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Feeney, Judith A.
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Adult Attachment and Conflict Behavior: Delineating the Links

Judith A. Feeney
University of Queensland

Abstract

In couple relationships, intense or protracted conflict can activate the attachment system, raising concerns about the partner's availability and the future of the relationship. Hence, individuals with different attachment orientations are expected to respond differently to conflict. This article summarises a series of studies into adult attachment and conflict processes, examining four issues: conflicts regarding closeness and distance in dating couples, patterns of marital conflict, reactions to anger-evoking and hurtful events, and the role of attachment and conflict patterns in the intergenerational transmission of relationship difficulties. The studies point to complex links between attachment and conflict variables. Insecurity - particularly attachment anxiety – is associated with high levels of conflict, and with maladaptive responses such as coercion and conflict avoidance. These conflict behaviors are likely to fuel disagreement, hence maintaining or exacerbating insecurity. There is also evidence that insecurity and maladaptive conflict behaviors create relational dissatisfaction, and that conflict behaviors partially mediate the link between insecurity and dissatisfaction. Research further suggests that parents' insecurity and destructive conflict behaviors have negative consequences for adolescent offspring, in terms of attachment difficulties and appraisals of loneliness. These findings highlight the importance of interventions designed to ameliorate insecurities and communication difficulties.

Key words: Adult attachment, Conflict behaviours, Intergenerational transmission.

Apego Adulto y Conflicto: Acotando su Relación

Resumen

En las relaciones de pareja, el conflicto intenso o prolongado puede activar el sistema del apego, genera preocupaciones acerca de la disponibilidad de la pareja y el futuro de la relación. Por lo tanto, se espera que los individuos con diferentes tipos de apego, respondan en forma diferencial al conflicto. Este artículo, resume una serie de estudios en apego adulto y procesos de conflicto, examinando cuatro aspectos: conflictos relativos a la cercanía y distancia en parejas, patrones de conflicto marital, reacciones a eventos dolorosos que evocan enojo, y el papel del apego y los patrones de conflicto en la transmisión intergeneracional de las dificultades en las relaciones. Los estudios se enfocan en vínculos complejos entre el apego y variables relacionadas al conflicto. La inseguridad –particularmente el apego ansioso- está asociado con altos niveles de conflicto y con respuestas poco adaptativas tales como coerción y evitación al conflicto. Estas conductas de conflicto son probablemente lo que estimulan el desacuerdo, generando con ello el mantenimiento o exacerbación de la inseguridad. Hay también evidencia de que la inseguridad y las conductas poco adaptativas del conflicto crean insatisfacción en la relación, y que dichas conductas juegan un papel parcialmente intermediario del vínculo entre inseguridad e insatisfacción. Además la investigación sugiere que la inseguridad de los padres y sus conductas destructivas durante el conflicto, tienen consecuencias negativas para los hijos adolescentes, en términos de las dificultades en el apego y apreciación de soledad. Estos hallazgos reflejan la importancia de las intervenciones diseñadas para aliviar inseguridades y dificultades en comunicación.

Palabras clave: Apego adulto, Conductas de conflicto, Transmisión intergeneracional.

According to Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980), the attachment system is an organized set of behaviors and motivation that serve the function of maintaining proximity to the caregiver (attachment figure). The system is thought to have evolved to offer young children a survival advantage by keeping them close to nurturing and protective adults. The attachment system is a homeostatic control system that maintains a balance between attachment (proximity-seeking) and exploratory behavior, taking account of the accessibility of attachment figures and potential dangers in the physical and social environment (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Thus, attachment behavior tends to be elicited by situations that appear threatening or stressful.

It is important to note that despite his major focus on the bonds that form between young children and their primary caregivers, Bowlby (1979) acknowledged that attachment behavior persists across the lifespan. Similarly, Ainsworth (1989) and Weiss (1986, 1991) argued that attachment bonds exist in both childhood and adulthood, and that similar functions, emotions and elicitors are involved, regardless of stage of life. According to attachment theorists, 'secure dependence' is an adaptive phenomenon that promotes healthy adjustment across the life cycle; somewhat paradoxically, it is the security afforded by attachment figures that allows the individual to function autonomously and effectively.

For both children and adults, then, stressful situations activate the attachment system and raise questions about the attachment figure's accessibility (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). If the attachment figure is seen as available and responsive, the individual experiences 'felt security', and can employ constructive approaches to the stressor, such as problem-solving and support-seeking. If the individual considers (based on experience) that the attachment figure is unavailable or unresponsive, two main alternatives exist. If proximity-seeking is seen as a viable option for dealing with feelings of insecurity, the individual engages in hyperactivating strategies, which seek to get the partner to pay more attention and give more support (intense monitoring; efforts to get closer). These strategies are characteristic of those high in attachment anxiety (preoccupied or anxious-ambivalent). On the other hand, if proximity-seeking is seen as dangerous or disallowed, the individual engages in deactivating strategies, which involve denying attachment needs and maintaining distance and control. These strategies are characteristic of those high in avoidance (particularly dismissing-avoidance). Individuals high in fearful-avoidance may show a combination of hyperactivating and deactivating strategies.

