

## **Partner Attachment and Interpersonal Characteristics**

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*This study investigated partner attachment and interpersonal characteristics in 134 nonclinical couples in long-term marriages. Irrespective of gender, spouses with greater anxiety over abandonment or discomfort with closeness endorsed dysfunctional relationship beliefs to a greater extent. On the anxiety over abandonment dimension, husbands with higher scores were rated less aggressive, less controlling, and more rebellious, whereas wives with higher scores were rated more dependent, more self-critical, and less competitive. Husbands higher on discomfort with closeness were rated less cooperative and responsible and were rated more aggressive and rebellious. Matched secure couples reported lower marital dissatisfaction than matched insecure or mismatched couples. Future research should contrast samples of nonclinical and clinical couples by marital duration to identify specific partner behaviors that are likely to foster marital dissatisfaction within particular attachment pairings. The authors' findings suggest the importance of marital therapists being attuned to the attachment-related beliefs and interpersonal styles uniquely operating within each couple.*

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Attachment theory, based on the early work of John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1977, 1980), offers an important perspective in understanding how individuals differ in their expectations of close relationships, and in their strategies to get what they want from them. Bowlby (1969) hypothesized that human beings develop internal working models or mental representations of self and others from early childhood experiences with primary caregivers. Children who feel secure believe that they are valued and that others are available to them. In contrast, children who do not develop feelings of security feel uncertain about their self-worth and the extent to which they trust that others will be available for them. This uncertainty is the foundation for negative expectations of oneself and others (Bowlby, 1980).

Attachment theory assumes that continuity exists between childhood and adult working mental models of close relationships. In this regard, Hazan and Shaver (1987) extended the model of infant attachment proposed by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) to three adult attachment patterns: secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant. Subsequently, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a four category model (secure, preoccupied, fearful avoidant, dismissive-avoidant), which reduces to dimensions of anxiety (about abandonment) and avoidance (discomfort with closeness), or to models of self and others. Securely attached adults think positively of themselves and others and are comfortable with intimacy and autonomy. Individuals with a preoccupied attachment pattern hold others in a higher regard than themselves. They are overly concerned about abandonment and therefore tend to make unreasonable demands upon a partner for reassurance and nurturance. Fearful avoidant individuals seek social interactions and intimacy but fear rejection and have difficulty trusting others. Dismissive avoidant individuals think positively of themselves but limit involvement in potentially rejecting social experiences. Fearful avoidant individuals are conflicted over their desire for closeness and their fear of rejection, while dismissive-avoidant individuals do not acknowledge a need for interpersonal closeness (Brennan, 1999).

Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) four-category model has greater empirical support than does the three-category model (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Fraley and Waller (1998) presented data in support of the notion that the attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety offer a more accurate description of the way individuals vary in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in close relationships than do categorical models. In theory, secure people reflect low avoidance/low anxiety, dismissive people reflect high avoidance/low anxiety, fearful people reflect high avoidance/high anxiety, and preoccupied individuals reflect low avoidance/high anxiety (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009).

Attachment working models formed in infancy and childhood are the basis for attachment representations throughout life (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Research on adult attachment has found that securely attached

individuals tend to be warm and confident; and report high levels of trust, intimacy, commitment, and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994; Hindy & Schwartz, 1994; Nofle & Shaver, 2006). Among insecure individuals, preoccupied people report low self-esteem, feelings of dependency, jealousy, and desperation in a relationship (Hindy & Schwarz, 1994; Kilmann, Vendemia, Parnell, & Urbaniak, 2009; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), tend to be overcontrolling in their relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Kuncé & Shaver, 1994), and experience anxiety and anger over perceived abandonment (Carranza, Kilmann, & Vendemia, 2009; Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994; Kidd & Sheffield, 2005; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Avoidant individuals refrain from intimacy and closeness, distrust others, and are nonassertive (Carranza & Kilmann, 2000; Kilmann, Laughlin, et al., 1999b; Kilmann, Urbaniak, & Parnell, 2006; Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997). In essence, individuals with insecure attachments are likely to directly or indirectly sabotage relationship quality and stability, either by emotional distancing in response to intimacy and/or conflict, or by making unreasonable demands for reassurance and nurturance.

