Attachment Styles, Conflict Perception, and Adolescents' Strategies of Coping with Interpersonal Conflict

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In this study, we examined the relationships between and among adolescents' attachment styles, conflict perceptions, and strategies for coping with conflicts with their peers. The study participants were 146 pupils at a junior high school who completed self-report question-naires about their attachment styles (secure, anxious, or avoidant), conflict coping styles (avoiding, dominating, obliging, compromising, and integrating), and conflict perceptions (positive or negative), as well as social and academic status and the frequency with which they and their friends were involved in conflicts.

We found strong, statistically significant correlations between attachment style, coping strategy, and conflict perception. Generally, participants whose secure attachment scores were higher reported that they held more positive attitudes toward conflict, used more coopera-tive strategies to cope with conflicts, and were involved in conflicts less often; they also seemed to be less obliging and more dominating in their coping strategies. Avoidant attachment adolescents in our study displayed more negative conflict perceptions and made greater use of dominating strategies.

We also found that participants' conflict perceptions mediated the relationship between their attachment styles and coping styles. Because it is generally easier to change attitudes than it is to change

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attachment styles, which are more fixed, our findings suggest that changing adolescents' conflict perceptions, through school curricula, for example, may be an effective way to improve their ability to cope with conflict.

Introduction

Children and adolescents are often involved in or exposed to interpersonal conflicts (Jones and Brinkman 1994; Johnson and Johnson 1996) with close friends, classmates, siblings, parents, and other adults. These situations, which are characterized by disagreement and a clash of wills and interests, are often highly emotionally charged and demand varying amounts of internal organization and coping from the child or adult involved (Shantz 1987; Hartup et al. 1988; Johnson and Johnson 1996). Sometimes these disputes involve a verbal argument and the expression of anger, and some-times renunciation or compromise, but these conflicts can also degenerate into physical violence. Children perceive, handle, and react to these situa-tions in different ways (see Sandy, Boardman, and Deutsch 1999 for a review).

In this study, we examined adolescents' different styles of coping with conflicts with their classmates, the relationships between their coping styles and their attachment styles, and the relationships between their coping styles and their perception of conflict. Attachment style has been shown to be a meaningful personality variable for understanding how children and adults respond during personal interactions (Shaver and Hazan 1987; Mikulincer, Orbach, and Iavnieli 1998), while perception of conflict is a cognitive factor that encompasses an individual's position toward conflict in general (Wilmot and Hocker 1985; Johnson and Johnson 1996). We hypothesized that these variables, attachment style and conflict perception, are a significant determinant of how adolescents will cope with interpersonal conflict.

Coping with Conflict

Coping is the dynamic process of responding to external events that are highly stressful or negative (McCrae and Costa 1986). It has both cognitive and behavioral components directed at minimizing or eliminating the stress or stress-inducing factors of the event (Folkman 1984). According to psychodynamic theories, coping methods express unconscious internal

mechanisms and defenses formed in early childhood, while cognitive theories emphasize the more conscious aspects of coping methods, which enable the individual to respond to the stressful situation. These methods, too, develop over one's lifetime, crystallizing to become personality traits.

Morton Deutsch (1973) described methods of coping with interpersonal conflict according to an axis of competition versus cooperation. For example, relationships between loving couples or close friends are characterized by cooperation and equality: both people seek to advance emotional understanding and the relationship is important to them both. In contrast, relationships between enemies or rivals are characterized by competitiveness: both parties may use force to achieve their objectives, and the solution reached in such a situation is usually temporary. Thus, competition and cooperation are two polar motivations that to a great extent determine whether a dynamic aimed at de-escalating and solving the problem will develop or whether the mode of coping will cause escalation of the conflict.

Deutsch wrote that the social environment influences how a person copes and in what form and that different people have dominant personal tendencies or patterns. People, will, for example, seek out social situations that suit their personalities and will try to avoid situations that do not (Sandy, Boardman, and Deutsch 1999).

Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964), who researched employee relations in organizations, presented a two-dimensional schema for characterizing different types of coping with situations of interpersonal conflict. During a conflict, they argued, both sides exhibit a certain degree of self-concern and concern for others. They defined self-concern as the extent of an individual's assertiveness and the degree to which he or she is willing to stand up for his or her own interests, while concern for others reflects one's ability to consider the other person and his or her needs and to cooperate with him or her.

Concern for self and concern for others are two separate dimensions that some theorists have argued can be combined to create five principal ways of coping with conflict: dominating, obliging, avoiding, compromising, and integrating (Rahim 1968 and 1983; Rahim and Bonoma 1979). The dominating style reflects a high degree of self-concern and a low degree of concern for others and is characterized by pursuing one's self-interest at the expense of meeting the other person's needs (Hammock et al. 1990). This style is belligerent and uncompromising, and those who display it may resort to force. Although there are conflictual situations in which such a style is appropriate, such as emergencies (Rahim and Bonoma 1979), usually this style of coping frustrates and angers the other side.

The obliging style is characterized by great concern for others and little concern for self. To persons having an obliging style, disagreements evoke anxiety. They seek to achieve a solution that will restore harmonious

relations. Such people are highly unassertive, and it is very important to them to be perceived as good people by the other side and to achieve their goals without ruining this impression, even at the expense of fulfilling their own needs (Rahim and Bonoma 1979).

