

Market mindset as a result of attachment insecurity. Exploration of the relation and its psychological mechanisms.

Abstract for the general public

Being part of modern society, we engage in various relationships. Some of them are close, intimate, and based on care, such as those between close friends or parents and children. Other relationships are limited to specific transactions and concentrate on gains and losses, such as those between buyers and sellers. Psychologists call the former “communal” and the latter “market” relationships. In many cases, the nature of a specific relationship is obvious, but some relations seem more ambiguous as they involve both economic and collective aspects. In such a situation, people might search for cues indicating whether the relationship at hand is communal or market-like to apply the respective rules and norms. However, in contemporary social life, market values play such an enormous role that people might find it easier to interpret reality in market-related terms—to conclude that the relationship at hand is a market-exchange one and, as a consequence, use rules of regulation and coordination that are specific for the market pricing system. Importantly, as suggested by Sandel (2012), people tend to apply market norms not only to ambiguous situations, but also to interactions that were initially purely communal. For example, they might treat marriage—one of the prototypical instances of a communal relationship—as a business-type interaction, in which both sides strictly calculate costs and benefits engaged in the household (Clark et al., 2010; Halawa & Olcoń-Kubicka, 2018). In this project, we seek for one explanation as to why turning to market norms might be so attractive for—at least some—people, and propose that people accept applying and intentionally want to apply market-based rules to both ambiguous and initially communal relationships because such a way of interpreting social reality is associated with concrete psychological rewards, i.e. the feeling of security that cannot be obtained from other sources such as attachment figures.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) presumes that communal relationships—naturally filled with compassion, empathy, and generosity—provide people with safety and a feeling of security. When children experience the availability and supportiveness of a caregiver—most typically, a parent—they develop a mental representation of attachment security, and behave in a similar way in adult intimate relationships. However, not everybody has a chance to develop a mental representation of attachment security. Insecurities about caregiver availability and affection manifest as two dimensions of adult attachment: attachment anxiety (also: attachment ambivalence) and attachment avoidance (Ainsworth, 2014; Fraley et al., 2000). People who are anxiously attached have an intense need for emotional closeness, but at the same time worry over the relationship too much. Avoidant individuals, in turn, deny the need for intimacy, but emphasize self-reliance, self-efficacy, and personal strength. In this project, I propose that the market mindset might serve different functions and have different dynamics, depending on the specific attachment insecurities. More specifically, I expect that anxiously attached individuals may strongly prefer market relationships to substitute for a lack of satisfying intimate relationships. Hence, they probably adopt market-exchange rules because of the order, predictability, and symbolical security it may provide, and they use engagement in market relationships as a compensatory strategy—similar to how they use possession attachment (Kogut & Kogut, 2011; Norris et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2020). However, avoidant individuals might engage in market relationships because they want to avoid dependence on others. At the same time, they would prefer to avoid even market relations if that was possible. Hence, adopting market-exchange rules allows them to satisfy their needs without relying on close others, which provides them with even greater feelings of self-reliance, agency, and control.

The project will consist of **a cross-sectional and longitudinal survey and experimental studies** using various methods of manipulating and measuring insecurity and market mindset. By examining the link between interpersonal insecurity and market mindset from these different angles, we will be able to address the limitations associated with one particular approach with another methodology. The current project will be divided into four tasks to test specific hypotheses related to attachment insecurity and market mindset. Task 1 will investigate the relationship between attachment insecurity and market mindset through a cross-sectional survey, while Task 2 will investigate this issue using a longitudinal survey. Task 3 aims to test the causal relationship between attachment insecurity and market mindset using an experimental approach. Finally, Task 4 aims to investigate this effect’s mechanisms and boundary conditions, again using an experimental approach.

We expect that the results of our project will have an impact on the development of such disciplines as social and economic psychology, as well as psychology of close relations. The research that we propose will create a basis both for developing a better understanding of the conditions under which people are eager to utilize market mindset, and for creating societally profitable solutions that diminish the negative consequences of attachment insecurities.