The interpersonal theory of personality (Carson, 1969) also offers guidelines to understanding individual differences that can affect the workings of close relationships. The complementarity principle of interpersonal theory defines the extent to which each partner's actions in an interaction elicit or constrain specific actions from the other. Since Leary's (1957) early research, complementarity consistently has been defined using an interpersonal circumplex perspective, which involves a circular pattern of traits with proximity reflecting similarity (Tracey, 1994). From a two-dimensional interpersonal circle, Kiesler (1983) defined complementarity as occurring on the basis of reciprocity with regard to the control dimension or axis (dominance pulls submission, submission pulls dominance), and correspondence in regard to the affiliation dimension (hostility pulls hostility, friendliness pulls friendliness). Relationships characterized by complementary interactions tend to be stable, in that such interactions are mutually reinforcing, minimize anxiety, promote approach behaviors from both participants, and increase the probability that existing behavior patterns and the relationship will last (Kiesler, 1996). Relationships characterized by frequent noncomplementary interactions are expected to be less stable, conflict-ridden, and more distressed. However, few studies have explored the relevance of the complementarity principle to marital quality and stability. It seems logical to assume that whether interpersonal complementarity occurs within a marital relationship depends on what each partner may seek or feel comfort with from the other.

Attachment theory would predict that individuals high on the attachment dimensions of anxiety over abandonment (AA) and discomfort with closeness (DC) would be more likely than individuals lower on these dimensions to hold dysfunctional relationship beliefs. Dysfunctional relationship

beliefs corresponding with unmet expectations would be expected to produce troublesome actions in response to conflicts, hence resulting in relationship dissatisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1993; Foran & Slep, 2007). Accordingly, we formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Higher scores on the attachment dimensions of AA and DC will be linked with greater agreement with dysfunctional relationship beliefs, and with greater marital distress.

Research has found evidence that attachment anxiety and avoidance are uniquely associated with numerous negative romantic relationship expectations and behaviors (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008). For instance, greater attachment anxiety predicted fear of rejection (Gable, 2006); and greater reliance on others; and greater approval, liking, acceptance and love from others (e.g., Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2006; Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). Greater attachment avoidance predicted increased fear of intimacy and desire for control and distance (e.g., Rom & Mikulincer, 2003). We predicted that these trends would be reflected in partner ratings:

Hypothesis 2: Higher scores on the attachment dimensions of anxiety over abandonment (AA) and discomfort with closeness (DC) will be associated with partner ratings of interpersonal styles. Spouses who report greater AA will be rated as more dependent and cooperative. Spouses who report greater DC will be rated as more aggressive and rebellious.

Attachment theory would predict that the unique working model of each marital partner impacts upon the quality of the relationship (Beach, Smith, & Fincham, 1994). Studies have found that insecure working models of attachment are linked with relationship problems and that a secure attachment is linked with positive adult relationship outcomes (e.g., McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). Individuals married to secure partners tend to be happier than those married to insecure partners (Berman, Marcus, & Berman, 1994; Davila, Bradbury, & Fincham, 1998). In couples consisting of two insecure partners, insecure attachment style was related to higher anxiety and depression (Conde, Figueiredo, & Bifulco, 2011). People with insecurely attached partners reflected greater stress in response to relationship conflict than those whose partners were securely attached (Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006). Self-reports of marital satisfaction and observed marital quality was related to security of couple attachment (Alexandrov, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005). The findings of these studies taken together led to our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Matched secure couples will report less dissatisfaction on dimensions of marital functioning than matched insecure and mismatched couples (insecure/secure pairings).

