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The Dynamics of Suggestive Influences:

Between the Person's Psychology and the Psychosocial Context

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

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Table of Contents

1. Suggestion and suggestibility: an integrating approach

The first chapter of our thesis, *Suggestion and suggestibility: an integrating approach*, draws a brief overview of the various definitions, ending with V. Gheorghiu's (2000) perspective. The chapter discusses upon the place suggestion occupies within the field of psychology, summarising the information currently available on suggestion and suggestibility compared to aspects still under discussion. At the end of the section, we motivated the importance of this research theme.

In the section dedicated to the explanatory theoretical models, we referred to the theory of the *structures of meaning* and the concept of *interpersonal priming* (Lundh, 1998). Using another model of dual systems, we showed how the *impulsive system* can explain suggestive phenomena (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Finally, we presented the source monitoring model in the research of false memories (Johnson, Hastroudi, & Lindsay, 1993).

In the following section we showed that all suggestions involve a *source*, a *target* (the suggestee) and a *message* which enables the influence. Additionally, we contributed with a classification based on the suggestion production method (see Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of suggestive influences depending on the production method

Suggestive influence type	Subtypes	Interest concepts	Tests or exemplifying situations
Suggestions based on the connection idea-experience ("ideo-manifestations")	inducing an ideo-motor response	ideo-motor response	arm levitation body sway arm catalepsy eyelids catalepsy press and release Chevreul's pendulum
	inducing an ideo-sensory response	ideo- sensory response	thirst hallucination music hallucination orange hallucination fly hallucination
	inducing an ideo-affective response	ideo-affective response	

Suggestive influence type	Subtypes	Interest concepts	Tests or exemplifying situations
Suggestions by inducing expectancy	successive stimulations	leading idea secondary suggestibility	Progressive lines test Progressive weights test Inkblot test Odour suggestion Heat illusion
	effect of the stimulus credibility	internalisation of the placebo norm prestige suggestibility	experiments using the autokinetic effect placebo manipulations
Suggestions by distorting mnesic contents	suggestions by deceitful questions suggestions by interrogative pressure	yield shift false confessions	Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale – Yield Subscale Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale – Shift Subscale
	suggestions by misinforming	source memory misinforming effect	event – misinforation – test paradigm
Suggestions by contagion through a model	behavioural contagion emotional contagion motivation social contagion hysterical contagion		

We continued by stating our point of view concerning the relation between suggestion and the phenomena researched by social influence psychologists. We correlated the *source credibility* with the notion of *structure of meaning* showing how, in the dichotomy *public conformism* vs. *private acceptance*, suggestion only crosses the latter, and that within the *attitudes change,* the contents processed peripherally can be included in the field of suggestionality (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Hood & Sherif, 1962; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). We consider that the suggestive influences include, without limiting to, the *informational influences* studied by social psychologists (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Extensive relationships between suggestion phenomena and phenomena studied by the social influence
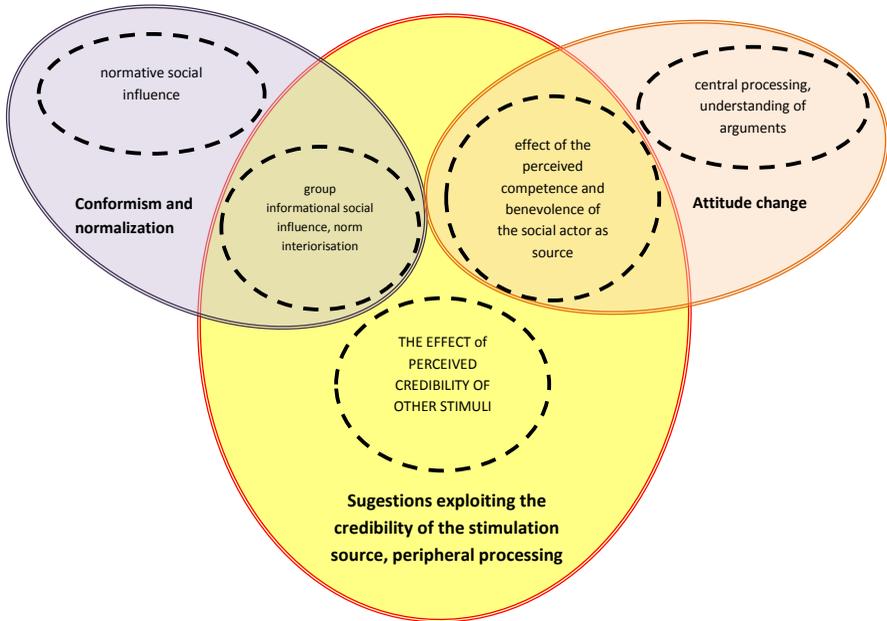
At the end of the chapter, we emphasised the elements shared in common by the structures of meaning approach, the cognitive models and the dual models. We showed that all three approaches discuss stable, highly complex information structures that store information in the node connections. They remain active for a short time after their initiation, before turning off. Some of these structures are built based on the temporal similarity and contiguity of the external world. Once activated, they influence all the mental processes (Lundh, 1998; Miclea, 2003; Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