The avoiding style is characterized, according to this five-style model, by low concern for both self and others. Individuals exhibiting this coping style do not expect any benefit to arise from solving the conflict and therefore prefer to withdraw. Avoidance, passivity, fear of confrontation, minimizing the importance of the conflict, and delaying its resolution all characterize this coping style, and these qualities can prevent the sides from reaching any kind of solution (Rahim and Bonoma 1979).

The compromising style expresses moderate concern for self and others. Individuals exhibiting this style are assertive and seek solutions that attend to their needs but not to the extreme. Their approach is to reduce disparities, to demonstrate flexibility and reasonableness, and to engage in mutual "give and take" in order to reach a "middle-ground" solution (Rahim and Bonoma 1979).

Individuals exhibiting the integrating style express high concern for themselves and for others. They use cooperation as a means to bring about a new and better solution for *both* sides that maximizes the benefit to both — a "win–win" solution (Rahim and Bonoma 1979).

According to the model (Rahim and Bonoma 1979; Rahim 1983), these five coping styles express a dominant tendency or approach that is reasonably stable across different situations. People do differ, however, in how committed they are to their dominant strategy in the course of a conflict (Rahim 1968).

In this study, we examined different styles of coping among adolescents who are in conflict with classmates and the relationships between a student's style of coping and his or her attachment style, which is a meaningful personality variable in understanding the responses of children and adults in situations of personal interaction (Shaver and Hazan 1987; Mikulincer, Orbach, and Iavnieli 1998). We also examined the relationship between the student's style of coping and his or her perception of conflict, which is a cognitive factor that expresses the position an individual takes regarding conflict in general (Wilmot and Hocker 1985; Johnson and Johnson 1996). Our hypothesis is that attachment style and conflict perception both influence how adolescents will cope when faced with interpersonal conflict.

Attachment Styles

John Bowlby's theory of attachment (Bowlby 1969, 1973, and 1980) assumes that infants come into the world with an innate ability to interact socially. They create their primary relationship with their primary caretaker, usually the mother. The quality of this primary relationship has momentous repercussions for children's continuing development, personality structure,

and the character of their interpersonal relationships in later life. According to Bowlby, "secure attachment" grows out of the constant and uninterrupted connection between the infant and the primary caretaker. Infants who do not enjoy these conditions, Bowlby argued, will likely show signs of deficiency, expressed, for example, in an exaggerated need for love or revenge, or feelings of guilt or depression. Situations of extreme deficiency may also bring about developmental delays or regression.

According to Bowlby (1969), children use early attachment to create "internal working models" of relationships that develop over time. These internal models contain two distinct dimensions: the degree to which the child trusts the attachment figure to be responsive and supportive and the degree to which the child perceives himself or herself as worthy of being responded to in a positive way during a time of need.

Secure, anxious, and avoidant are three distinct styles of attachment that, theorists have argued, are determined by the infant's experiences of his caregivers' responsiveness and that express high or low values on the dimension of relation to self and the dimension of relation to others (Ainsworth et al. 1978). The secure type is convinced that in a time of need there will be someone available to respond to him. Such an infant will grow into an adult who has a strong relationship with both himself and others. The anxious type is unsure whether someone will respond in a time of need and is ambivalent toward the caregiver figure. Individuals having this style are highly invested in others during interpersonal interactions, an expression of their weak connection to themselves and their strong connection to others. The avoidant type is convinced that the caretaking figure will not be available to care for her during a time of need and prefers to disengage from others. This type has a strong relationship to herself but a weak relationship to others. In interpersonal interactions, individuals having this attachment style are primarily focused on themselves and their own needs.

Attachment styles can be expressed in interpersonal relationships throughout the life span and in different social contexts. Children having a secure attachment style play more imaginative games, experience new situations with greater confidence, demonstrate better social abilities, and are better at resolving conflicts compared to anxious children, who find adapting to situations that require cooperation or negotiation difficult. The imaginary play of avoidant children is generally more shallow and contains less social interaction and involves few other people (Rosenberg 1984).

Secure children are more prepared to connect with others and have a greater ability to cope and process the feelings that arise when they interact with others, while avoidant children try to avoid emotionally charged situations or situations that require the mutual expression of emotions between themselves and others, and find it difficult to cope with negative emotions. Anxious children demonstrate the most negative

emotions and the most hostility during emotionally charged situations (Carlson and Sroufe 1995).

In adolescence, secure individuals perceive their parents as more supportive and are more prepared to experience positive and negative situations. They also seem to be more adept at moderating emotions and express less dysfunctional anger, exhibiting "balanced assertiveness" and a more direct focus on problem solving (Kobak and Sceery 1988; Kobak et al. 1993). Adolescents displaying a secure attachment style demonstrate greater flexibility and more positive self-image, while adolescents characterized as anxious exhibit negative self-image and more self-criticism, and those who display an avoidant attachment style exhibit slightly less negative self-image (Gotlib-Nir 1991).

In adulthood, as well, securely attached individuals use more constructive and effective strategies, work harder to find a possible solution to the problem, and tend to seek more support and help from their surroundings in emotionally charged situations. In contrast, avoidant adults employ more distancing and separation strategies, and anxious ones respond to emotionally charged situations with hopeless worry (Mikulincer 1998; Mikulincer, Orbach, and Iavnieli 1998). Secure adults display more empathy toward others, whereas anxious adults seem to find situations that require consideration of others unpleasant and disturbing (Mikulincer et al. 2001).