## METHOD

## Participants

Participants were 134 married nonclinical couples. The great majority resided in the southeast region of the United States. As shown in Table 1, the mean age of the husbands and wives was 51.0 and 49.0 years, respectively. The mean education (12 years reflected a high school education) was 15.3 years for husbands and 14.4 years for wives. The mean number of children was 2.4, with a range of 1 to 8. The average marital duration was 27.4 years ( $SD = 6.08$  years). Only approximately 10% and 6% of the husbands and wives, respectively, previously had been married. None of the spouses reported previous individual or marital therapy. Both partners were employed full-time in most couples.

## Measures

## RELATIONSHIP SCALES QUESTIONNAIRE

The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) is a 30-item self-report measure with items taken from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment measure, Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) Relationship Questionnaire, and from Collins and Read's (1990) Adult Attachment Scale. Respondents are asked to rate themselves on a 5-point scale on statements about their approach to close relationships. The Relationship Scales Questionnaire indirectly measures four attachment patterns: secure, fearful-avoidant, preoccupied, and dismissive-avoidant. The highest score, after items within each subscale are averaged, is considered the best fitting attachment category, although most respondents reflect features of more than one category. The Relationship Scales Questionnaire has a Cronbach's alpha of .41 for the secure attachment pattern and .70 for the dismissive-avoidant attachment pattern. Internal consistencies can be low because two orthogonal dimensions (model of self and model of others) are combined to create each pattern (e.g., secure attachment reflects positive self-model and

**TABLE 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Marital Couples ( $N = 134$ )

Variable	Husbands		Wives	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age in years	51.0	7.5	49.0	7.1
Years of education	15.3	2.6	14.4	3.2
Number of children	2.4	0.9	2.4	0.8
Years married	27.4	7.4	27.4	7.5
Prior marriage	10%		6%	

positive other-model quadrant. Construct validity of the two underlying dimensions has been shown (Bartholomew, 1990). Multitrait-multimethod matrices and confirmatory factor analyses has demonstrated the convergent and discriminant validity of the two dimensions (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Convergent validity has been demonstrated between the Relationship Scales Questionnaire scores and interview ratings (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Roberts and Noller (1998) derived two attachment dimensions from the Relationship Scales Questionnaire using a principal components factor analysis: AA and DC. The AA scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) is made up of eight items (scores can range from 8 to 40) that concern a fear of being alone and a preoccupation with complete emotional intimacy with others. The DC scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ) consists of 12 items (scores can range from 12 to 60) that reflect an apprehension over forming dependent relationships or establishing emotional intimacy. Roberts and Noller (1998) found that the two scales explained 41.3% of the variance in the 30 Relationship Scales Questionnaire items. In the present study, we used the highest of the four Relationship Scales Questionnaire scores (secure, preoccupied, fearful avoidant, or dismissive-avoidant) to categorize individuals as secure or insecure. We also obtained scores on the two attachment dimensions for each individual following the procedure of Roberts and Noller (1998). Husbands reported mean scores of 1.99 ( $SD = 0.74$ ) and 2.73 ( $SD = 0.66$ ) on the AA and DC dimensions, respectively. Wives reported mean scores of 1.81 ( $SD = 0.69$ ) and 2.35 ( $SD = 0.67$ ) on the AA and DC dimensions, respectively.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BELIEFS INVENTORY

This inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) asks subjects to rate 32 items that assess dysfunctional beliefs about relationships. Scores range from 0 to 18. The items form five dimensions: (a) disagreement is destructive, (b) mindreading is expected, (c) partners cannot change, (d) sexual perfection is expected, and (e) the sexes are different. Cronbach alpha coefficients for the five dimensions range from .72 to .81. The Relationship Beliefs Inventory has shown moderate evidence of convergent and construct validity. Higher scores indicate greater agreement with dysfunctional beliefs.

#### THE INTERPERSONAL CHECKLIST

This checklist, developed by Leary (1957), offers ratings of observable actions including verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The checklist, which has demonstrated adequate interjudge reliability ( $r = .78$ ), consists of 128 items that reflect eight personality dimensions: managerial, responsible, cooperative, dependent, self-effacing, rebellious, aggressive, and competitive. The possible scores on each of these variables range from 0 to 20. All spouses rated themselves and their partner on separate Interpersonal Checklist forms. As

suggested by Kiesler (1987), all Interpersonal Checklist scores were ipsatized for greater precision.