2. Adult attachment: reading grid for the relationship with the Other

In the chapter *Adult attachment: reading grid for the relationship with the Other* we presented the adult attachment model (see Fig. 2); we argued that attachment influences all social relations, we summarised the main debate around attachment measurement and we carried out a short synthesis of the few studies directly approaching the relationship suggestibility-attachment (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b; Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Goldsmith, 2010; Mercer, 2011).

Fig. 2: Adult Attachment Model (Bartholomew, 1990)
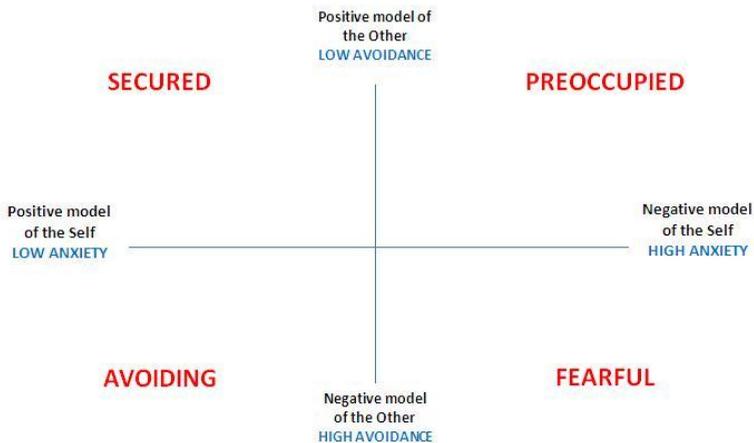
3.   Objective of the thesis

In this chapter we showed that the relationship between suggestion and attachment can be studied from three perspectives, namely: target, content and source of the suggestive message (see Fig 3).

Fig. 3: Research strategy
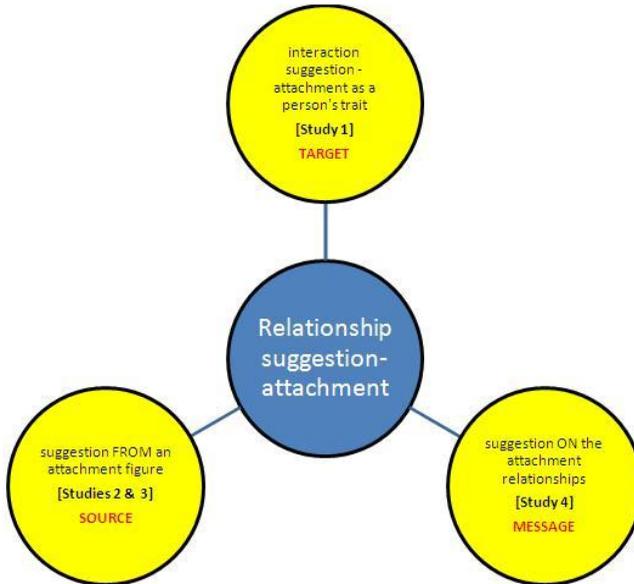
If the suggestant has significant models of the personal value of the Self and the availability and responsiveness of the Other, this means that these models will influence the amplitude of the reaction to suggestion. The target's feeling of personal value can make the target invest itself with more or less informational dependence on the Other. The attachment models can be regarded as macrostructures of meaning activated in the processing of the suggestive influences coming from the Other.