Because attachment behavior is elicited by stressful situations, it is most readily apparent at these times. Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed that conditions of apparent threat fell into three types: conditions of the child (e.g., hunger, pain), conditions of the environment (e.g., frightening noises, presence of unfamiliar people), and conditions of the attachment relationship (e.g., caregivers' departure or discouraging of proximity). Although some of these specific conditions (such as the presence of unfamiliar persons) may elicit attachment behavior only in helpless infants, the broad typology is applicable to adult behavior. For example, conflict between adult partners may challenge or threaten their attachment bond. Conflict is an inevitable consequence of the interdependence between intimates, and

although minor conflicts may be readily resolved, intense or protracted conflict is stressful and can cast doubt on the viability of the relationship (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994; Pietromonaco, Greenwood, & Feldman Barrett, 2004). In other words, serious conflict can activate the attachment system, leading to attachment-style differences in immediate conflict behaviors and longer-term outcomes.

This article summarises findings from my own research program into adult attachment and conflict processes, and also notes relevant findings from other researchers. The article examines four broad issues: conflicts regarding closeness and distance in dating couples, patterns of marital conflict, reactions to anger-evoking and hurtful events, and the role of attachment and conflict patterns in the intergenerational transmission of relationship difficulties. It is important to note that because these studies were conducted at varying points in time, and because of the rapid proliferation of measures of adult attachment, results will refer variously to the three-group model (secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant; see Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the four-group model (secure, preoccupied, dismissing and fearful; see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and the major attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety (e.g., see Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Closeness and distance in long-term dating couples

Distance regulation, which focuses on individuals' needs for closeness and distance and the strategies used to meet these needs, is fundamental to the negotiation of couple bonds (Baxter & Simon, 1993). Distance regulation involves seeking opportunities for both separateness (autonomy) and closeness (connection). Indeed, relationship partners need to balance these opposing forces or tendencies: Relationships cannot exist unless partners give up some individual autonomy in order to forge a connection, but too much connection can stifle the individual entities and destroy the relationship. Further, these issues are never fully resolved; needs for autonomy and connection shift as partners and situations change, and hence must be managed on an ongoing basis (Baxter & Montgomery, 1997). Because proximity-seeking is a central feature of the attachment system, individual differences in attachment security are likely to shape responses to issues of closeness and distance. In fact, proximity-seeking has been described as the major goal of attachment behavior Bowlby (1973), and as one of the key criteria of attachment bonds (Weiss, 1991).

Open-ended reports of attitudes to closeness and distance

One of our earliest studies of adult attachment (Feeney & Noller, 1991) reflected our concern that administering structured questionnaire measures of attachment style to participants might overstate the importance of attachment

issues; that is, attachment-related issues may not be very important to individuals except when they are introduced by measurement procedures. To address this problem, we asked participants in dating relationships to provide open-ended verbal descriptions of their relationships, telling 'what kind of person your partner is, and how you get along together.'

In this study, content analysis of the descriptions showed that core attachment issues, including closeness and distance, were raised spontaneously by most respondents. Further, the specific themes raised were consistent with participants' responses to the forced-choice (three-group) attachment measure, completed two weeks later. For example, those identifying as secure advocated a balance between closeness and autonomy. Avoidant individuals clearly reported the desire to limit intimacy and commitment, together with fears of partners wanting to get too close. In contrast, those identifying as anxious-ambivalent reported craving more closeness and affection. Although this study did not focus specifically on conflict, it could be expected that such contrasting attitudes to closeness and distance could prove a source of conflict for many couples.

To examine this proposition, a later study (Feeney, 1999a) involved both members of 72 dating couples completing measures of attachment security; namely, the four-group forced-choice measure and scales assessing avoidance (discomfort with closeness) and attachment anxiety. Again, open-ended descriptions of relationships were obtained (separately from each partner), and content analysis was used to calculate the proportion of each transcript devoted to the discussion of closeness-distance issues. Overall, the mean proportion of the transcripts devoted to these issues was .34, suggesting that issues concerning closeness and distance are highly salient in long-term dating relationships. Regression analyses were also conducted in which avoidance and anxiety were used to predict the proportion of the transcript dealing with closeness-distance, separately for each gender. This proportion was related positively to males' avoidance and females' anxiety; as expected, these results point to the *particular* salience of closeness-distance issues to those who are insecurely attached. Of the 72 couples, 37 included at least one partner who explicitly mentioned overall differences in partners' needs for closeness-distance. Consistent with the finding based on the 'proportion' measure, reported difference in needs was related positively to males' avoidance and females' anxiety.

More detailed analyses focused on participants who reported cyclical patterns of closeness and distance over time (32 individuals, including both partners in 11 couples). Almost half of these attributed the cyclical patterns to regular changes in work or study commitments, whereas the remaining 15 (including both partners in 5 couples) attributed them to interpersonal dynamics involving distancing and pursuing. All 12 couples who reported these recurring struggles over closeness-distance, involving 'push-pull' dynamics, included at least one insecure partner. Their reports of the relational dynamics involved in these struggles were lengthy and highly emotional, pointing to the difficult emotional climate that can accompany insecure attachment, especially when partners have very different relational styles (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Pistole, 1994). The concepts of hyperactivation and deactivation are relevant here: An anxious

person's needs and demands (e.g., 'wanting to be showered with attention') frustrate an avoidant partner's preference for distance. Conversely, an avoidant person's preference for distance (not wanting to be 'smothered' or controlled) frustrates an anxious partner's desire for intense closeness, exacerbating their tendency to cling and control. The clearest finding concerned the role of dismissing-avoidant men; 7 of the 15 couples with a dismissing man reported cycles of distancing and pursuing, compared with only 5 of the remaining 59 couples.