#### THE MARITAL SATISFACTION INVENTORY

This inventory, developed by Snyder (1979), was designed to identify aspects of marital distress in areas of spousal interaction. The questionnaire consists of 280 true/false items including one validity scale, one global satisfaction scale, and nine additional scales that measure more specific dimensions of marital interaction: conventionalization, global distress, affective communication, problem-solving communication, time together, disagreement about finances, sexual dissatisfaction, role orientation, family history of distress, dissatisfaction with children, and conflict over childrearing. The Marital Satisfaction Inventory, considered the most psychometrically sound measure for the assessment of marital satisfaction (Burnett, 1987), has been shown to relate couples' reports on the measure to their verbal and nonverbal behaviors in problem-solving tasks (Snyder, Trull, & Wills, 1987). The participants' standard scores on the inventory were used as dependent variables.

#### Procedure

Undergraduates whose biological parents were married and still living with each other were given an option of gaining extra course credit if each parent completed personality and relationship questionnaires. Interested students were instructed to ask each parent their willingness to participate. Eleven students in the class whose parents fit the criteria declined to participate for reasons such as "parents are too busy" and "don't want to ask them." In an informed consent form, participants were told that all information obtained from the questionnaires would be coded with numbers rather than names. Students whose parents agreed submitted their parents' names, address, and phone number. Each parent was sent a separate letter and packet and told that (a) the purpose of the experiment was to assess personality and relationship characteristics of married couples and (b) all information would be coded and only accessible to the research team. Each parent was asked to refrain from sharing responses with their spouses and to return their completed questionnaires and signed consent form in an enclosed prestamped envelope. Complete data were obtained from all parents included in the study. It should be noted that students whose biological parents were not still married or not living together were given another option for extra course credit.

## RESULTS

The couples' mean score of 47.00 (SD = 6.67) on the Marital Satisfaction Inventory global marital distress scale was within the normal range (Snyder

et al., 1987), and significantly lower than the mean of 65.80 ( $SD = 9.20$ ) reported by distressed couples seeking marital therapy (Kilmann, Carranza, & Parnell, 1999a). The husbands' and wives' mean scores on the Marital Satisfaction Inventory role orientation scale indicated that they endorsed a traditional orientation toward marital and parental roles.

An examination of the spouses' scores on the dependent variables indicated that departures from normality were not very severe, with no platykurtosis. Given the fairly large sample size, no remedial measures were necessary with respect to the distribution. We used a hierarchical multivariate approach for all statistical models to be discussed. It should be noted that in all cases in which we used a multivariate analysis of variance, we used descriptive discriminant analysis to identify which dependent variables contributed to any statistically significant findings. Variables with structure values greater than .40 were determined to be meaningful contributors to significant differences found by the multivariate analysis of variance.

We used a multivariate analysis of covariance model to test our first hypothesis, that higher scores on the AA and DC attachment dimensions will be linked with greater agreement with dysfunctional relationship beliefs, and with greater marital distress. We treated the five Relationship Beliefs Inventory scales and the Marital Satisfaction Inventory global distress scale as the responses. The independent variables included the two attachment dimensions, AA and DC, gender, and couple to account for within-couple correlation. These were the only variables controlled for in the analyses. We examined only main effects because of small cell sizes for some combinations. We used discriminant analysis as a follow-up to any significant multivariate analysis of covariance results for the categorical variables and used canonical analysis for the continuous variables. We found no significant interactions between gender and AA ( $p > .05$ ) and between gender and DC ( $p > .05$ ), nor did AA and DC interact significantly ( $p > .05$ ). Furthermore, no significant gender differences were found ( $p > .05$ ) on the multivariate response. There were significant differences among the couples ( $p < .001$ ).

