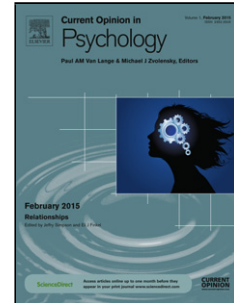


Accepted Manuscript

Title: Attachment, conflict and relationship quality:
Laboratory-based and clinical insights

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PII: S2352-250X(18)30020-4
DOI: <https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.002>
Reference: COPSYC 643



To appear in:

Received date: 15-1-2018
Revised date: 16-3-2018
Accepted date: 10-4-2018

Please cite this article as: J. Feeney, J. Fitzgerald, Attachment, conflict and relationship quality: Laboratory-based and clinical insights, *COPSYC* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.002>

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Attachment, conflict and relationship quality: Laboratory-based and clinical insights

Judith Feeney and Jennifer Fitzgerald

Abstract

Severe or persistent conflict is disturbing for romantic partners and can jeopardize the couple relationship, hence activating the attachment system. In this paper we integrate recent laboratory-based and clinical research into attachment processes and couple conflict. Three main tenets are addressed. First, attachment security and insecurity have pervasive effects in conflict situations, shaping perceptual, physiological and behavioral responses to conflict. Second, attachment insecurity and associated conflict behaviors tend to erode relationship quality. Third, attachment-related interventions are effective not only in reducing the maladaptive responses that lead to conflict escalation, but also in promoting security and emotional connection within the couple bond. These findings attest to the key role of attachment processes in conflict interactions, while offering a clear, theory-based framework for intervention.

Adult attachment and conflict behaviors are inextricably linked. All couples experience tensions and disagreements; when severe, these have the potential to jeopardize the relationship, hence activating the attachment system. Secure individuals, who perceive attachment figures as available and attentive, generally respond with proximity-seeking and constructive conflict engagement. Anxiously attached individuals, however, perceive attachment figures as unreliable, unpredictable or intrusive; they tend to respond to conflict with clinging and controlling behaviors ('hyperactivating strategies'), designed to elicit attention and support. In contrast, avoidant individuals, who perceive attachment figures as rejecting or disapproving of vulnerability, engage in distancing and withdrawal ('deactivating strategies'), designed to deny emotional needs and maintain control [1]. These various attachment behaviors are adapted to the interactions experienced with caregivers, but when carried forward into adulthood, 'insecure' strategies (also known as secondary attachment strategies) have largely negative effects. Hyperactivating strategies exacerbate the accessibility and intensity of negative thoughts and feelings, and often alienate relationship partners; deactivating strategies lower the accessibility of attachment-related thoughts, tending to maintain inflated self-perceptions and denigration of partners [2*].

This article presents a model of attachment, conflict and relationship quality (Figure 1), incorporating laboratory-based and clinical findings. Extending previous work in this area [1,2*], three tenets are addressed: (1) attachment security and insecurity shape responses to couple conflict; (2) attachment insecurity and associated conflict

behaviors erode relationship quality, and (3) attachment-related interventions are effective in reducing conflict and distress.

Attachment security and insecurity shape responses to couple conflict

A wealth of self-report, observational, and experimental data, much of it based on dyadic studies, demonstrates that attachment security and insecurity shape perceptual, physiological and behavioral responses to conflict (see Table 1, top row for a summary; Mikulincer & Shaver [2*] provide a detailed review).

Studies of perceptual processes, for example, indicate pervasive effects of attachment in conflict situations. In an observational study [3], newlywed couples were videotaped during a conflict discussion, and rated their own and their partners' responsiveness during the conflict. Observers also coded both partners' responsive behaviors. Compared to observers' ratings, more avoidant participants underestimated both their own and their partner's responsiveness. Further, in two studies of couple conflict and daily interactions [4], perceptions of partners' emotions and partners' actual emotions were compared. Using partners' reports of their own emotions as the accuracy benchmark, findings showed that highly avoidant perceivers overestimated the intensity of their partners' negative emotions to a greater extent than less avoidant individuals, both during conflict discussions and in daily life. In turn, negative perceptions of partners' emotions triggered hostile and defensive behavior in avoidant perceivers, highlighting the links among attachment-related emotions, cognitions and behaviors.

Attachment anxiety also shapes perceptions of conflict. In an experimental study, Wood *et al.* [5] asked individuals to observe images and videos of couples in conflict. Those higher in attachment anxiety perceived more negative interactions and negative emotion in the couples they observed. This finding fits with other research linking attachment anxiety to exaggerated perceptions of threat and negativity [1], and demonstrates that perceptual biases extend beyond the individual's own relationship.

Research using physiological measures has also contributed important insights into attachment-related differences in conflict behaviors, highlighting the utility of dyadic data and providing a window into less conscious and controlled responses to conflict. One such study identified several interaction effects of spouses' attachment dimensions: Although some findings were specific to behavioral or to self-report measures, the combination of an avoidant and an anxious spouse generally predicted more physiological reactivity and less effective caregiving [6]. For example, both partners in these dyads showed increased stress response (cortisol) when anticipating conflict; further, 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. More recently, Taylor *et al.* [7] examined the effects of attachment dimensions on skin conductance during and following conflict. (Skin conductance is a physiological indicator of emotion dysregulation, which can involve either emotional arousal or the suppression of emotion.) Dyadic analysis again revealed a systemic effect of attachment, whereby emotion dysregulation increased when one

partner was high in attachment anxiety and the other was high in avoidance. These authors noted the link between this systemic effect and resulting demand-withdraw patterns of couple interaction.