People often express their attachment styles in the ways in which they cope with conflict situations. Because conflicts are highly charged interpersonal interactions, personal attachment styles can be critical in determining how individuals will organize and cope with them (Shantz 1987; Hartup et al. 1988; Johnson and Johnson 1996). For example, in disputes between romantic partners, Marc Levy and Keith Davis (1988) found that people who displayed more secure attachment styles used more integrative strategies, compromised more often, demonstrated greater concern and consideration for their partners, and tended to use self-centered strategies less frequently.

M. Carole Pistole (1989) found similar results among young adults. In comparison to avoidant or anxious individuals, secure individuals tended to use strategies focused on mutuality and cooperation and integration and compromise more frequently and used strategies of domination, obliging, and avoiding less frequently during conflicts with their romantic partners. In addition, people having an anxious attachment style tended to oblige and appease others more often than did those who displayed an avoidant style (Pistole 1989).

In this study, we examined the relationship between coping styles and attachment styles among adolescents in conflictual situations with their classmates. We assumed that adolescents having a secure attachment style, who brought with them the sense that they are loved and accepted, would be less threatened by situations of disagreement and conflict. Because they

have a greater ability to moderate their own emotions, to cope constructively and effectively with emotionally charged situations, and to respond to others and their needs during these situations, they will, we hypothesized, be more likely to cope with conflict situations using cooperative strategies of integration and compromise and will seek solutions that take the needs of both sides into consideration. We would expect adolescents who display an anxious or avoidant style, who are less sure of themselves in their relationships with others, to feel more threatened during emotionally charged interpersonal situations. Their ability to moderate emotions and cope constructively and practically in these situations is not high, and therefore we would expect them to use less cooperative coping methods, such as domination or obliging. Thus, we hypothesized that secure attachment will be positively correlated with cooperative strategies (integration and compromise), and insecure attachment will be positively correlated with noncooperative strategies (dominating and obliging).

Conflict Perceptions

In recent decades, popular attitudes toward conflict have been transformed and what was once viewed as an essentially negative and destructive phenomenon has come to be seen by many theorists as a potentially positive phenomena (for a review, see Deutsch and Coleman 2000). These scholars view conflict as a natural and necessary form of socialization that can serve both individuals and society by promoting development, change, and adaptation to one's surroundings (see Shantz 1987; Johnson and Johnson 1996). Further, avoiding conflict does not necessarily serve the interests of justice or morality (see Kriesberg 1998) because it is through conflict that people often achieve such basic needs as recognition and autonomy (Deutsch 1973).

Psychologist Erik Erikson (1959) regarded conflict between individuals and their surroundings as central to personal development and as an agent of change and growth. According to Erikson, the manner in which children cope with both internal and external conflicts can serve as a springboard to further development or can cause stagnation and regression. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1932) also viewed conflict, particularly between children of the same age group or developmental stage, as instrumental for reducing the child's egocentrism and for teaching cooperation and empathy.

Conflict perception is a social-cognitive variable that grows out of the child's experiences with interpersonal conflicts and how she sees them addressed and resolved (at school, at home, in her community) (Jones and Brinkman 1995). A negative conflict perception is the belief that disagreements and conflicts are undesirable, destructive, and futile. In this view, conflicts threaten and endanger personal relationships. Words that may be associated with this position include: destruction, anger, hostility, war,

violence, threat, anxiety, competitive, tension, and pain (Wilmot and Hocker 1985). Individuals holding negative conflict perceptions are likely to value communication and restraint as means of preventing conflict. They dread the destructive outcomes of conflict and find their emotional intensity intolerable, denying that disagreements may contain any positive aspects (Johnson and Johnson 1996).

A positive conflict perception is the opposite view. People holding this perception see conflict as a challenge, an opportunity to renew understanding and to reach a solution from which both sides can benefit. Here, conflict embodies an opportunity to clarify issues, prevent unnecessary errors, and bring the sides closer together. Words that may be associated with this view of conflict include: intimacy, clarification, challenging, creativity, enriching, opportunity, promoting growth, and exciting (Wilmot and Hocker 1985). Naturally, this is a theoretical classification, and people in fact fall all across the spectrum between negative and positive.

Children differ in their responses to conflicts, sometimes withdrawing and other times using conflicts to modify social relationships and circumstances to serve their interests (see Jones and Brinkman 1995). Overwhelmingly, however, children and adolescents hold negative views of conflict. For example, Bruce Dudley, David Johnson, and Roger Johnson (1996) found that junior high school students who were not trained in conflict resolution techniques held a fundamentally negative view of conflict and associated eight times as many negative words with the word "conflict" as positive words.

Adults, too, usually view conflicts as dangerous and destabilizing (see Wilmot and Hocker 1985) and typically strive to avoid them or resolve them quickly. Indeed, conflicts can generate nonessential, time-wasting arguments; hamper workplace productivity (Rahim 1968), inflict emotional pain; and wreak damage on the social order (Wilmot and Hocker 1985). But conflicts can also have constructive outcomes. While children may fear that conflict puts them in physical danger, threatens their social and academic status, and can humiliate, confuse, anger, or sadden them, some children do, at the same time, perceive coping with conflict (even when doing so demands physical intervention) as necessary when social norms and values have been infringed. Among children, coping can provide defense from injury and can serve as a path to greater social status and self-esteem (see Johnson and Johnson 1996).