Laboratory studies of closeness and distance

Conflicts over closeness and distance can also be studied in the laboratory. For example, the 'improvisation scenes' developed by Raush, Barry, Hertel, and Swain (1974) involve explicit conflicts of interest, primed by researchers. In another study (Feeney, 1998), the same dating couples from the previous study took part in three interactions involving such conflicts. Immediately before one scene (the 'leisure scene'), each member of the couple was separately primed to argue for a different leisure activity, to be undertaken in a time previously set aside for shared couple activity. In the other scenes, one partner was primed to behave in a cold and distant manner toward the other, who was primed to try to establish closeness. The roles of the man and woman were reversed in the two interactions, which were counterbalanced. The major focus was on responses to partner's distancing; this type of core relational conflict is likely to be seen as threatening the future of the relationship, and hence, to activate attachment behavior. The leisure scene enabled a comparison of relational conflict (closeness-distance) with more concrete (issue-based) conflict.

For each of the three scenes, trained observers rated participants' responses to the conflict. Based on factor analyses, summary measures were developed: Verbal behavior was rated for levels of reason, affiliation, and coercion; nonverbal behavior was assessed in terms of touch and avoidance (which tap the extent of interactional involvement); and finally, affect was defined in terms of worry (fear and sadness) and hostility (anger and disgust).

In the leisure (issue-based) scene, the number of significant relations between attachment scales and conflict behavior did not exceed that expected by chance. In contrast, responses to partner distancing showed many significant effects. Verbal behavior showed effects of both own and partner's attachment characteristics. For example, males high in attachment anxiety used more coercion; females high in avoidance used less reason, and their partners were less affiliative. With regard to nonverbal behavior, males high in avoidance and females high in anxiety showed less active involvement in the interaction (i.e., less touch and more avoidance). Finally, with regard to emotion, females high in avoidance showed more negative affect (both worry and hostility).

The finding that attachment-related effects were restricted to the partner-distant scene supports the proposition that attachment behavior is activated particularly by conflict pertaining to proximity-seeking and distancing, which

threatens the viability of the relationship. Similarly, Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips (1996), in another laboratory study of conflict in dating couples, found that the detrimental effects of anxiety and avoidance on couples' interactions patterns and levels of distress were more pronounced for couples who were asked to discuss major, rather than minor, conflicts.

Marital conflict

Our first study of attachment and marriage, the Young Couples Study (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994), provided a comprehensive picture of marital conflict. This study employed multiple methods and a longitudinal design to address the relations among attachment, conflict behavior, and marital satisfaction. Four aspects of conflict were assessed. First, couples filled out interaction diaries six months after marriage, assessing the quality of their day-to-day interactions in terms of recognition, disclosure, involvement, satisfaction, conflict, and domination. The remaining measures were completed at assessment sessions conducted after 12 months and 21 months of marriage. At these sessions, couples completed questionnaire measures of attachment: avoidance (discomfort with closeness) and attachment anxiety. With regard to conflict behavior, a structured questionnaire was used to assess levels of mutuality, coercion, destructive process such as demand-withdraw, and post-conflict distress (lingering hurt, guilt and resentment). They also discussed two issues causing conflict in their relationship, and provided reports of their own influence strategies; these reports were coded to yield scores on positivity (reason and support), negativity (manipulation and threat), and conflict avoidance (physical and emotional retreat). Finally, a series of ambiguous messages was used to assess spouses' accuracy at exchanging positive, neutral and negative nonverbal messages (negative messages are particularly relevant here, as they imply disagreement or disapproval).

Effects of own and partner's attachment characteristics

For husbands only, own avoidance was related to diary reports of less involvement, recognition, disclosure and satisfaction in everyday interactions, and to questionnaire reports of less mutuality (mutual negotiation). For wives, own avoidance was negatively related to accuracy of decoding neutral and negative messages. Links between own attachment anxiety and conflict behavior were even more widespread, although they were somewhat stronger for wives. Anxiety was linked to diary ratings of low involvement, disclosure, and satisfaction, and high conflict and domination; to questionnaire reports of low levels of mutuality and high levels of coercion, destructive process, and post-conflict distress; and to reported use of negative influence strategies in conflict-centred discussions. For

husbands, anxiety was also negatively related to accuracy at decoding all types of nonverbal messages. In addition, wives' anxiety predicted their *later* reports of destructive process and post-conflict distress, even when earlier conflict scores were controlled. These concurrent and predictive links suggest that anxiety about attachment issues drives a range of destructive conflict behaviors, which may contribute to relationship breakdown and exacerbate insecurity. Similarly, other researchers have linked attachment anxiety with higher levels of conflict and with conflict escalation, in both long-term dating (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005) and married couples (Gallo & Smith, 2001).