We found that AA was significantly related to the dependent variables ( $p < .05$ ), with the canonical analysis showing that the relationship was with two Relationship Beliefs Inventory scales: disagreement is destructive ( $R = 1.45$ ) and the sexes are different ( $R = 2.84$ ). DC also was significantly related to the dependent variables ( $p < .05$ ), specifically with the disagreement is destructive scale ( $R = 1.85$ ) and the partners cannot change scale ( $R = 2.13$ ) from the Relationship Beliefs Inventory, as well as with the Marital Satisfaction Inventory global marital distress scale ( $R = 1.21$ ). Thus, increased levels of AA and DC were related to greater agreement with the Relationship Beliefs Inventory disagreement is destructive scale and a higher score on the Marital Satisfaction Inventory global marital distress scale.

Our second hypothesis was concerned with the relation between (a) a partner's AA and DC scores and (b) ratings of them by their spouse on



the Interpersonal Checklist octant scores. For this purpose, we used multivariate regression, treating the couple as the unit of analysis. Analyses were run separately for husbands and wives, with the octant scores treated as the responses and the two independent variables being AA and DC. In addition, we tested for the significance of the interaction between AA and DC for husbands and wives; neither interaction was significant ( $p > .05$  for husbands,  $p > .05$  for wives).

For husbands, significant relationships were found between AA ( $p < .05$ ) and DC ( $p < .01$ ) with the multivariate response. Further investigation using canonical analysis showed that AA was related to wives' ratings of husbands on Interpersonal Checklist scales: aggressive ( $R = -.44$ ), rebellious ( $R = .33$ ), and managerial ( $R = -.46$ ). The canonical analysis found that DC was related to scores on the aggressive ( $R = .61$ ), rebellious ( $R = .61$ ), cooperative ( $R = -.52$ ), and responsible ( $R = -.69$ ) scales. Thus, the higher the husbands' AA score, the lower they were rated on the aggressive and managerial scales, and the higher they were rated on the rebellious scale. The higher the husbands' DC score, the higher they were rated on the aggressive and rebellious scales, and the lower they were rated on the cooperative and responsible scales.

For wives, we found that AA ( $p < .05$ ), but not DC ( $p > .05$ ), was significantly related to their husband's ratings of them on the Interpersonal Checklist octant scales. The post hoc canonical analysis found that AA was related to scores on the self-effacing ( $R = .34$ ), dependent ( $R = .29$ ) and competitive ( $R = -.42$ ) scales. The higher the wives' AA score, the higher they were rated on the dependent and self-effacing scales, and the lower they were rated on the competitive scale.

We tested our third hypothesis by classifying each couple by attachment pattern as either matched secure, matched insecure, and mismatched. Of the 268 spouses, 116 reported a secure attachment pattern and 152 reported an insecure pattern. Of the 134 couples, 26 consisted of two secure partners (matched secure). Of the 64 couples consisting of one secure and one insecure partner (mismatched), the most frequent pairing was a secure partner with a dismissive-avoidant partner ( $n = 32$ ). Of the 44 couples consisting of both partners with an insecure attachment pattern (matched insecure), the most frequent pairing was two dismissive-avoidant partners ( $n = 12$ ). There was no remarkable difference in representation between husbands and wives in any of these attachment pattern pairings. We then conducted separate multivariate analyses of variance, comparing the couple pairings on the wives' and husbands' Marital Satisfaction Inventory ratings. These analyses were significant ( $p < .05$ ) for the wives ratings on nine Marital Satisfaction Inventory scales: conventionalization, global marital distress, affective communication, problem-solving communication, time together, disagreement about finances, sexual dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction with children, and conflict over childrearing. No significant multivariate effects on the scales were found for husbands. Given the exploratory nature of this research, and the