Conflict in Adolescence

Adolescents are frequently involved in interpersonal conflicts with peers and siblings, parents, and other adults that involve disagreement or clashes of wills and interests (Shantz 1987; Hartup et al. 1988; Johnson and Johnson 1996). Conflictual interactions can be an important means through which adolescents form their personal and group identities (Sandy and Cochran

1999). They sometimes resolve these disagreements and conflicts through arguments and the expression of anger or, on other occasions, through compromise or obliging, but sometimes these conflicts can escalate into physical violence.

Schools themselves can be highly competitive places both academically and socially. Adolescents' relationships can be highly dichotomous — one is either liked or hated, a friend or an enemy, accepted or rejected. Disagreements pose real threats to relationships between children, particularly if those children perceive conflict as negative. But conflicts among adolescents can also be beneficial, helping children to define their relationships with and expectations of others, and conflicts with friends can strengthen children's sense of identity and autonomy, particularly during adolescence (Raffaelli 1997).

We assumed that in order to resolve conflicts constructively and cooperatively, adolescents must hold a more positive view of conflict. Individuals who have a more positive conflict perception are more likely to be less threatened by conflictual situations and thus more easily consider the needs of themselves and the other party, while those holding a more negative view of conflict are more likely to be threatened by conflicts and will act to eliminate the sense of threat via competitive, uncompromising struggle or by withdrawing from and avoiding conflict altogether. Thus, we hypothesized that positive conflict perception will be positively correlated with the integrating and compromising coping strategies, whereas negative conflict perception will be positively correlated with the dominating, avoiding, and obliging strategies.

With respect to attachment style, we hypothesized that secure attachment will be positively correlated with positive conflict perception, and insecure attachment will be positively correlated with negative conflict perception because individuals who display a secure attachment style are less threatened by conflictual situations (Pistole 1989) and are better able to cope with emotionally charged interpersonal situations considerately and effectively (Carlson and Sroufe 1995; Mikulincer, Orbach, and Iavnieli 1998).

We sought to test a model whereby adolescent's conflict perception acts as a mediator between his or her attachment style and his or her coping style. Figure One illustrates our research model and the direction of relationships we expected to find between the three variables of attachment style, conflict perception, and manner of coping with conflict.

Method

Participants in our study were 146 Israeli Jewish junior high school students whose average age was 14.7 years (age range 14–16, standard deviation: 0.57) equally divided between boys and girls.

Figure One
Research Model

Attachment Style → Conflict Perception → Coping with Conflict

Students completed a series of self-report questionnaires in the presence of the researcher during a single classroom session. We told them that their participation was voluntary and anonymous and explained that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers on the questionnaires but that only the personal perspective of each student was relevant to the study.

Attachment Style

We examined each student's attachment style using Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shavers's (1987) questionnaire, which was translated into Hebrew and revised by Mario Mikulincer, Victor Florian, and Rami Tolmacz (1990) and which was adapted for use with children by Ricky Finzi and his colleagues (Finzi et al. 1996) and by Ofra Bengio (1997). (The questionnaire, which comprises fifteen statements, is designed to measure the three basic attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant and was found to be valid and reliable in prior studies; see Finzi et al. 1996; Bangio 1997; Mikulincer and Horesh 1999.)

We asked the participants to rate the extent to which each statement described themselves on a five-point bipolar scale: "completely untrue" (1), "untrue" (2), "somewhat true and somewhat untrue" (3), "true" (4), and "completely true" (5).[1]

Coping with Conflict

We examined conflict coping style using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROC II), which was developed by M. Afzalur Rahim (1983) to identify coping styles in organizational conflicts. The questionnaire has also been used to examine coping with interpersonal conflicts between friends and children (Hammock et al. 1990). The original questionnaire included twenty-eight statements, each expressing one of the five styles of coping — avoiding, dominating, obliging, compromising, and integrating. (The questionnaire was found to be valid and reliable in several studies; see Hammock et al. 1990; Rahim and Magner 1994.) For this study, we used the version translated into Hebrew and revised by Rachel Ben-Ari, Neta Shamir, and Michal Feiner (2002).

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a seven-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).[2]

Conflict Perception

Participants' conflict perception was measured using a questionnaire constructed specifically for this study. To develop it, we asked thirty junior high school students from similar backgrounds as the research population to freely rate associations with the word "conflict." On the basis of their responses, we chose fourteen associations having the highest frequency, seven positive aspects and seven negative aspects. We phrased these associations as statements and asked thirty-five additional students to rate their agreement with these statements on a five-point scale ranging from "completely untrue" (1) to "completely true" (5). On the basis of their responses, we amended the phrasing of some items on the questionnaire.

We next administered the revised questionnaire to the research population. Our analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) revealed two significant factors, negative conflict perception (reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.80; e.g., "disagreement can only be destructive") and positive conflict perception (reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.70; e.g., "disagreement helps to understand things better"), which together explained 43.8 percent of the variance among respondents in conflict perception. Accordingly, two scores were calculated by averaging the statements of each factor. A significant but low negative correlation was found between the two factors ($r = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$.)