As noted in regard to the observational study of dating couples (Feeney, 1998), conflict behavior in couple bonds tends to be shaped by the attachment characteristics of the *partner*, as well as those of the reporter. In our study of newly-weds, the most consistent partner effects involved husbands' avoidance and wives' anxiety. When husbands were high in avoidance, wives reported less involvement, recognition, and satisfaction in their day-to-day interactions. Conversely, when wives were high in anxiety, husbands reported more domination and less involvement in day-to-day interactions, and more coercion and destructive process in response to conflict.

Together, these results suggest that in the early years of marriage, insecure spouses struggle to resolve differences and disagreements. Avoidance seems to interfere with husbands' constructive responses to conflict, such as involvement, disclosure, and negotiation. Anxiety is linked to higher levels of conflict, as well as to coercive and dominating conflict behavior, and lingering feelings of hurt and resentment.

In another study of attachment and marital conflict (Feeney, 1994), 361 couples were systematically sampled to represent different durations of marriage: 1 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, and more than 20 years. This study focused only on questionnaire reports of communication patterns (mutuality, coercion, destructive process, and post-conflict distress); further, because the primary focus was on attachment and marital satisfaction, the analyses of conflict scales addressed only the effects of individuals' own (rather than partner's) attachment.

Preliminary analyses showed that scores on the conflict scales were similar for husbands and wives, and for the three groups defined by length of marriage. The findings also pointed to associations between attachment dimensions and conflict behavior that were very robust across length of marriage. For both husbands and wives, avoidance and anxiety were related negatively to mutuality, and positively to all three scales measuring destructive responses to conflict (coercion, destructive process, and post-conflict distress); generally, the correlations tended to be slightly stronger for the anxiety dimension of attachment. These results again point to the detrimental effects of attachment insecurities on couple interaction patterns and on post-conflict distress; they also indicate that these effects are not confined to the early years of marriage.

Interaction effects of partners' attachment characteristics

In couple relationships, as already noted, both partners' attachment characteristics are likely to shape relationship processes and outcomes. Beyond these 'main effects', it is possible that interactive effects may occur – that is, the effect of one person's avoidance or anxiety may *depend on* the partner's attachment profile. To date, two of our studies have addressed this issue in relation to conflict variables (Feeney, 2003).

The first of these was the study of dating couples' responses to interactions involving conflicts of interests, discussed earlier. Re-analyses assessing interactive effects were conducted at a later date, and focused specifically on participants' responses to partner distancing. Men's responses to partner's distancing showed only main effects of attachment (own and partner effects, discussed previously). However, for women's responses to partner's distancing, male anxiety and female anxiety interacted to predict three dependent variables: coercive verbal behaviour, and levels of touch and avoidance. Interestingly, this interaction effect varied in form. For coercion and avoidance, couples in which both partners were high in anxiety functioned most poorly; that is, they engaged in nonverbal avoidance but were demanding, threatening and disparaging in their comments. In contrast, the highest levels of friendly touch occurred when the man was anxious but the woman was not, suggesting that the low-anxious women may have been taking account of their partners' insecurities and trying hard to show support and encouragement.

In the Young Couples Study mentioned earlier, we also examined possible interactive effects of partners' attachment characteristics. Again, the most consistent effect involved husbands' and wives' anxiety levels, which had interactive effects on wives' reports of conflict behaviors. Further, because this study was longitudinal, we were able to show that the effects emerged both concurrently and over time. Again, the interactive effects varied in form. For example, wives reported the most conflict avoidance when both spouses were anxious about the relationship, suggesting that the avoidance behavior was driven by the insecurities of both partners. This finding, which highlights the problematic combination of two anxious spouses, fits with the results for coercion and avoidance in response to partner distancing (above). It is not surprising that this combination can prove difficult: Both partners are excessively focused on their own insecurities and on trying to control the other's behaviour, and both tend to feel misunderstood. Moreover, neither seems able to recognize or meet the other's needs, leading to mutual frustration and increasing anxiety.

Interestingly, however, anxious wives with anxious husbands reported *less* coercion than those with low-anxious husbands. This finding suggests that anxious wives may perceive their non-anxious husbands as unable or unwilling to understand their insecurities; this may lead to escalating coercion, or to the misattribution of partners' behavior as coercive. Similarly, Gallo and Smith's (2001) study of marital conflict showed complex effects of spouses' anxiety levels: Couples with two anxious spouses reported the most conflict, but couples in which only the wife was anxious reported slightly less conflict than those with two low-

anxious spouses. Anxious wives generally strive hard to retain their partners, and non-anxious husbands may take this into account when facing their needs and demands.

Conflict as a mediator of the security-satisfaction association

The association between secure attachment and relationship is now well established (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). More recently, increasing attention has been paid to variables that may *mediate* this association. Such variables act as a link in the causal chain; hence, understanding the mechanisms by which insecurity leads to unhappy relationships can suggest additional points of intervention for counselors and clinicians. Given that communication is the vehicle by which attachment relationships are negotiated (Bretherton, 1988; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994), it seems likely that patterns of communication (including conflict-centred communication) mediate the effects of insecurity on relationship outcomes. We have examined this issue with two married samples: the newly-weds, and those sampled across the life cycle of marriage.