4. Study I: The relationship between the general reaction to suggestion and the attachment dimensions

4.1. Hypotheses

Hypotheses on dimensions:

1. Attachment anxiety positively predicts the reaction to suggestion;
2. Attachment avoidance negatively predicts the reaction to suggestion;
3. The subjects with a high avoidance level react to suggestion to a significantly smaller extent compared to those with low avoidance level.
4. The subjects with a high anxienty level react to suggestion to a significantly smaller extent compared to those with low anxiety.

Hypotheses on styles:

5. The preoccupied subjects have significantly more ample reactions to suggestions than the secured ones;
6. The preoccupied subjects have significantly more ample reactions to suggestions than the avoiding subjects;
7. The fearful subjects respond to suggestion like the secured ones;
8. The secured subjects have significantly more ample reactions to suggestions than the avoiding subjects;

4.2. Design

Our study makes use of three (respectively four) independent groups and three repeated measures (groups based on the dimensions anxiety, avoidance, respectively the prototypical styles of adult attachment). The dependent measures (repeated) were the scores of three experimental tasks involving suggestion.

4.3. Instruments

Ways of suggestive influence

The memory task

Based on a classical paradigm *stimulus-misinformation-test* we photographed several ordinary objects, placed next to one another (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004). After viewing the image, the subjects were asked to answer a series of misleading questions suggesting the existence of some objects that were not present in the photograph. At the end, the subjects had to choose from a list

comprising all the objects mentioned in the questions only the ones seen in the image. We made a ratio between the number of suggested objects and the number of actual objects.

The inkblot task

For the inkblot task we created inkblots plates in which the shapes were either undefined, or obvious (Eysenck, 1943). During the pre-testing stage, we gathered spontaneous answers (the subject answered openly to the question *What does this inkblot resemble to?*). We only kept the plates containing undefined shapes that recorded significant differences between the frequency of the spontaneous answers and the frequency of suggested answers (Alpha = .73). In suggesting the answers we used the formula *Many people think that this resembles ... Can you see anything similar to ...?*. We summed up the scores of the undefined shapes plates and suggested answer.

The circles task

For the *circles task*, the subjects read about an alleged psychological effect assuming that two circles seemed equal, although they were not. The two black disks were in fact identical in size. The subjects' task was to "ignore the illusion" and "assess" the difference between the two circles in percents, exploiting thus the secondary suggestibility and the prestige suggestibility (Stukát, 1958; Das, 1960). For the data used within the study, the internal Alpha consistency was .78.

ECR Scales

We used the revised version of the Experiences in Close Relationship questionnaire pretested by exploratory factorial analysis on a number of 63 students (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). We retained 22 items composing a short version of the instrument.

4.4. Subjects

The questionnaire was applied on a number of 231 subjects, undergraduate students and highschool students, 73% of which were women. The average age was 20 years and one month (20.06).

4.5.   Procedure

Each participant received a book on the three suggestion tasks and an answer sheet. For the memory task, we selected the objects allowing for a good dissociation. We used the natural logarithm and the score square root in order to normalize the scores. We made succesive divisions according to each attachment dimension and based on the prototypical styles.

