autonomy and appreciated their efforts.

However, additional research suggests that attachment-anxious (rather than avoidant or secure) individuals may be more inclined to comply with others' demands and more likely to relinquish their own needs, possibly to avert rejection or abandonment. Benjamin (2011) describes how fear of abandonment drives attachment-anxious individuals to prioritize a partner's needs, sometimes at the expense of their own well-being. This sensitivity to potential rejection makes them particularly prone to comply with a partner's demands in order to maintain the relationship and mitigate rejection anxiety. Indeed, Impett and Peplau (2002) found that more attachment-anxious women were more likely to consent to unwanted sexual activity, citing as reasons their fear of conflict or concern about a partner's waning interest. Additionally, Gudjonsson et al. (2008) noted that trait-like compliance was positively correlated with trait attachment anxiety, although Drake (2014) found conflicting results in this relatively unexplored research area.

Taken together, these research findings suggest that the attachment-compliance link in adulthood may be more nuanced than initially expected. Whereas attachment security may encourage a willingness to cooperate and comply with others' requests, attachment avoidance may act against compliance and cooperation because these prosocial tendencies imply relational interdependence and commitment. However, attachment anxiety, like attachment security, may also lead to compliance, but often in the service of warding off potential rejection. In our view, these behaviors stem from distinct motivations. For attachment-secure individuals, compliance represents a genuine desire to foster relational harmony without sacrificing personal needs. By contrast, attachment-anxious individuals may comply as a way to receive care from others or to avoid being rejected. To date, no published study has examined these underlying motives nor whether compliance reflects cooperation or submission depending on a person's degree of attachment anxiety. For deeper insight into these different motivations, we next offer a brief review of existing compliance models with which we might establish connections with attachment theory and research.

Models of Compliance

Two principal models have been proposed to explain the motivations behind compliance: the *instrumental* perspective (Becker, 1968) and the *normative* perspective (Tyler, 2006). The *instrumental* or *instrumental/deterrence* viewpoint posits that people comply with requests based on the potential rewards of compliance and the penalties associated with noncompliance (Becker, 1968). In this view, individuals are more inclined to comply when it yields a desirable outcome (reward) or when noncompliance is likely to result in a negative outcome that deters them from rejecting the request (Feldman, 2011). While such instrumental motivations (maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments) can indeed boost compliance, their influence tends to be weak and difficult to sustain over time (Tyler & Blader, 2000). Relying solely on instrumental incentives can foster only superficial

compliance and may undermine a person's identification with the request, making it less likely for the request to align with the individual's values and beliefs. This, in turn, reduces intrinsic motivation to comply when immediate rewards or sanctions are absent (Tyler & Blader, 2000). Critics also point out that the instrumental model overlooks moral and social factors and presumes that people act as purely rational agents, which may not adequately capture the complexity of human decision-making (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). Nevertheless, the instrumental model has been widely applied in economics and criminology to explain rule-following, adherence to laws, and conformity to social norms.

By contrast, the *normative* perspective (Tyler, 2006) suggests that people comply not merely by calculating rewards and sanctions, but because they feel they *ought* to. In this framework, compliance arises from intrinsic motivation – a process in which the request is integrated with a person's own values and beliefs – and from a genuine willingness to cooperate and strengthen the relationship (Farrow et al., 2017). In essence, individuals identify with the request, and their compliance reflects a prosocial orientation.

A key factor in fostering this type of compliance is the *perceived legitimacy* of the request – whether the authority of other people or institutions is seen as appropriate, rightful, and fair, and thus worthy of respect and obedience (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Research by Sunshine and Tyler (2003) underscores that perceived legitimacy is essential for encouraging voluntary compliance, particularly in legal contexts where people are more inclined to observe laws they regard as just. The normative model further argues that *procedural justice* – the sense of being treated equitably and compassionately by others or institutions and feeling confident in their goodwill (Tyler & Blader, 2000) – is the primary antecedent of both perceived legitimacy and normative-based compliance (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). According to Tyler and Blader (2000), perceptions of procedural justice hinge on four main features of social interactions: (a) being treated with dignity and respect, (b) having one's needs and

perspectives acknowledged (i.e., being given a voice in decision-making), (c) ensuring decisions and procedures are fair and transparent, and (d) receiving signals of benevolent and trustworthy motives from the authority or partner.