In the Young Couples Study, we assessed the role of attachment dimensions and conflict variables (measured after a year of marriage) in predicting later marital satisfaction. We conducted hierarchical regression analyses in which marital satisfaction at Time 2 was predicted by earlier scores on own and partner's attachment (step 1) and own conflict behavior (step 2). These analyses were carried out separately for the questionnaire scales (mutuality, coercion, destructive process, and post-conflict distress) and the nonverbal accuracy task, both of which constitute general measures of communication skill.

For the full sample (i.e., pooled across gender to increase statistical power), Time 1 attachment dimensions predicted later marital satisfaction, with own anxiety being the strongest predictor. When the questionnaire scales were added, the overall prediction was marginally significant. Own anxiety remained the only significant predictor, and the regression weights associated with the attachment scales did not change substantially with the inclusion of the conflict variables. These findings suggest that for these young couples, communication patterns during conflict did not add to the prediction of marital satisfaction afforded by attachment dimensions, and that the effect of attachment dimensions on satisfaction is not mediated to any large degree by conflict patterns.

When nonverbal accuracy scores for the three message types were entered (in place of the questionnaire scales) at step 2, own anxiety was again the only significant predictor of marital satisfaction, and the influence of attachment on satisfaction was unaffected by the decoding measures. Hence, again, it does not appear that communication accuracy plays a substantial mediating role in the link between attachment and satisfaction.

In the study of couples across the life cycle of marriage, the possible role of the four questionnaire scales as mediators of the attachment-satisfaction link was again explored. Six hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, one for each

combination of gender and length of marriage. The dependent variable was marital satisfaction, and the predictors were participants' scores on the attachment scales (step 1) and conflict scales (step 2).

In all six analyses, the attachment scales provided significant prediction of marital satisfaction at step 1. Husbands' marital satisfaction was negatively related to anxiety, irrespective of length of marriage. For wives, satisfaction was negatively related to both avoidance and anxiety. At step 2, in sharp contrast to the Young Couples Study, addition of the conflict scales resulted in a highly significant increase in explained variance in all six analyses. Results were consistent across the three stages of marriage. In the full model, mutuality was the strongest predictor of husbands' satisfaction, with anxiety maintaining a significant or near-significant relationship with the dependent variable. Mutuality was also the strongest predictor of wives' satisfaction, with both attachment scales becoming nonsignificant predictors. These findings indicate that for husbands, the negative association between anxiety and satisfaction was *partially* mediated by communication patterns adopted during conflict - for husbands, anxiety seems to have some deleterious effects over and above those attributable to conflict patterns. For wives, the link between secure attachment and satisfaction was fully mediated by conflict patterns.

In recent years, several studies have confirmed the importance of conflict-related variables as mediators of the association between insecure attachment and relationship distress (see Feeney, 2008, and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for summaries of this work). Examples of relevant conflict variables include problems in negotiation, negative attributions for partner behaviors, and reluctance to forgive transgressions.

Affect regulation: Dealing with anger and hurt

In intimate relationships, conflict and negative emotion are closely linked (Sillars, 1998; Sillars & Scott, 1983). Emotions are felt most strongly and expressed most spontaneously between intimates. Conflicts also have greater potential to become emotional in intimate relationships, because they are more involving and threatening. In turn, emotionality has important effects on conflict-centred interactions: It increases the likelihood of biased interpretation of messages (often leading partners to overgeneralize their differences), of selective attention to behavior that is visually salient or negative, and of reduced ability to engage in complex thought. All these effects are likely to maintain or exacerbate conflict.

The importance of negative emotion to attachment behavior is also highlighted by attachment theorists' emphasis on affect regulation. Caregivers' reactions to the child's needs and signals provide a critical context in which the child learns how to deal with negative emotions and achieve 'felt security' (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). If caregivers are mostly available and responsive, children can regulate distress by turning to them for comfort; however, if caregivers are unavailable or unpredictable, alternative strategies develop (Mikulincer & Shaver,

2008). These varying strategies are gradually incorporated into rules that guide responses to stressful situations. Secure attachment is associated with rules that allow the individual to acknowledge distress and engage in support seeking. Avoidant attachment is associated with rules that restrict expression of distress and support seeking (deactivating strategies), and anxious-ambivalent attachment reflects rules that encourage heightened awareness and expression of distress (hyperactivating strategies).

Dealing with anger

This section describes two studies of attachment and emotional control, focusing on participants' reported responses to anger in their relationship. The studies were designed to investigate the extent to which participants controlled ('bottled up') their anger, rather than expressing and acknowledging it. This issue has important implications for individual and couple well-being, as high levels of emotional control have been linked to health problems and relational dissatisfaction (Fitness, 2006; Kotler, Buzwell, Romeo, & Bowland, 1994).

In the first study (Feeney, 1995), participants in dating relationships reported on the frequency with which they experienced anger in their relationship. They also rated the extent to which they controlled their anger, and the extent to which they thought their relationship partner *wanted* them to control (rather than express) their anger. Finally, an open-ended question asked participants to describe any other reaction they often had when experiencing anger within their relationship.