4.6.   Results

In the absence of linear relationships, we could not perform any multiple regressions; thus, we reject hypotheses 1 and 2. Among the significant effects when comparing the groups determined by the two dimensions, i.e. four prototypical styles, the contrasts effect reached the following values for the memory test:

1. students: secured > the other attachment styles .61
2. students: fearful < the other attachment styles .51
3. students: highly avoiding < low avoiding .55 (supports H_3);
4. students: highly anxious < low anxious .51 (rejects H_4);
5. all subjects: preoccupied > avoiding .37 (supports H_6);
6. students: fearful < secured .72 (rejects H_8);
7. high school students: preoccupied > secured .61 (supports H_5);
8. students: secured > avoiding .59 (supports H_9);

Fig. 4: Attachment styles groups for the students, memory task
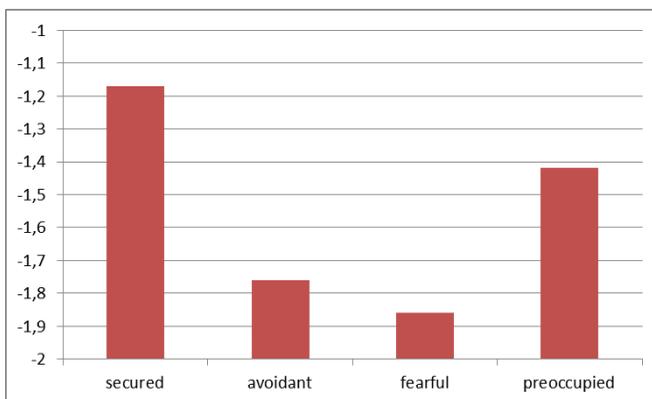
4.7.   Discussions and conclusions

The results suggest a possible connection between avoiding the attachment and resistance to suggestion; this could be explained by the fact that attachment avoidance involves an exaggeration of the personal competence. The result is congruent with the newer approaches considering interpersonal trust as a trait and not just a situational factor (Evans & Revelle, 2008).

Contrary to our expectations, the results suggest that a higher attachment anxiety also results in a decreased response to suggestion, rendering the fearful subjects the most resistant to the suggestions applied, while the secured become the most likely to respond to the tasks. A possible explanation resides in the fact that, for higher anxiety, the inconstancy of the attachment figures can generate the feeling that the others' responsiveness is unpredictable, leading to distrust in all the social relationships of the adult. The explanation corresponds to the results regarding the relationship between the ambivalent attachment in adults, predictability, trust in the partner, trust in the others, self-disclosure, privacy, romantic involvement (Fuller & Fincham, 1995; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). A non-secured attachment may also involve decreases both in the model of the Self and in the model of the Other; also, these modifications are likely to drive each other. Moreover, Zeijlmans et al.(2003) showed that attachment insecurity, and not the type of insecurity, actually influences the attentional and memory processes. Overall, the results are not considered exhaustive in any of the cases.

5. Study II –The life partner as a co-suggestor

5.1. Hypotheses
1. A main effect of the experimental condition on the scores obtained for the suggestion tasks;
2. The subjects in condition 1 register significantly higher scores compared to the subjects in the other two conditions;
3. The subjects in condition 3 record significantly lower scores compared to the subjects in the other two experimental conditions.

5.2. Experimental Design

The design contains three conditions between two repeated measurements. The three conditions are:
1. the subjects are exposed to answers they believe to belong to their life partners;
2. the subjects are exposed to the alleged answers of "another participant in the research".
3. the subjects fill in the answers without being exposed to other answers.

The dependent measures are the memory task and the inkblots task scores.

5.3. Instruments

The memory task and the inkblot task were used. Additionally, the same short version of ECR-R was employed and, for additional control, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976).

5.4. Subjects

The subjects included in the study were 92 students in various pedagogical fields: 14 men and 78 women; the average age was 26 years and 7 months.

5.5. Procedure

In condition 1, the subject was convinced that the answers on the sheet were his/her life partner's. A detailed representation of manipulation in condition 1 is shown in Fig. 5. The subjects in condition 2 were only informed that the answers were another person's, with no further explanations.