Empirical evidence indicates that when individuals experience trust, respect, neutrality, and the opportunity to express their views (core elements of procedural justice), they are more likely to follow directives, rules, and laws, and to cooperate voluntarily with authorities (e.g., Murphy et al., 2008). These dimensions of procedural justice have proven to be strong predictors of compliance across diverse contexts, including workplaces, legal systems, and educational institutions (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Huo, 2002). For instance, fair treatment enhances people's satisfaction with the justice system, boosts the legitimacy of legal authorities (Tyler & Fagan, 2008), and leads to greater cooperation with police and adherence to the law (Tyler & Huo, 2002). Likewise, Jackson and Bradford (2010) found that procedural justice is vital for building public trust and ensuring community cooperation with law enforcement.

From our perspective, the concept of procedural justice closely parallels the concepts of security-enhancing parenting or caregiving (in attachment theory) and what has been called *perceived responsiveness* in dyadic relationships Reis et al., 2004). Perceived responsiveness refers to the belief that a partner understands, values, and respects one's inner experience, and will act supportively and empathetically toward one's needs, goals, and preferences (Reis et al., 2004). In the context of both procedural justice and perceived responsiveness, an individual feels fairly treated by a trustworthy, benevolent other (e.g., a romantic partner or the government) that is attuned to their needs. Attachment theory identifies perceived responsiveness as a core element of the creation of secure attachment and compliance with a caregiver's perspective and instructions. The attachment figure's

responsiveness reinforces both emotional trust in this figure's support and epistemic trust in the figure's norms and perspectives (Fonagy & Allison, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023).

Similarly, *perceived legitimacy* in institutional or social contexts can be likened to *epistemic trust*. In both instances, the individual regards the other party (e.g., romantic partner or government) as a dependable source of knowledge, believing that requests are driven by a sincere concern for their well-being. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the normative model, illustrating how perceptions of procedural justice or a partner's responsiveness enhance perceptions of legitimacy or epistemic trust, which in turn foster compliance and cooperation.
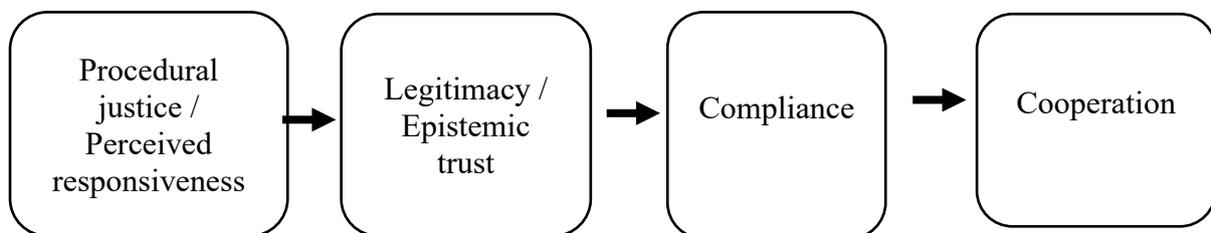

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the normative/secure model of compliance

Models of Compliance and Attachment

With the aforementioned models of compliance in mind, we hypothesized that the personal meaning and motives involved in compliance would vary along the attachment-anxiety dimension. Individuals scoring high in attachment anxiety were expected to construe compliance as an instrumental means for avoiding negative outcomes. In times of threat or need, when the attachment system is activated and fear of rejection or abandonment becomes pronounced, attachment-anxious people who experience significant doubts about their lovability and feel helpless without an attachment figure's support were expected to do whatever is necessary to regain closeness to and love and care from that figure. These efforts could include adopting a submissive, compliant stance to ward off rejection or other punitive outcomes that might cause them to be excluded from the relationship (e.g., abandonment by a

romantic partner; fines or imprisonment by governmental agencies). For those with chronic fears of exclusion, the primary goal of compliance should be to ensure continued inclusion in a relationship on which they feel highly dependent. To them, this is an alarming threat to their survival and well-being.

In contrast, people who are relatively secure with respect to attachment, who trust in others' love even when disagreements arise, should be less inclined to view compliance as a form of self-protection. Because they believe they are treated well by benevolent others, they typically regard requests as legitimate, viewing them as motivated by genuine goodwill (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Relatively secure individuals tend to accept and internalize these requests and comply from a more autonomous, pro-relational stance.