Insecure participants reported experiencing anger more frequently in their relationships. Further, females high in avoidance (discomfort with closeness) reported controlling ('bottling up') their anger, as did males high in anxiety. These relations with emotional control remained significant after controlling for the frequency of anger. Although the finding for avoidance is consistent with the concept of deactivating strategies, the link between anxiety and control of anger does not fit with the notion that anxious individuals engage in *heightened* expressions of distress. However, the basic formulation relating attachment anxiety to extreme displays of negative affect may be overly simplistic. Although emotions such as anger, sadness and anxiety are all rated as negative in hedonic tone (i.e., as unpleasant), they differ in important ways. In particular, the experience of anger is associated with tension, impulsiveness and a tendency to engage in destructive behaviour. For this reason, social norms often discourage the expression of anger (Wallbott & Scherer, 1988), and those who are very anxious about their relationships may inhibit expressions of anger to attachment figures so as not to alienate them. Consistent with this argument, anxious men and women in this study perceived that their partners *wanted* them to control their anger.

For the open-ended question about 'other' responses to anger, self-reported responses were coded into categories; a frequency comparison showed that the categories were strongly related to the forced-choice (four-group) measure of

attachment style. Secure participants reported active negotiation of anger situations; that is, open and honest discussion and expression. This kind of direct, bilateral strategy has been shown to be the most constructive in terms of relationship outcomes (see Wilson & Morgan, 2004, for a discussion). In contrast, insecure individuals reported less constructive reactions: Preoccupied participants reported using indirect influence (e.g., letting their actions or silence convey their anger); dismissing participants reported avoidance behaviors (e.g., leaving the scene); and fearful participants reported verbal and physical aggression.

A later study (Feeney, 1999b) explored the issue of emotional control of anger in a sample of married couples. Apart from the sampling, this study differed from the previous one in two respects. First, participants were asked to rate the intensity, as well as the frequency, with which they experienced anger. Second, participants made their ratings (of frequency, intensity and emotional control) for each of two contexts: when the anger was caused by 'something the partner had done' (partner-related context), and when it was caused by 'something not involving the partner' (other context). This distinction was designed to assess whether rules and strategies for regulating distress, learned with caregivers, generalize to other emotionally-laden situations (as predicted by attachment theory).

In terms of emotional experience, attachment anxiety was linked to reports of more frequent and intense anger, both partner-related and other; avoidance was linked to more frequent anger in the partner-context only. Attachment-related effects for emotional control were more robust across gender than in Study 1; for both husbands and wives, anxiety and avoidance were linked to greater control of anger, both partner-related and other. Although anger may be controlled in the interests of denying distress or placating the partner, it may have the unfortunate consequence of impeding the expression of grievances and legitimate requests for change.

Together, these two studies provide substantial evidence that insecure individuals experience more frequent and intense anger than secure individuals, and are more likely to 'bottle up' their anger or respond in other maladaptive ways. These results are largely consistent with those from Mikulincer's (1998) questionnaire- and laboratory-based studies of anger. In these studies, insecure attachment (avoidant or anxious) was associated with greater anger-proneness and less adaptive responses to anger. In addition, avoidance was linked to high levels of control of anger, and anxious attachment was linked to tendencies to internalize or displace anger (Mikulincer did not find that anxiously attached persons used more emotional control, but unlike my own work, he assessed responses to anger generally, rather than anger in the relationship).

Understanding psychological hurt

Another issue relevant to conflict behavior is that of hurt feelings. Hurt and conflict can be connected in various ways (Caughlin, Scott, & Miller, 2009): Hurt

can lead either to conflict or to conflict avoidance, and conflict can either increase or diminish hurt (depending on how it is handled).

'Hurt feelings' are common in close relationships, but researchers continue to debate the exact nature of the emotional experience. In a study of the hierarchical organization of emotion concepts, Shaver and colleagues reported that 'hurt' belonged within the basic emotion of sadness, in a sub-cluster of terms (e.g., 'anguish') tapping the theme of suffering (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). However, hurt is often regarded as a blend of emotions. According to Vangelisti (2001; Vangelisti & Young, 2000), hurt involves a combination of sadness (at a felt loss) and fear (of being vulnerable to harm). Other data suggest that hurt may be a unique emotion in its own right. Ratings by victims indicate that hurt feelings are not simply reducible to other negative emotions, although other negative emotions do often arise (Leary & Springer, 2001). Further, in a recent retrospective study of separate events that had elicited hurt, sadness and anger, respondents were able to differentiate between the three types of events; hurtful events were characterized as unexpected and incomprehensible, as eliciting distress and confusion, and as producing urges to cry and to exit the situation (Fitness & Warburton, 2009).

What are the defining features of hurtful events?

In a retrospective study of diverse relationship types, Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, and Evans (1998) reported that victims described six types of hurtful events: active disassociation (explicit rejection or abandonment); passive disassociation (implicit rejection); criticism; betrayal; teasing; and feeling unappreciated or taken for granted. Adapting this typology for couple relationships, Feeney (2004) found support for five types of hurtful events: active disassociation (denying or retracting love and commitment), passive disassociation (ignoring or excluding partner from plans and activities), criticism, sexual infidelity, and deception (lying; breaking promises and confidences).