In addition, we examined the social and academic status of the participants as control variables, using two five-point self-report scales in which students were asked to rate their own social acceptance (social status) and academic success (academic status). Finally, we asked participants to report the extent to which they were involved in conflicts or disagreements in school (self-involvement), and the extent to which their friends were involved in conflicts (friends' involvement).

Results

Correlations between Coping Strategies and Attachment Style

Table One illustrates the correlations between the five coping strategies and the three attachment styles. In support of our hypothesis, we found positive correlations between secure attachment and the compromising and integrating strategies, between avoidant attachment and the dominating strategy, and between anxious attachment and the use of avoiding coping strategy. In addition, avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with the obliging, compromising, and integrating strategies, and secure attachment was negatively correlated with the avoiding strategy.

Table One
Correlations between Attachment Styles and Coping Strategies

	Secure Style	Avoidant Style	Anxious Style
Avoiding strategy	−0.16*	0.03	0.35***
Dominating strategy	0.12	0.26***	−0.02
Obliging strategy	0.06	−0.16*	0.10
Compromising strategy	0.30***	−0.22**	−0.01
Integrating strategy	0.26***	−0.18**	−0.09

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table Two
Correlations between Conflict Perception and Coping Strategies

	Positive Perception	Negative Perception
Avoiding strategy	−0.13	0.34***
Dominating strategy	0.45***	−0.11
Obliging strategy	−0.01	0.11
Compromising strategy	0.29***	0.06
Integrating strategy	0.31***	−0.05

***$p < 0.001$.

Correlations between Coping Strategies and Conflict Perception

Table Two presents the correlations between the five coping strategies and conflict perception. As our hypothesis predicted, positive conflict perception was correlated with the compromising and integrating coping strategies, whereas negative conflict perception was also correlated with the avoiding coping strategy. In addition, positive conflict perception was also correlated with the dominating coping strategy, which was not predicted. Also, we found no connection between negative conflict perception and the obliging and dominating coping strategies, which was in opposition to our hypothesis.

Correlations between Attachment style and Conflict Perception

Table Three presents the correlations between the three attachment styles and conflict perception. As we hypothesized, we found positive correlations between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and negative conflict perception, and between secure attachment and positive conflict perception. In addition, we found negative correlations between anxious

Table Three
Correlations between Attachment Styles and Conflict

	Secure Style	Avoidant Style	Anxious Style
Positive perception	0.19**	−0.004	−0.22**
Negative perception	−0.20**	0.22**	0.44***

**$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table Four
Correlations between Background Variables and Attachment Styles

	Background Variables			
	Social Status	Academic Status	Self-Involvement in Conflict	Friends' Involvement in Conflict
Secure style	0.38***	0.16*	−0.17*	−0.16*
Avoidant style	−0.25***	−0.17*	0.25**	0.19**
Anxious style	−0.39***	−0.10	−0.15	−0.05

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

attachment and positive conflict perception and between secure attachment and negative conflict perception.

Relationships between Background Variables and Coping Strategies

As a control, we examined the relationships between the research variables and four situational variables: the students' academic and social status and the extent of their own and their friends' experiences with peer conflict. Tables Four, Five, and Six detail the correlations that we found between these variables and the subjects' attachment styles, conflict coping strategies, and conflict perceptions.

In general, we found that secure attachment styles were positively correlated with high academic and social status and lower levels of personal or peer group involvement in conflict. In contrast, we found that high-avoidant attachment style scores were positively correlated with lower social and academic status scores and greater personal and peer group involvement in conflict. Finally, anxious attachment styles were correlated with lower social status.

Table Five
Correlations between Background Variables and Coping Strategies

	Background Variables			
	Social Status	Academic Status	Self-Involvement in Conflict	Friends' Involvement in Conflict
Avoiding strategy	−0.20*	−0.13	−0.31***	−0.13
Dominating strategy	0.19*	0.12	0.08	0.02
Obliging strategy	−0.15	−0.01	−0.26**	−0.16*
Compromising strategy	0.01	0.21**	−0.44***	−0.28***
Integrating strategy	0.14	0.20*	−0.34***	−0.27***

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table Six
Correlations between Background Variables and Conflict Perception

	Background Variables			
	Social Status	Academic Status	Self-Involvement in Conflict	Friends' Involvement in Conflict
Positive perception	0.36***	0.25**	−0.03	−0.04
Negative perception	−0.23**	−0.08	−0.03	0.05

**$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Regarding conflict coping strategies, we found higher academic status positively correlated with the use of compromise and integration strategies. In addition, the more frequent use of avoiding, obliging, compromise, and integration strategies was negatively correlated with involvement in conflict. We found similar correlations between three of those same conflict strategies (obliging, compromising, and integrating) and the frequency of peer group involvement in conflict. We also found that participants' social status correlated negatively with an avoiding strategy and positively with a dominating strategy. Finally, a positive conflict perception was positively correlated with higher academic and social status, and negative conflict perception was negatively correlated with social status.

The Relative Contribution of All Research Variables to Coping Strategies

In order to integrate the above findings into a general and thorough overview and to assess the unique contribution of each of the research variables to the prediction of each conflict coping strategy, and in order to test the hypothesis about the mediating role of conflict perception, we carried out five separate hierarchical regression analyses for each strategy (Baron and Kenny 1986).

