Relationship Science Online

Perceptions & Behaviours

Perceptions of Conflict

Table 1

Implications of attachment anxiety and avoidance for experience and outcomes of couple conflict.

	Attachment anxiety	Attachment avoidance
Experience of couple conflict	Reports of frequent and intense conflict Negative partner behavior seen as intentional and stable Conflict interactions perceived as more negative in tone Less accurate decoding of partner's positive nonverbal messages	Downplaying frequency and impact of conflict Underestimation of own and partner's responsiveness Overestimation of intensity of partners' negative emotions Less accurate decoding of partner's negative nonverbal messages

Feeney & Fitzgerald (2018)

Dyadic Implications: Perceptions & Behaviours

- **Issues around negative perceptions and destructive conflict patterns can be intensified in dyadic situations where an individual has one attachment style and their partner has a different attachment style.**
- **The pairing of an avoidant and an anxious partner can be especially problematic. Found to be associated with:**
  - Greater physiological reactivity (stress response [cortisol] in anticipation of conflict (Beck et al., 2013).
  - Less effective caregiving: avoidant spouses had difficulty in asking constructively for support, and anxious spouses had difficulty in recognizing their partner's distress.
    - *"These findings highlight the difficult emotional climate associated with this pairing and the importance of distance regulation, which is central to attachment dynamics: Conflicts over closeness and distance can prove intractable when partners have conflicting attachment needs."* (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2018, p.129)
  - Greater emotion dysregulation (emotional arousal or the suppression of emotion) measured by way of skin conductance (Taylor et al., 2017).
  - Greater demand-withdraw (Taylor et al., 2017).

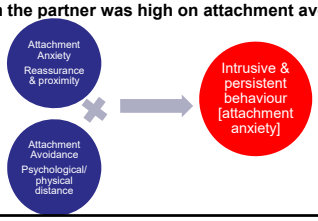
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Dyadic Implications: Perceptions & Behaviours

- **Work by** Overall and colleagues (2014) **found, that for attachment anxiety was associated with:**
  - Greater expressions of hurt and guilt-inducing verbal and non-verbal behaviour.
  - Appraised their partner and relationship more positively when their partner felt more guilt.
  - But, the partners of anxious individuals reported more guilt AND more relationship dissatisfaction.
- Jayamaha et al. (2016) **also found attachment anxiety was associated with guilt induction, but, the effectiveness of the strategy depended upon the partner's level of attachment avoidance.**
  - Higher the partner's avoidance the less successful the guilt induction and less motivation to change.
  - Both members of the couple reported less problem resolution.

Dyadic Implications: Perceptions & Behaviours

- Feeney & Fitzgerald (2018) **surmise: Anxiously attached individuals employ guilt induction to convey hurt and frustration, but also wish to keep the partner close.**
  - The use of guilt is a tactic (manipulative) to foster intimacy.
  - But, it reduces satisfaction in partners over time.
  - Resistant response from avoidantly attached partners.
- **A diary study on conflict** (Lavy et al., 2013) **found that anxiously attached individuals reported intrusive behaviors (e.g., invading the partner's privacy) when the partner was high on attachment avoidance.**



Dyadic Implications: Exceptions to the Rule

- **Context matters – it can moderate the associations between attachment styles and conflict patterns in couples** (e.g., Simpson & Rholes, 2012; Simpson et al., 1996).
- **Individuals high in attachment anxiety may use less destructive engagement (and more passive/indirect strategies) when the risk/probability of rejection is high** (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).
- **Individuals high in attachment avoidance may use less conflict avoidance (and more active/direct and destructive strategies) when threat is perceived as imminent (e.g., one is under attack, and possibly, cannot escape).**
  - The active/direct-destructive strategy may reflect a defensive fight response (see Karantzas & Kambouropoulos, in press).

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Dyadic Implications: Exceptions to the Rule

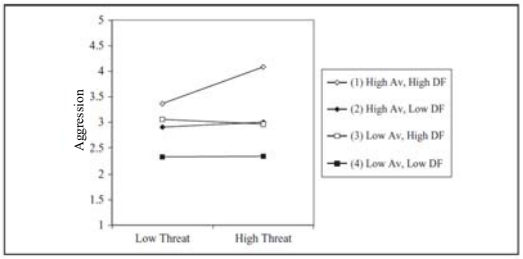


Figure 1. Three-way interaction between attachment avoidance, DF, and relationship threat condition (Study 1). *Note.* Av = attachment avoidance; DF = defensive fight.

Karantzas & Kambouropoulos (in press)