Although it is useful to understand the various types of hurtful behavior, it is equally important to understand their 'common denominator'. Researchers agree that the common theme involves particular cognitive appraisals, but differ somewhat in their analysis of those appraisals. One view (Leary, 2001) links hurt feelings to perceived *relational devaluation*; that is, to the perception that the offender regards the relationship as less valuable or important than the victim would like. In another approach, Vangelisti (2001) suggested that the defining feature of hurt feelings is *relational transgression*; that is, the offender is seen as having broken a relationship rule, and the target appraises his or her own role in the interaction as that of victim.

More recently, I have suggested that hurt feelings stem from relational transgressions that involve a sense of *personal injury* to one's self-worth or basic trust in others (Feeney, 2005). That is, consistent with attachment theory, hurt results when partners' behavior threatens core beliefs about the lovability of the self or the availability of others (positive working models). This perspective has

received indirect support from an analysis of victims' accounts of hurtful events in couple relationships: Although sadness, fear, and anger were common elements, the *dominant* theme was a sense of pain and injury, and a considerable number of idiosyncratic terms focused on pain and damage (e.g., 'cut to the quick', 'pierced'). Expert judges' ratings of rule transgressions also suggested that hurt is elicited specifically by transgressions that threaten positive working models; these transgressions generally (but not invariably) also imply relational devaluation. In a variant of this view, Shaver and colleagues have proposed that the key feature of hurtful events is their capacity to destroy an individual's sense of safety and security, which is deep, visceral and generally unconscious (Shaver, Mikulincer, Lavy, & Cassidy, 2009).

Attachment-style differences in responses to hurtful events

Given theoretical links among attachment insecurity, psychological hurt and difficulties with affect regulation, we would expect individual differences in attachment security to constitute an important source of differences in perceptions of, and responses to, hurtful events. Victims' ratings of emotional reactions support this argument. Consistent with the notion of deactivating strategies, respondents high in avoidance report lower levels of hurt, as well as lower levels of general distress and fear. In contrast, those high in attachment anxiety report higher levels of hurt, fear, general distress and shame (Feeney, 2005).

In a more detailed analysis of hurtful events (Feeney, 2004), Structural Equations Modeling was used to develop integrative models of the longer-term effects of these events on the victim (continued worry and lack of confidence) and on the couple relationship (continued distrust and distancing). With regard to effects on the victim, the relevant dimension of insecurity was attachment anxiety. In the short term, individuals who were anxious about their relationships responded to hurtful partner behavior with high levels of distress and self-blame. Further, attachment anxiety had a direct effect on victims' adjustment problems in the longer-term, together with indirect effects via the immediate increases in distress and negative self-perceptions (Feeney, 2004).

When predicting effects on the relationship, avoidance was the important attachment dimension. Avoidant individuals tended to perceive partners as lacking remorse for hurtful behavior, and this perception served to fuel conflict and impede relationship repair (Feeney, 2004). There was also a direct path from avoidance to ongoing relationship problems; this path may reflect an overlearned tendency to deny attachment needs, especially in stressful situations (Fraley & Shaver, 1997). Interestingly, although avoidance had the overall effect of *increasing* relationship problems, it also had an indirect path through less destructive victim behavior; that is, avoidant individuals were less likely to resort to sarcasm, anger and tears, and this effect served to *decrease* relationship problems. This finding suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that the controlled interpersonal style associated with avoidance may sometimes prevent conflicts from escalating.

Attachment, conflict and intergenerational transmission of relationship difficulties

The next study to be discussed (Feeney, 2006) was designed to examine parent-child conflict, and to assess the implications of parental attachment and conflict behavior for offspring's relational adjustment (attachment security and loneliness). This was a cross-sectional study; in each family, mothers, fathers and adolescents completed attachment scales (avoidance and anxiety). In addition, mothers and fathers reported on their own conflict behavior toward their offspring (problem-solving, attacking and avoiding), and offspring reported on each parent's conflict behavior toward them. (Because parents' conflict behavior with offspring was central to the study, both parents and offspring reported on these variables.) Finally, offspring completed a measure of loneliness.

First, to assess systematic differences in family members' perceptions of conflict behavior, MANOVAs were conducted. For ratings of mothers' conflict behavior, the overall effect of reporter (mother, offspring) was highly significant. Mothers and offspring differed in their reports of attacking and problem-solving: Mothers saw themselves as less attacking and more problem-solving than did their offspring. For ratings of fathers' conflict behavior, the multivariate effect of reporter was not significant, but univariate tests showed that fathers saw themselves as less attacking than did their offspring. These effects are consistent with the generational stake hypothesis: Different generations have a different stake in how they view the family, depending on their investment in it and the centrality of the family to their future life (Bengtson & Troll, 1978). Adolescents are in the process of seeking autonomy from the family and hence describe it more negatively than their parents, who have usually made a huge investment in family life over many years.