Fig. 5: Manipulation of the naive subject's trust, condition 1, study 2
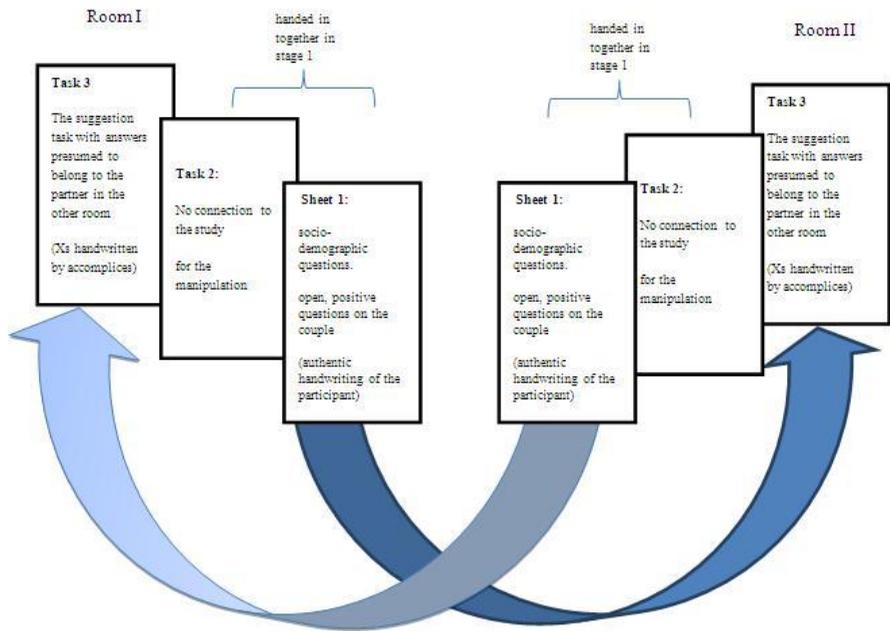
5.6. Results

The results were modest and limited solely to the inkblot task. The tests $t_{contrast}$ showed that the subjects in the third condition recorded significantly lower scores compared to the subjects in the other two experimental conditions considered together (.40) and compared to the subjects in the first condition (.42). The main effect did not reach the significance threshold. We reject H_1 and H_2, and we partially support H_3.

5.7.   Discussions and conclusions

The results suggest that a co-suggestor brings in a reduced or even insignificant influence. If present, the effect of the co-suggestor is more important compared to the absence of a co-suggestor, whether or not the relationship co-suggestor – suggestee is one of attachment. Most likely, the similarity with a co-suggestor and the ingenuous intention that the suggestee implies in the supplier of the first set of answers are more important (Cialdini, 1993; Petty et al., 2006). Moreover, the influence in the second group might have generated a more homogeneous effect, where the presumed author of the previous answers was unknown, resorting thus to the level of interpersonal trust as a trait (Lahno, 2004; Evans & Revelle, 2008).

6. Study III –The parental figure as a co-suggestor

6.1. Hypotheses and Design

We used the same design and procedure as for the second study, but the co-suggestor was the mother. The hypotheses are:

1. A main effect of the experimental condition on the suggestion tasks scores;
2. The subjects in condition 1 record significantly higher scores compared to the subjects in the other two conditions;
3. The subjects in condition 1 record significantly higher scores compared to the subjects in the second condition;
4. The subjects in condition 3 record significantly lower scores compared to the subjects in the other two conditions.

6.2. Instruments

We used the two suggestion tasks, the short version of the ECR-R and Barnes & Olson's Parent Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS) (1985).

6.3. Subjects

The subjects included in the study were high school students in the 11th grade at the "Garabet Ibrăileanu" High School of Iaşi, 40 girls and 16 boys, aged 18 on average.