The results of our hierarchical regression analyses demonstrate the unique contributions of attachment styles and conflict perception to the students' conflict coping strategies. The regressions show that the anxious attachment style has a positive contribution to the avoiding and obliging coping strategies, that the avoidant attachment style has a positive contribution to the dominating coping strategy, and that the secure attachment style has a positive contribution to the dominating, integrating, and compromising coping strategies and a negative contribution to the obliging strategy. Thus, the higher students scored on measures of anxiety, the more they reported employing the avoiding coping strategy; the higher they scored on avoidant measures, the more they reported employing the dominating strategy; and the higher they scored on measures of the secure attachment style, the more they reported employing the dominating, integrating, and compromising strategies and the less they reported employing the obliging strategy.

Regarding conflict perception, we found that negative conflict perception made a positive contribution to use of the avoiding coping strategy and that positive conflict perception made a positive contribution to the dominating, integrating, and compromising strategies. Thus, the more negatively students perceived conflict, the more likely they were to report employing the avoiding strategy. The more positively they perceived conflict, the more frequently they reported employing the dominating, integrating, and compromising strategies.

Moreover, the regressions also indicate that conflict perception fully mediated the direct relationships between attachment styles and four of the coping strategies (avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising) and partially mediated the relationship between attachment styles and the dominating strategy. More specifically, negative conflict perception mediated the correlation between anxious attachment and the avoiding coping strategy, and positive conflict perception partially mediated the relationship between secure attachment and the dominating strategy and fully mediated the relationships between secure attachment and the compromising and integrating strategies. Conflict perception also fully mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and the obliging coping strategy. Our mediational analysis thus indicates that the personality variables

(attachment styles) affect the cognitive variables (conflict perception), which in turn affect the behavioral variables (coping strategies).

Discussion

In this study, we explored the relationships between personality attributes and adolescents' ways of coping with interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflicts are essential to the development and socialization of children (Piaget 1932; Erikson 1959). They are often highly emotional and require children to develop and use coping strategies (Shantz 1987; Johnson and Johnson 1996). Children, like adults, differ in how they perceive and respond to these situations (Sandy, Boardman, and Deutsch 1999). We made use of a model (Blake and Mouton 1964) that distinguishes between five strategies or ways of coping with conflictual situations. Three of them (compromise, integration, and obliging) are strategies that reflect a more cooperative orientation, and the other two (avoidance and domination) are noncooperative strategies.

Because conflicts may be threatening, they make salient the individual's attachment models, as these models represent a basic personal belief in the ability to get support and in the extent to which others should be trusted. Under threat, these basic beliefs are particularly relevant and therefore salient (Bowlby 1969) We hypothesized, therefore, that adolescents' attachment styles would correlate with how they cope with conflict; specifically, we predicted that secure attachment would be correlated with the use of integrative coping strategies, anxious attachment with avoiding or obliging coping strategies, and avoidant attachment with dominating and competitive coping. Further, we hypothesized that adolescents' perceptions of conflict, positive or negative, would also play a role in determining how constructively adolescents cope with conflict and may even mediate the relationships between adolescents' attachment styles and manner of coping with conflict.

Attachment Style and Coping

Results of hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that attachment styles significantly contributed to adolescents' choices of conflict coping strategies. Anxious attachment made a unique contribution in predicting the use of the avoiding and obliging coping strategies, avoidant attachment contributed to predicting the use of the obliging and dominating coping strategies, and secure attachment contributed to predicting the use of the dominating, compromising, and integrating strategies. These findings generally match those of previous studies, which have demonstrated that attachment styles are associated with different strategies for coping with conflict among adults, including in romantic relationships (Levy and Davis 1988; Pistole 1989; Sharir 1996; Mikulincer et al. 2001). Thus, the present study validates the influence of attachment style on interpersonal conflict

coping strategies among an adolescent population and in collegial relationships (among classmates).

The finding that anxious attachment was associated with the use of the avoiding coping style supports our first hypothesis. It appears that children who harbor anxious "working schemas" are concerned about being rejected and forfeiting social relationships. Failing to believe that they can influence the course of interpersonal conflict, they choose to bypass it and not cope with the disagreement directly.

Interestingly, however, one of our findings contradicted our hypothesis: we found that adolescents who scored in the high range for anxiety were less likely to use the obliging strategy. This may arise from the tendency of adolescents in general to make less frequent use of this strategy compared to other strategies. Further, because the obliging strategy maximizes investment in the other party and minimizes personal expression, this strategy may be less preferred by adolescents who seek to increase their sense of individualism during this life stage (Shantz 1987).

We hypothesized that adolescents with avoidant attachment styles would use the more competitive conflict strategies (the dominating rather than obliging, integrating and compromising strategies). Our findings support this hypothesis: the higher our participants scored on avoidant attachment, the more frequently they used the dominating strategy and the less frequently they used the other three strategies.

As we hypothesized, secure attachment was positively correlated with compromise and integration and negatively correlated with avoiding. Thus, we conclude that the more secure adolescents feel in their attachments, the more likely they are to employ cooperating strategies and the less unwilling they will be to confront their peers.