Although the generational stake hypothesis implies that parents and offspring tend to differ in their perceptions of the family, it seems plausible that attachment insecurity (which involves a range of fears and defences) might be associated with *greater* differences than usual. This issue was examined in two ways: first, by correlating family members' attachment scales with 'difference scores' on conflict (offspring's score minus parent's score), and second, by regressing parental attachment on parents' reports (step 1) and offspring's reports (step 2) of parent-child conflict, thus 'unconfounding' the effects of the two components (Griffin, Murray, & Gonzalez, 1999). Both these methods yielded similar conclusions; as expected, attachment insecurity was linked to larger difference scores, and parents' and offspring's reports of conflict provided independent prediction of parental insecurity. Specifically, when fathers were highly anxious, offspring reported less paternal problem-solving than fathers did. In addition, when mothers were highly anxious, offspring reported less maternal problem-solving than mothers did, together with more maternal avoiding and attacking. Finally, when offspring were highly anxious, offspring reported more maternal avoiding and attacking than mothers did.

Parental attachment and parental conflict behavior

To assess links between parental attachment security and conflict behavior, parents' attachment scores were correlated with their reports of parent-child conflict. For both mothers and fathers, anxiety and avoidance were associated with reports of attacking behavior (although the link between fathers' avoidance and attacking behavior was only a trend). In addition, problem-solving was related negatively to mothers' avoidance and fathers' anxiety. These results provide substantial support for the link between parental security and constructive conflict behavior. Although these associations could be inflated by the use of a common reporter (i.e., ratings of both attachment and conflict behavior may be affected by parents' general relational attitudes and biases), additional analyses in which parents' reports of attachment security were correlated with *offspring's* reports of parental conflict again supported the link between parental security and constructive conflict styles.

Parental variables and offspring's relational difficulties

Given the pivotal role of conflict-centred communication in the negotiation of attachment relationships, parents' conflict behaviors were expected to predict child outcomes, and to mediate the link between parental security and child outcomes. Correlations showed that both parental attachment security and conflict behavior were related to offspring's avoidance, anxiety and loneliness, although the specific pattern of association varied across these three dependent measures. Further, regarding the possible mediating role of conflict behavior, the results provided preliminary support for links between the independent variables (parental attachment) and proposed mediators (conflict behaviors).

Regression analyses and Sobel tests were used to further test the mediational model. In four instances, these analyses supported the hypothesis that parental conflict behavior mediates the association between parental attachment and offspring's relational adjustment. Low maternal problem-solving mediated the association between maternal avoidance and offspring's avoidance. However, evidence of mediation was strongest for the prediction of offspring's loneliness: The association between maternal avoidance and loneliness was mediated by low maternal problem-solving, and the association between paternal anxiety and loneliness was mediated by both paternal attacking and low paternal problem-solving. (There was no evidence of mediation for the prediction of offspring's anxiety, although parental anxiety and offspring's anxiety did show direct links). The observed mediated relationships probably involve complex and overlapping mechanisms – for example, parents who engage in verbal attack, rather than problem-solving, may discourage open discussion of emotion, send implicit messages that foster distrust of others, and model relationship behaviors that put offspring at risk of rejection by their peers (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Feldman, 1997).

In considering these findings, it is important to note that attachment and conflict patterns are not necessarily stable over long periods of time, and to acknowledge the difficulty, with cross-sectional studies, of inferring patterns of causation. For instance, in contrast to the proposed mediational model, it could be argued that offspring's attachment may influence parent-child conflict patterns, rather than being influenced *by* them. Specifically, parent-child conflict behaviors might be shaped by the attachment characteristics of both partners; or parents' attachment might influence offspring's attachment, in turn affecting conflict behavior. In this study, however, analyses testing these alternative models were less effective in explaining the data; indeed, offspring's attachment was relatively unimportant in predicting parental conflict, providing no support for its direct or indirect effects.

Summary and conclusions

As researchers have pointed out (Bretherton, 1988; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994), communication is the vehicle by which attachment bonds are established and maintained. In couple relationships, the association between attachment security and conflict-centred communication is likely to be bi-directional. As we have seen, there is extensive support for attachment-style differences in conflict behaviors. Insecure individuals - particularly those high in attachment anxiety - are prone to perceive high levels of conflict and negativity in their relationships. They are also likely to respond to conflict in negative ways. In particular, conflict over serious issues, including closeness and distance, can create severe challenges for insecure individuals. In couple bonds, both partners' attachment orientations shape conflict behavior; there is also evidence of interactive effects, whereby the effects of one person's attachment characteristics depend on the characteristics of the partner. The conflict behaviors adopted by insecure individuals - including conflict avoidance and coercion - are likely to result in ongoing conflict and lingering anger and resentment. In this way, couple interactions in the context of conflict may maintain, or even exacerbate, insecurity.

Both insecurity and destructive responses to conflict tend to fuel dissatisfaction with the relationship. Further, there is evidence that destructive responses to conflict mediate the association between insecure attachment and relational dissatisfaction; that is, insecurity drives maladaptive responses to conflict, which contribute to insecure persons' tendency to evaluate their relationships negatively. Importantly, research suggests that the negative effects of adults' insecurity and destructive responses to conflict are not confined to the couple relationship. Rather, these variables appear to have negative consequences for adolescent offspring, in terms of their own attachment difficulties and appraisals of loneliness. Fortunately, many therapeutic interventions now focus on ameliorating attachment insecurities and communication difficulties, thus providing a means of breaking negative relational patterns.

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