6.4. Procedure

The procedure varied from the one used in the previous study only by the fact that the manipulation was unidirectional, mothers to students.

6.5. Results

We identified significant differences between the three groups both for the memory task ($F_{(2.49)} = 7.86$; $p < 0.01$), and for the inkblots task ($F_{(2.53)} = 3.12$; $p < 0.05$). We confirm H_1. The coefficients are given in Table 2.

| | Experimental groups | | | F | $\eta^2_{(gender)}$ |
	Mother	Other participant	Control		
Memory	0.27 (.13)	0.20 (.11)	0.11 (.12)	7.86**	0.243
Inkblots	8.35 (4.72)	8.47 (4.91)	5.50 (3.23)	3.12*	0.105

Note: *significant at p <.05

** significant at p <.01

Table 3: Averages distribution in the MEMORY task among the three experimental groups
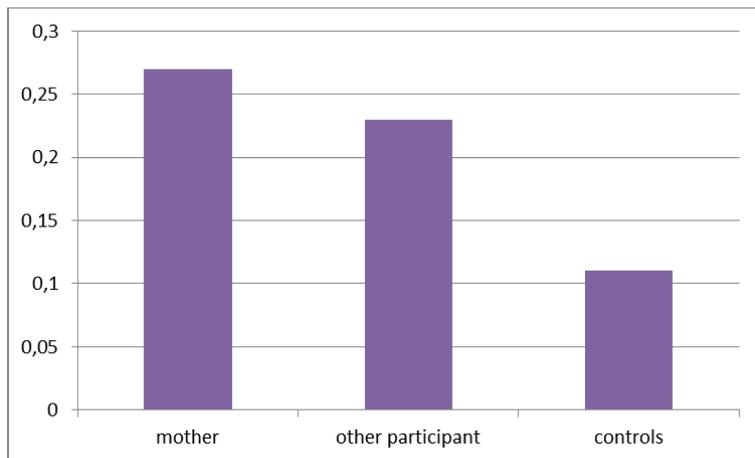
The effect size in the contrasts between the three groups for the *memory* task was moderate and powerful, as follows:

1. .99 control < groups 1 and 2 (supports H_4);
2. .83 group 1 > groups 2 and 3 (supports H_2);
3. .55 group 2 > group 3.

For the *stains* task, the effect was:

1. .63 control < groups 1 and 2 (supports H_4);
2. .54 control < condition 1.

The most important hypothesis (H_2) was not supported by significant contrasts in any of the two tasks.

6.6. Discussion and conclusions

The results support the conclusions reached in the previous study. The control group differed significantly from the other two groups in both tasks. A single contrast showed that in the memory task, the first experimental group recorded significantly higher scores than the other two groups. The result could mean that, because of the age difference, the student perceived his/her mother as being more competent in solving the task (Cialdini, 1993). The results suggest that the presence of a supplementary information source in an uncertainty situation is more important than the attachment relationship between the target and the suggestor. We attribute these values especially to the similarity and willingness the subjects perceived in the fictive co-respondent (Cialdini, 1993; Byrne, 1971; Petty, et al., 2006).

7. Study IV – Attachment dimensions and suggestion by means of an attachment related stimulus

7.1. Hypotheses
1. modest effect of suggestion on the experimental task in the secured subjects;
2. no significant effect of suggestion on the task in the avoiding subjects;
3. moderate or strong effect of suggestion on the task in the fearful subjects;
4. moderate or strong effect of suggestion on the task in the preoccupied subjects.

7.2. Design
The study includes two independent measures:
1. An experimental task involving two conditions:
    a. the *separation* condition (I) – before identifying the emotions in the images, the subjects answer open questions on couples breakups, which clearly refer to painful feelings related to breakups and conflict;
    b. the *leisure* condition (II) – before identifying the emotions, the subjects answer questions about the leisure time spent by the life partners; the questions refer to pleasant feelings related to spending time together with their spouses and to harmony;
2. A post-hoc separation into three groups based on the attachment dimension (*anxiety vs. avoidance*) resulting in nine independent groups.