**TABLE 2.** Marital Satisfaction Differences Across Couple Attachment Pairings

	Couple attachment pairings							
	Wife secure/ husband secure ( <i>n</i> = 26)		Wife secure/ husband insecure ( <i>n</i> = 23)		Wife insecure/ husband secure ( <i>n</i> = 40)		Wife insecure/ husband insecure ( <i>n</i> = 45)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Marital satisfaction								
Wife ratings								
Conventionalization	58.2	9.5	55.7	10.4	55.4	10.0	50.1	9.8
Global distress	42.3*	2.9	44.8	5.7	46.1	7.4	49.8*	9.9
Affective communication	41.5*	5.7	44.4	8.6	45.6	9.0	50.3	9.5
Problem-solving communication	43.0*	7.0	46.0	8.6	47.5	9.6	51.5*	10.1
Time together	42.9*	6.5	47.6	9.0	48.6	8.4	52.5*	10.2
Disagreement about finances	45.6	6.5	48.8	8.8	49.4	10.4	51.4	8.6
Sexual dissatisfaction	45.9	7.9	46.5	9.7	48.0	10.2	50.7	9.7
Role orientation	51.1	9.7	49.6	7.8	48.3	9.4	50.9	8.0
Family history of distress	47.3	11.3	46.2	10.0	51.1	9.6	48.3	8.8
Dissatisfaction with children	44.8	6.9	47.1	7.8	49.6	7.9	49.7	8.9
Conflict over childrearing	46.6*	6.9	47.5	6.5	47.1	6.0	53.5*	7.9
Husband ratings								
Conventionalization	58.5	8.9	54.9	9.1	53.8	9.1	50.6	9.5
Global distress	43.1	4.0	48.3	10.1	48.6	10.1	49.6	9.6
Affective communication	42.7*	6.6	48.4	12.9	46.8	10.0	52.2*	11.0
Problem-solving communication	42.7*	8.1	46.7	10.8	49.7	11.2	52.7*	11.3
Time together	44.2	9.3	48.8	11.1	49.5	10.3	51.8	13.1
Disagreement about finances	45.1	6.6	50.4	8.8	48.3	10.5	53.0	10.8
Sexual dissatisfaction	46.0	9.3	48.5	11.1	50.1	11.2	53.7	9.9
Role orientation	54.4	8.8	50.4	9.6	54.0	8.9	52.3	8.6
Family history of distress	46.6	9.8	47.7	9.0	45.8	9.0	49.1	9.3
Dissatisfaction with children	44.6	4.9	49.5	9.1	47.6	10.6	52.1	11.1
Conflict over childrearing	44.1*	4.4	49.2	4.4	47.5	7.0	52.1*	10.1

Except for the conventionalization and role orientation scales, higher scores reflect higher levels of dissatisfaction.

\*Indicates groups are different on selected variable ( $p < .05$ ).

low multivariate power resulting from small sample sizes in some of the couple pairings, we conducted individual analyses of variance for the husband and wife ratings, controlling for the Type I error using Bonferroni's correction. As shown in Table 2, this analysis revealed a similar pattern for both genders, although more pronounced for the wives. As predicted from the multivariate analysis of variance, matched secure spouses consistently reported significantly less dissatisfaction on dimensions of marital functioning than mismatched and matched insecure couples, respectively.

## DISCUSSION

We found that irrespective of gender, partners who reported higher AA or greater DC reported greater agreement with the dysfunctional belief that

disagreements are destructive, and greater marital distress. Spouses who reported higher levels of AA were more likely to hold different relationship expectations of men and women. Spouses who reported greater DC endorsed to a greater extent the notion that people are not likely to change their attitudes, opinions, or behaviors. These findings are consistent with the findings of other research that insecurely attached individuals hold significantly more irrational relationship beliefs, which tends to be linked with their lessened relationship satisfaction (Stackert & Bursik, 2003).

We also found gender differences in the association between attachment orientations and interpersonal styles. That is, husbands who reported higher scores on the AA dimension were rated as less aggressive, less controlling, and more rebellious. In contrast, wives who reported higher scores on this dimension were rated as more dependent and self-critical and as less competitive. Husbands with a higher level of DC were rated as less cooperative and responsible, and as more aggressive and rebellious. In essence, higher scores on the two attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance appear to be linked with problematic relationship beliefs and interpersonal styles that are likely to threaten relationship stability.