Similar in important respects to attachment theory, Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for personal development and well-being. When these psychological needs are fulfilled, individuals experience intrinsic motivation, leading to self-actualization and positive engagement with the social world. Conversely, when these needs remain unmet, people often experience negative emotions and doubts about themselves and others, heightening the risk of mental health difficulties (see Ryan & Deci, 2017). This dynamic parallels the transformation resulting from the broaden-and-build cycle of attachment security: Greater attachment security fosters a shift away from self-focused, ego-driven forms of love toward more mature, pro-relational, and prosocial behavior. In both theories, feeling secure and supported, whether through autonomy-supportive environments or security-promoting relationships, enables individuals to participate in relationships and societal roles from a place of authenticity and self-direction. In both frameworks, this transition represents a movement away from defensiveness and dependency and toward relational harmony and personal growth,

underscoring the vital role of supportive contexts in cultivating deeper, more mature connections.

These various theoretical ideas provide a basis for delineating secure and insecure forms of compliance toward romantic partners and governmental institutions. Whereas attachment-avoidant individuals would be reluctant to comply and cooperate with others, both attachment-secure and attachment-anxious individuals would exhibit relatively higher levels of compliance but for different reasons. For attachment-secure people, compliance is a reflection of the trust they feel toward others. For attachment-anxious people; compliance is a defensive means against fears of rejection and abandonment.

We must keep in mind, however, that romantic relationships are typically informal and relatively egalitarian, allowing both partners to serve as attachment figures for each other. In contrast, sociopolitical relationships are more formal and hierarchical, putting the government in the role of what Bowlby called a secondary attachment figure, and placing the individual in the position of receiving support and influence from the government. Nevertheless, in both types of relationships, individuals can feel protected and supported by their attachment figures, either a romantic partner or government, and may comply with these figures' requests either as a freely chosen act of cooperation or as a submissive route to secure protection and care.

Preliminary Evidence

In a 2025 PhD dissertation, one of us, Zur, carried out six experimental studies that explored how attachment differences shape both normative and instrumental forms of compliance toward romantic partners and governmental institutions. We describe the studies here only in summary form, without statistical details. The research program comprised two complementary sets of studies. The first set of four studies tested whether people high in attachment anxiety use compliance as a defense against their fear of rejection. If so, their

compliance should satisfy Greenberg et al.'s (1997) three criteria for a psychological defense. First, a defensive maneuver should be triggered when the relevant threat is salient. In our case, attachment-anxious individuals should become most compliant when rejection or exclusion looms. Second, once activated, a defensive maneuver should alleviate concerns regarding the perceived threat. In our case, giving attachment-anxious people a chance to comply with a partner or institution should reduce their rejection-related concerns. Third, blocking a defensive maneuver should intensify concerns regarding the perceived threat. In our case, preventing attachment-anxious individuals from complying should heighten their fear of rejection.

The remaining two studies investigated the link between attachment security (viewed as low attachment anxiety) and normative, legitimacy-based compliance. Specifically, these studies examined (a) whether the compliance of attachment-secure individuals depends on their perceptions of responsiveness or procedural justice of the requesting partner or institution, and (b) whether their compliant behavior reflects a broader cooperative stance. According to Tyler's (2006) normative model of compliance, fair procedures enhance perceived legitimacy, which in turn increases voluntary compliance and cooperation. Consequently, if secure people follow the normative model, making a partner's or institution's responsiveness/procedural justice salient (versus a neutral induction) should raise perceived legitimacy and, in turn, boost both compliance and cooperation.

Across all six studies, young Israeli adults completed an online attachment measure that assessed attachment anxiety and avoidance toward a specific figure. In Studies 1, 3, and 5 they filled out the nine-item Experiences in Close Relationships—Relationship Structures questionnaire (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011) with reference to their current romantic partner. In Studies 2, 4, and 6 they completed the seven-item Organizational Attachment Scale (OAS; Feeney et al., 2020) referring to governmental institutions.