7.3. Instruments
The experimental task involved using some photographs depicting two persons talking (see Fig. 6). The images were pre-tested by a group of 12 experts. In the end, an experimental task with only two photographs (four stimuli) was obtained. For each stimulus, the subject had to choose from a list of positive and negative emotions a single emotion adequate to

the character (Robinson, 2009). We rated the negative emotions by 0, and the positive ones by 1.

The pre-testing confirmed a main effect of suggestion on the valence of the emotions attributed to the characters in the image; the internal consistency of the four items was .61. We used the short version of the ECR and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (supplementary control).

7.4. Subjects

The subjects included in the study were 404 students from various faculties of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" and "Gh. Asachi" Universities of Iaşi, 73% females and 27 % males, aged 22 on average.

7.5. Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed during the classes, without letting the students know there were two distinct variants. They were asked to solve the tasks following the predefined order: open questions, identification of the emotions in the photographs and the two questionnaires.

7.6.   Results

We identified a significant interaction effect between the level of AVOIDANCE, the level of ANXIETY and the suggestion condition on the valence of emotions attributed by the subjects to the characters in the images ($F = 2.31$; $p = 0.05$). The coefficients resulting from the interaction 3 x 3 x 2 are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Interaction AVOIDANCE LEVEL x ANXIETY LEVEL x SUGGESTION

		Low anxiety	Moderate anxiety	High anxiety
Negative suggestion (separation)	Low avoidance	1.83 (.24)	1.07 (.33)	2.23 (.36)
	Moderate avoidance	2.56 (.31)	2.09 (.22)	2.09 (.28)
	High avoidance	2.06 (.31)	2.25 (.29)	1.61 (.27)
Positive suggestion (leisure time)	Low avoidance	3.00 (.32)	3.17 (.37)	2.73 (.39)
	Moderate avoidance	2.72 (.31)	1.66 (.25)	2.66 (.24)
	High avoidance	2.39 (.36)	2.71 (.35)	2.50 (.32)

The contrasts that showed the effect of suggestion in the various groups reached the following effect dimensions:

1. moderately anxious and low avoiding .85;
2. secured .57 (rejects H_1);
3. avoiding: insignificant (supports H_2);
4. fearful .42 (rejects H_3);
5. preoccupied: insignificant (rejects H_4).

22

7.7.   Discussions and conclusions

The data supports the hypothesis that by overrating personal autonomy, high attachment avoidance increases the resistance to suggestion (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew, 1990; Collins & Read, 1990; Sable, 2008, etc). The explanation is in keeping with other conclusions according to which the avoiding subjects make use of distancing strategies when their relationship is threatened (Birnbaum, Weisberg, & Simpson, 2010), show low empathic accuracy (Simpson et al., 2011) and present, to a higher extent, negative emotions after a couple fight (Hicks & Diamond, 2011).

The dimensions of anxiety, avoidance and suggestion type affected the tasks results. The greatest effect was recorded by the subjects showing low avoidance and moderate anxiety, followed by the secured (low anxiety and avoidance) and the fearful subjects (high avoidance and anxiety). The secured subjects' results could be justified by interpersonal trust (Lahno, 2004; Evans & Revelle, 2008; Cialdini, 1993; Mikulnicer, 1998). Other explanations could refer to the secured subjects' optimism and persistency in the challenging tasks (Morley & Moran, 2011) or their less defensive way of excluding the negative stimuli in the attentional stages of information processing (Zeijlmans et al., 2003).

It seems that the dimension anxiety interacts with the nature of the stimulus by means of which suggestion is induced. At increased levels of attachment anxiety, the structures of meaning of the distrust in the Other (i.e. in the suggestor) might prevail, while at moderate levels of anxiety and low levels of avoidance, the implicit trust in the suggestor might be added a background distrust in the couple relationships' stability and security. On the contrary, at increased levels of anxiety and avoidance, the structures of meaning of close relationships uncertainty may certainly prevail. The explanation is consistent with the informational dependency identified in previous studies in the preoccupied subjects (Simard, Moss, & Pascuzzo, 2011).