Conflict Perception and Attachment Style
In contrast to attachment style, which is a personality variable that many researchers believe is formed in early childhood, conflict perception is a cognitive variable that develops over years of social interaction. We found, in support of our hypotheses, that the participants who exhibited more anxious attachment were more likely to report negative conflict perceptions and less likely to display positive conflict perception. Likewise, those who exhibited more secure attachment displayed higher levels of positive conflict perception and lower levels of negative conflict perception.

These findings suggest that because anxious individuals seem to be threatened by conflict situations — because they have great concerns about their relationships with others but also fear rejection and do not believe that they can successfully influence a conflict situation — such individuals can only see conflict as negative, harmful, and destructive. It seems that secure individuals, by contrast, hold less negative views of conflict because they have greater trust in other people and also believe in

their own abilities to reach agreeable solutions. Thus, secure people view conflict as an opportunity that can be both challenging and enabling.

We found the avoidant attachment style to be correlated with a negative attitude toward conflict. We believe these individuals perceive conflict more negatively because they are more likely to see other people as threatening and unreliable and thus to be harmed by them in a conflict situation.

Conflict Perception and Coping Strategies

In support of our hypothesis, the more positively that a participant perceived conflict, the more likely he or she was to report use of the compromising and integrating strategies. We also found, however, that adolescents who held more positive attitudes also made greater use of the strategy of domination. This finding raises the possibility that adolescents view domination as a legitimate technique for handling conflicts and as an appropriate way to articulate their individuality, which, as stated, is a central preoccupation during the adolescent years (Shantz 1987). Moreover, it may be that an adolescent's confidence in his or her ability to dominate a conflict gives rise to a more positive view of the conflict, as a sense of power may diminish the fear of the conflict. Our correlative results do not allow us to determine the direction of influence between positive conflict perceptions and dominating strategy, so further study is needed to test this explanation. One last explanation we offer to this intriguing result is culturally specific. We conducted our study in Israel, a country that is continually under threat and involved in military action. It may be that under these circumstances, youth in Israel hold a more positive view of power and domination as a form of conflict resolution than one might expect. Cross-cultural study must be conducted to test this explanation.

Regarding negative conflict perception, we found, in accordance with our hypothesis, that negative conflict perceptions were correlated with the avoiding coping strategy. But in contradiction of our hypothesis, we found no connection between either positive or negative conflict perceptions and the obliging coping strategy. This finding, again, suggests that adolescents in general do not perceive obliging as an appropriate coping strategy because using such a strategy could cause them to "lose face" and appear weak. It is possible that adolescents who have a negative conflict perception feel better served by the avoiding strategy than by the obliging strategy.

Another hypothesis that we tested in this study was that conflict perception mediates the direct relationship between attachment style and conflict coping strategy. In general, our findings supported this model of mediation: attachment style affected conflict perception, and conflict perception, in turn, affected coping strategy. More specifically, negative conflict perception mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and the avoiding coping strategy and positive conflict perception partially mediated

the relationship between secure attachment and the dominating strategy and fully mediated the relationships between secure attachment and the compromising and integrating strategies. Conflict perception also fully mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and the obliging coping strategy.

This mediation effect has important implications: the fact that both attachment style *and* conflict perception are related to the choice of coping strategies indicates that intervention directed either toward more secure attachment or toward more positive conflict perception could result in more cooperative and effective coping strategies. As conflict perception mediates the effect of attachment style, however, it offers a more potent point of intervention because attachment affects coping strategies *through* conflict perception and because this cognitive perception is easier to change than the more primary attachment style.

Relationships between Background Variables, Conflict Perception, and Manner of Coping

Social and academic status and the involvement of oneself and one's peers in conflicts were significantly correlated with coping strategies. We found that the higher an adolescents' social status, the more likely he or she was to employ dominating strategies and the less likely he or she was to employ the avoiding strategy, and the higher his or her academic status, the more likely he or she was to use such coping strategies as compromise and integration.

In addition, we found that higher social status was associated with higher positive conflict perception and lower negative conflict perception, and that higher academic status was associated with higher positive conflict perception. It appears, thus, that adolescents who enjoy greater social status hold more positive attitudes toward conflict, are less wary of confrontation, and are more dominating when they cope with conflict. One explanation is that their high social and academic status makes them more secure and thus enables them to cope more actively, directly, and constructively — though perhaps also at times aggressively — in situations of interpersonal conflict with their classmates.

These findings support findings from previous studies that found a correlation between social skills and conflict coping abilities. Richard Fabes and Nancy Eisenberg (1992) found that children who exhibited better social skills were more socially accepted, were more direct and active in coping with angering situations, and were active in seeking out ways to resolve conflicts and avoid the harm they might inflict on social relationships.

Another explanation of the relationship of social status to coping strategies may be that the ability to deal successfully with conflict enhances social status. Students' popularity may partially derive from their ability to

solve conflict cooperatively, to everybody's satisfaction, but also, at this age, from the ability to dominate others in conflict and thus acquire more power. As to the relationship between academic status and coping strategies, it is possible that the same cognitive and behavioral abilities that make good students also nurture more creative and clever conflict resolution. These explanations must be tested in further research.

We also found that the more likely participants were to report personal involvement in conflicts, the less likely they were to employ the strategies of avoiding, obliging, compromising, and integrating. This supports the findings of David Shantz (1986) that individuals who are more involved in conflicts make greater use of aggressive strategies.