Two studies tested the prediction that making rejection threats salient (versus not salient) would increase compliance primarily among people high, but not low, in attachment anxiety. Participants were randomly assigned to a *threat-salient* or *control* condition that either heightened or did not heighten concerns about partner rejection or social exclusion. Following these manipulations, participants' willingness to comply with a romantic partner (Study 1) or a governmental institution (Study 2) was assessed as the main dependent variable. Consistent with expectations, reminders of a partner's potential rejection significantly boosted willingness to comply with that partner's requests, but only among participants high in partner-specific attachment anxiety. A parallel pattern emerged in the institutional context: Experimentally highlighting the possibility of social exclusion led to greater compliance with governmental directives, again primarily among those with elevated institutional attachment anxiety. These findings demonstrate the *threat-contingent* nature of anxious individuals' compliance and satisfy the first criterion of a psychological defense. In the two studies, higher scores on the attachment avoidance dimension were associated with lower levels of compliance in both control and threat-salient conditions.

Two additional studies tested two follow-up hypotheses. First, giving participants an opportunity to comply with a romantic partner or governmental institution should reduce rejection-related concerns mainly among highly attachment-anxious individuals. Second, blocking compliance should amplify these concerns, again mainly among the highly attachment anxious. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions and received bogus feedback indicating that they had either succeeded in complying (compliance condition), failed to comply (non-compliance condition), or received no feedback (neutral condition). One study centered on responses to a romantic partner's request, the other focused on compliance with governmental rules. After the manipulation, the accessibility of rejection-related concerns was measured as the primary outcome in the two studies.

Overall, higher attachment anxiety predicted greater accessibility of rejection-related concerns, underscoring the importance of fear of rejection for these individuals. The feedback manipulation shifted accessibility of rejection-related concerns in diametrically opposite directions. Relative to the neutral-control condition, feedback that one had *failed* to comply produced a marked surge in rejection-focused thoughts, whereas feedback confirming *successful* compliance produced an equally pronounced drop in such thoughts. These shifts were medium-to-large in magnitude but, importantly, they appeared almost exclusively among participants in the upper range of attachment anxiety; low-anxious individuals showed little change regardless of feedback valence. This interaction neatly satisfies Greenberg et al.'s (1997) second and third criteria for a defense. For attachment-anxious individuals, the chance to comply functions as a psychological safety signal: Its confirmation rapidly quiets fears of rejection, whereas thwarted compliance removes that buffer and leaves attachment-anxious people exposed, thereby amplifying their vulnerability and rekindling rejection concerns.

The remaining two studies examined whether highlighting a romantic partner's responsiveness or a governmental authority's procedural justice would enhance perceived legitimacy, compliance, and cooperation predominantly among people low in attachment anxiety (i.e., relatively secure). In one study, participants were randomly assigned to conditions depicting either high or low partner responsiveness. In the second study, they were randomly assigned to conditions depicting either high or low police procedural justice. Subsequently, participants reported the perceived legitimacy of the partner's or policeman's authority, their willingness to comply, and their inclination to cooperate, which formed the key dependent variables in each of the two studies.

Findings showed that highlighting a romantic partner's high responsiveness substantially increased both compliance and broader cooperation primarily among

participants who scored relatively low on attachment anxiety or avoidance toward their romantic partner (more secure participants). A conceptually identical pattern emerged for procedural justice: Making a police officer's fair treatment salient enhanced legitimacy judgments, compliance, and cooperative intent mainly among participants who scored relatively low on attachment anxiety or avoidance toward governmental institutions (more secure participants). In addition, higher attachment avoidance scores were associated with lower levels of compliance and cooperation with a romantic partner and police regardless experimental inductions of partner's responsiveness or police's procedural justice.

Together, these results underscore the pivotal role of perceived responsiveness and procedural fairness in fostering normative compliance among attachment-secure people who are less motivated by rejection-avoidance and more by prosocial and relationship-nurturing motives (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Complementing prior evidence linking attachment security with prosocial feelings and behavior (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), Zur's (2005) findings indicate that secure individuals comply not from fear or self-protection but from a genuine desire to uphold relational and societal norms.

The converging evidence from Zur's six experiments suggests that attachment orientations operate as a psychological "switchboard," routing the same external demand into qualitatively different internal motives. Attachment-avoidant individuals tend to resist others' demands and directives, probably due to their concerns about relational commitment and loss of autonomy. Attachment-anxious individuals are more likely than attachment-avoidant ones to comply with others' requests. For them, compliance seems to be triggered by the specter of rejection and social exclusion and functions as an anxiolytic maneuver. That is, the act of saying "yes" momentarily dials down hyperactivation of the attachment system. For secure individuals, in contrast, compliance is motivated by a concern with fairness and reciprocal obligation; it is experienced less as de-escalation and more as a values-affirming choice.