Our finding that matched secure and matched insecure couples reported the least and most marital distress, respectively, is consistent with the findings of prior research (e.g., Alexandrov et al., 2005; Berman et al., 1994; Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992). Greater marital distress was more likely in marriages consisting of at least one insecure partner. Secure wives paired with insecure husbands reported less marital distress than secure husbands paired with insecure wives; wives' attachment security may be an important factor in maintaining satisfaction in longer marriages. Future research should identify the mechanisms under which matched secure couples might be more likely than other couple attachment pairings to resolve the conflict and intimacy issues that surface in close relationships.

A methodological strength in the present study is that we investigated middle-aged couples in relatively long-term marriages. In this regard, previous attachment research has primarily focused on undergraduate romantic dating relationships or younger couples. Nevertheless, our study reflected several limitations. For instance, with the exception of spousal ratings of partner interpersonal styles, our findings are dependent upon self-report data. Since the great majority of couples lived in the southeast, it cannot be determined whether our results generalize to middle-aged couples in other regions of the country. Furthermore, all couples were recruited by offspring who desired extra credit in their psychology class. It cannot be determined whether the parents of these students reflected different characteristics than parents who were not recruited by their offspring for reasons such as being divorced from each other, or from parents whose offspring did not seek extra course credit. Our middle-aged couples can be considered at or approaching the empty nest stage of the marital life cycle, in which parental roles are less important and typically there is less marital and family stress.

Middle-aged couples have survived the early marriage years and generally report the first increase in marital satisfaction since early marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, & White, 2003). Younger couples face different adjustments and transitions than do older, longer married couples. These include in-law influences, early career demands, and/or the experience of parenthood. Younger couples also tend to have unrealistic expectations of marriage (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Thus, our findings might not have occurred for spouses in marriages of shorter (or even longer) durations.

Because stress activates an individual's attachment system (e.g., Simpson & Rholes, 1994), it would seem logical that partners in a distressed marriage would reflect more pronounced associations on the variables in this study than would our nonclinical couples. Future research should contrast nonclinical and clinical couples to assess whether these associations would differ and/or vary by marital duration. One strategy would be to compare data from three subgroups; couples married three years or less, couples married 4 to 10 years, and those married 11 years or longer. Since interpersonal behavior is communicated through spoken words and nonverbal expressions, such as gestures, postures, and facial reactions (Van Buren & Nowicki, 1997), partner ratings of interpersonal behavior should be supplemented with direct observations of couple interactions. Spousal perceptions of partner interpersonal styles from interviews would offer an additional perspective into answering the questions raised earlier.

### Therapeutic Implications

Attachment theory would predict that each partner's ability to act protective and nurturing, and to accept these behaviors from another is considered necessary for relationship success (Beach et al., 1994). One partner's attachment system can be activated either by the other's proximity-seeking or distancing behaviors, which alter experienced anxiety/security (Berman et al., 1994). Our findings and those of other researchers suggest that the attachment system of insecure partners is more likely to be activated by perceived partner rejection, abandonment, withdrawal, attempts to control, and a lack of cooperation, than for secure partners. Insecurely attached individuals are at risk for relationship distress (e.g., McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). Some evidence suggests that previous insecure attachment representations can be overwritten with a new, more positive working model of romantic relationships, especially with a greater understanding of how family of origin and subsequent romantic relationships impact attachment representations (e.g., Dinero et al., 2008; Kilmann et al., 2006). For unmarried individuals or couples, therapists can prevent the likelihood of relationship problems by challenging the maladaptive relationship beliefs and identifying the potentially troublesome interpersonal strategies of insecurely attached partners (e.g., Kilmann et al.,

1999; Kilmann et al., 1999b). Therapists working with distressed marriages should help partners reframe attachment-related unrealistic relationship beliefs that are ongoing blocks to mutual need satisfaction, as well as helping partners to identify actions and nonactions that trigger anxiety/avoidance reactions in each other. It also would seem important to help partners to resolve long-standing attachment-related relationship disappointments that inhibit mutual self-disclosure and intimacy and that interfere with successful conflict resolution.

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