We also found that the more likely students were to report that others in their immediate social environment were involved in conflicts, the less likely they were to employ the coping strategies of obliging, compromising, and cooperating, which is not surprising when one considers that adolescents, in order to preserve their friendships and maintain their social status within their peer groups, conform to the behavioral norms of that group.

Implications of the Findings

This study broadens our understanding of how adolescents cope with interpersonal conflicts while integrating variables from diverse areas of knowledge: conflict management and resolution, cognitive psychology, and personality psychology. We found that attachment style indeed influences how adolescents cope with conflicts and that conflict perception both influences coping and mediates the relationship between attachment and coping.

While most studies have investigated the role that attachment style plays in conflicts between adults, and, in particular, in romantic relationships, this study broadens this understanding to situations of interpersonal conflict among adolescents. The dynamics of conflict for this population play out against the background of the developmental and social tasks that stand before them during this life stage as they develop their individual and social identities.

In the practical sphere, studies have shown that training in conflict management and resolution in schools has a positive influence on how children cope with interpersonal conflicts and contributes to a less violent and more positive school atmosphere (for a review see Johnson and Johnson 2001, 2004, and 2005). The findings of our study suggest that one of the goals of such a curriculum should be to change attitudes toward conflicts. We found that, among adolescents, a positive or negative attitude toward conflict is related to the coping strategies that individuals choose and acts as a mediating variable between the personality disposition of the individual (attachment style) and manner of coping. Therefore, changing a

child's attitude toward conflict might influence that child's chosen coping strategy.

Schools can be a breeding ground for conflicts; they are often competitive and serve as the setting for the adolescent child's journey of self-examination and exploration of his or her place in society. Because conflicts can escalate quickly, learning how to transform them into constructive processes and springboards for advancing personal and social aims can be an eminently useful undertaking. Our findings underscore the influence of the school atmosphere in forming students' perceptions of conflict. A school can be a secure and protective harbor or a threatening jungle or both, and this backdrop can affect how children perceive and cope with conflicts.

The implementation of cooperative learning methods in general (Ben-Ari and Rich 1997) and, more particularly, the use of active mediation as a tool of conflict resolution, can teach children effective ways of dealing with conflict. Their acquired competence would, in turn, allow them to view conflict more positively, thus changing conflict perception. Although attachment style is a predisposition, it also can be affected by situation. Therefore, if the teacher creates a secure atmosphere in the classroom, allowing anxious and avoidant students to gradually display a more secure style in that environment, he or she may also gradually affect their coping behavior, at least as far as conflicts in the classroom are concerned. These suggestions, as well as other ways to shape conflict perception and behavior, are worthy of further examination and research.

Coping studies have shown that both one's gender and the depth of one's friendships can influence how individuals cope during a dispute (Raffaelli 1997). This study examined the influence of relationships between adolescents but did not account for their degree of closeness or whether the conflicts designated by students occurred between individuals of the same sex. Here, as well, there is considerable room for further research.

In this study we identified and differentiated the concept of conflict perception and constructed a reliable scale to measure it. Conflict perception exhibited a strong direct and mediating influence on adolescents' choice of coping strategies. Further studies could deepen our understanding of this concept and examine it in other populations. Until now, research on this factor has been limited (Sillars and Wilmot 1994; Johnson and Johnson 1996).

An important factor that we did not consider is the cultural context, which is central to understanding how conflicts are managed and resolved (see Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001). Conflicts do not occur in a vacuum but exist within some kind of context: an institutional context molded by the school and a cultural-social context from which children draw their manner of relating to conflicts generally (Jones and Brinkman 1995). In this study, in

opposition to the hypotheses, adolescents who enjoyed secure attachment tended to use the strategy of domination and to avoid the strategy of obliging. A possible explanation for these findings is that the school serves not only as a "safe harbor" cut off from the external reality, but as a microcosm of the cultural and the geopolitical context in which it is situated (Johnson and Johnson 1996). Therefore, the fact that this research was conducted in Israel might have influenced the results, particularly those related to the strategy of domination. Israel is the locus of an intractable conflict that has stretched for more than half a century, and Israeli children are raised in a threat-filled environment in which survival strategies, including dominance, are commonly discussed and also highly valued by many. Further studies in varied cultural settings in which conflict plays both a more and less central role than it does in Israel would further illuminate the roles of young people's conflict perception on their conflict behaviors as well as the role of culture in determining that perception.

NOTES

1. Reliability analysis of the three styles revealed the following results: avoidant (five items, reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.68); for example, "I find it unpleasant when someone else comes too close and connects with me too much"; anxiety (five items, reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.80); for example, "Sometimes I am afraid that others won't want to be with me"; and security (five items, reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.45); for example, "I easily connect with other children."

2. Reliability analyses revealed the following outcomes: an avoiding style (six items; reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.62); for example, "I try to keep my disagreement with the other side to myself"; a dominating style (six items; reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.76); for example, "I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue"; an obliging style (four items; reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.73); for example, "I give in to the wishes of the other side"; a compromising style (five items; reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.77); for example, "I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse;" and an integrating style (six items; reliability Cronbach's alpha: 0.84); for example, "I try to work with the other side to find solutions that satisfy our expectations."

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