This attachment perspective clarifies why prior compliance research has yielded apparently contradictory findings. Whereas some studies link acquiescence to distress and low self-esteem, others associate it with civic engagement and social capital. The attachment lens reveals that both patterns can coexist, each anchored in a distinct motivational substrate and different working models of self and others.

A particularly striking nuance is that the same external feedback, success or failure in complying, has opposite emotional effects depending on attachment orientation. Success feedback confers psychological "earned security" on attachment-anxious participants but merely confirms expectations for attachment-secure people. Failure feedback, by contrast, threatens attachment-anxious participants with relationship loss yet poses little threat to secure people who can draw on internalized representations of reliable care. These asymmetries forecast downstream differences in emotion regulation, mental and physical health, and even neural responding to social rejection, pointing to fertile ground for interdisciplinary follow-up research that combines behavioral experiments with psychophysiological or neuroimaging indices.

A Broader View of Attachment and Compliance

An attachment-based lens deepens our understanding of power dynamics in romantic relationships. Although such relationships are often idealized as egalitarian, imbalances of influence routinely color everyday interactions. It matters who makes decisions, who controls resources, and who acquiesces to a partner's wishes (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009). Compliance, therefore, is more than a sign of harmony; it is a behavioral index of how power is distributed and renegotiated. For attachment-anxious partners, these dynamic carries special weight. These people's chronic fear of rejection makes them especially willing to concede to a partner's demands, even when those demands conflict with their own needs. They do this to preserve closeness and avoid conflict. In effect, frequent acquiescence can

signal a structurally weaker position, preventing these individuals from asserting their preferences and from cultivating a more reciprocal balance of power.

Extending this logic beyond the couple, similar compliance–power dynamics emerge in interactions with governmental institutions. Just as someone may comply with a partner to maintain approval or avert conflict, citizens may comply with state directives to secure material benefits, maintain safety, or forestall punishment. Individuals high in attachment anxiety appear doubly sensitive: Their heightened vigilance to rejection generalizes to hierarchical, bureaucratic settings, fostering a readiness to conform to regulations or the wishes of authority figures. Thus, attachment theory helps explain why some citizens experience a diminished sense of agency when confronting governmental demands and why they may yield more readily to institutional power.

This vulnerability can be exploited by authoritarian or charismatic leaders. Such leaders often cultivate what Haslam and Reicher (2006) call a *cultivation-of-insecurity* strategy: "I profess to value you, yet you remain unworthy—unless you follow me." By oscillating between conditional approval and implied rejection, they play on followers' insecurities, tightening control and eliciting obedience to policies that may be unethical or self-destructive. Governments that withhold genuine care or that deliberately mistreat subgroups can amplify this effect, fusing promises of protection with the threat of exclusion, disenfranchisement, or punishment (Tyler & Blader, 2000). Attachment-anxious citizens, primed to seek acceptance from powerful others, may therefore comply even when democratic freedoms erode, illustrating a psychological pathway through which totalitarian regimes can consolidate power.

Although attachment theory originated in the study of intimate bonds, its principles naturally generalize to social hierarchies and institutions. Whether in workplaces, schools, or civic life, attachment-based differences in trust and threat perception shape individuals'

willingness to comply, resist, or negotiate. This broad applicability makes attachment theory an integrative framework for studying how legitimacy, power, and relational security intersect to produce cooperative or oppositional behavior in both interpersonal and societal arenas.

An attachment perspective offers a useful synthesis of instrumental and normative models of compliance. For attachment-avoidant individuals, compliance goes against their main goal of being autonomous and self-reliant, and then they might resist others' requests and directives. For attachment-anxious individuals, compliance is fundamentally defensive: a self-serving strategy to soothe fears of rejection or social exclusion, often at personal cost. For attachment-secure individuals, compliance reflects prosocial motives based on a sense of trust, perceived fairness, and the desire to uphold mutually beneficial norms while still allowing room for assertive autonomy. These different pathways illuminate how attachment avoidance inhibits compliance, attachment anxiety channels compliance through anxiety-reduction, and attachment security channels compliance through a broaden-and-build cycle of trust, perspective-taking, and cooperative motivation. In doing so, attachment theory not only clarifies the psychological dynamics of compliance but also highlights leverage points for fostering healthier power balances and more democratic forms of influence in both private and public life.

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