The data suggests that the fearful subjects respond better to suggestion when stimuli that rely on the close relationships uncertainty are used. Overall, the results of the fourth study show that the various attachment profiles respond differently depending on the nature of the administered suggestion, and not just according to the suggestee's attachment style.

8. General Conclusions

We aimed to identify the effect that an individual's attachment has upon his/ her suggestibility. An important clue is the fact that the persons showing a secured attachment constantly tend to respond to suggestions, irrespective of the nature of the stimulus; this result could be explained by the increased level of interpersonal trust these persons are used to show in the interactions with the others. Contrary to our expectations, the results would suggest that secure attachment facilitates suggestion processing due to the secured subjects' positive and adaptive expectations in the interactions with the others.

Considering the effects' amplitude in the first and the last study, the results indicate that the high levels of attachment avoidance render the subject more resistant to suggestion, irrespective of the nature of the stimulus used in the suggestive influence. This conclusion supports our initial assumptions based on the overrated personal autonomy specific to avoiding subjects. The use of heuristics regarding the Other are minimal, the subjects showing avoidant behaviour processing the information, most probably, by means specific to the reflexive system. This result can overlap with the studies showing that the avoiding subjects resort to selective attention in order to ignore the social clues (Shorey, 2010).

Attachment anxiety seems to be playing an important part especially in interaction with attachment avoidance. In neutral tasks, the fearful (high anxiety and avoidance) seem to be the most resistant to suggestion, while the preoccupied tend to react to suggestion to a higher extent compared to the other unsecured attachment styles. Nevertheless, when the stimulus refers directly to the attachment relationship, moderate values of anxiety in interaction with low avoidance values, rendered our subjects particularly suggestible, while the fearful subjects (high anxiety and avoidance) became moderately suggestible, closely following the secured subjects.

Attachment anxiety seems to favour the suggestive message processing by means of the structures of meaning referring to relationships uncertainty in general. The probable interaction between the manner in

which the anxious-attached subject regards the suggestor and the way in which (s)he simultaneously activates the structures of meaning specific to the predictability/ unpredictability of the attachment behaviour causes fluctuation in the way the attachment anxiety dimensions relate to the reaction to suggestion. It is interesting that the results seem to illustrate the paradox specific to the individual showing a fearful attachment, who avoids closeness associating it with suffering, but, at the same time, is hyper-conscientious of his/her personal vulnerability and longs for social contact (Shorey, 2010).

We noticed that the relationships investigated were not linear, which did not allow for statistical predictions. Overall, the results suggest that the secured subjects are constantly prone to influence by suggestion, the avoiding subjects tend not to respond to suggestion, while the preoccupied and the fearful oscillate, depending on the extent to which the suggestive message refers to the relationship or not. The message derived from an attachment figure does not seem to exert more influence compared to the influence derived from another source. The source is perceived as lacking bad intentions and, similarly to the suggestee, does not depend on the attachment relationship with the target. A new research design would require a complex interaction between the type of suggestion, the suggestive message valence, the attachment dimension and the suggestion source.

In the thesis *The Dynamics of Suggestive Influences: between the Person's Psychology and the Psychosocial Context* we discussed the concept of attachment, since it has a decisive role both in the personality dynamics (the person's psychology) and in the psychosocial context (the person's relations with the others). Our study aims to make a contribution both on the theoretical and the empirical plane; not only did we open an integrating perspective on a field rich in disparities, but we also suggested experimental tasks aimed to revive the research tradition in the field of suggestion. Moreover, investigating the relationship between attachment and the suggestive message can help us unveil whether there is a

personality tendency specific to suggestionality which has not been identified yet due to the potential restraining variables.

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