Further support for the role of perceptions and arousal in shaping conflict behaviors come from recent studies using diaries and behavioral observation. For example, Overall *et al.* [8] found that attachment anxiety predicted exaggerated expressions of hurt and guilt-inducing verbal and non-verbal responses. Further, highly anxious individuals appraised their partner and relationship more positively when their partner felt more guilt; partners of anxious participants reported more guilt but also more relationship dissatisfaction. Extending this research, Jayamaha *et al.* [9*] confirmed that anxiously attached individuals engaged in more guilt induction, but noted that the effectiveness of this strategy depended on partners' attachment avoidance. Specifically, when partners were more avoidant, they reported that actors' guilt induction was less successful and produced less motivation to change, and both members of the couple reported less problem resolution. Together, these studies suggest that anxiously attached people use guilt induction to express hurt and frustration, while seeking to keep the partner close. This manipulative stance may foster intimacy in the short term, but erode partners' satisfaction in the longer term, and elicit resistance from avoidant partners.

In another dyadic study of conflict behavior, diary data indicated that own anxiety and partner's avoidance were robust predictors of self-reported intrusive behaviors, such as invading the partner's privacy [10]. Given anxious individuals' needs for reassurance, avoidant individuals' distancing tendencies may prompt partners to

resort to intrusiveness as a means of monitoring the relationship. These studies of guilt induction and intrusive behaviors highlight the importance of understanding the attachment-related *intentions and motivations* which underlie conflict behaviors.

Attachment insecurity and associated conflict behaviors erode relationship quality

These pervasive attachment-related differences in responses to conflict impact on relationship outcomes (Table 1, bottom row). Diamond *et al.* [11] compared attachment and relationship satisfaction in three groups of individuals: those in a first marriage, those separated or divorced from their first spouse, and those in a second marriage. Relationship satisfaction was consistently associated with measures of attachment styles, but for those currently dating or married, did not differ across these two groups. A recent study by Molero *et al.* [12] extended previous research by showing that both self-rated and *partner-rated* attachment insecurity impact negatively on relationship satisfaction, although in this Spanish sample, the findings for attachment anxiety were no longer significant once attachment avoidance was controlled.

Meta-analyses confirm the link between attachment insecurities and relationship distress. Assessing multiple indicators of relationship quality, Li *et al.* [13] highlighted the differential correlates of attachment avoidance and anxiety: Avoidance was more strongly associated with low levels of support, connectedness and general satisfaction, whereas anxiety was more strongly associated with conflict. Meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies [14] suggests that the inverse associations of attachment dimensions with relationship functioning are stronger in relationships of

greater duration. This finding may reflect several factors: The negative effects of insecurity may emerge as new relationships lose their novelty, may strengthen as expectations of intimacy increase, or may accumulate over time as tensions solidify [14].

Other studies further demonstrate the role of conflict in the link between insecurity and dissatisfaction. In a recent diary study [15], avoidance predicted low relationship quality for both actors and partners, whereas attachment anxiety predicted *volatility* in relationship quality, linked to levels of relationship conflict. Specifically, on days when individuals reported more conflict than usual, they reported lower relationship quality, with this association being stronger if the partner was high in attachment anxiety. A recent review of studies of attachment and satisfaction confirms the mediating role of conflict behaviors [2*]. For example, research by Chung [16*] points to the anxiety-dissatisfaction link being mediated by mental rumination and low tendency to forgive partner transgressions, and the avoidance-dissatisfaction link being mediated by low empathy and low tendency to forgive partner transgressions. Further, in a test of *double mediation effects* [17], an attachment-based model received substantial support: Anxiety and avoidance predicted low levels of partner support and trust; in turn, these variables were related to poor conflict management and lack of intimacy, and hence, to relationship dissatisfaction.

Attachment-related interventions reduce conflict and distress

Understanding relationship distress through an attachment lens offers a map for relationship therapists to assist couples in moving from distress and disconnection to increasingly secure bonds. In Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), the emphasis is on facilitating bonding events [18]. The therapist begins by offering a

safe haven to both partners and, over time, supports them in providing this for each other [19]. The ‘secondary attachment strategies’ [2*] of relentless support-seeking, protest and frustration (hyperactivation), or shutting down, withdrawal and compulsive self-reliance (deactivation), are conceptualized as a reflection of unmet attachment needs, and as the core organizing variables in distressing interactions between partners. Intervention involves empathic reflection, processing of emotion sequences by exploring triggers for emotional arousal and associated response tendencies [20], and tracking the steps in the negative ‘dance’ (that is, the therapist explores and summarizes how each partner’s reactions impact the other, resulting in recursive, negative loops). For example, the therapist might say, “The more you criticize, the more your partner gets defensive or turns away; the more s/he turns away, the more you feel alone and unsupported, resulting in more protest and criticism. This pattern is your enemy and I want to help you both to interrupt it.”

The therapist helps partners to identify emotions underlying the interactions (such as a pursuing partner’s fear of abandonment or a withdrawing partner’s fear of not measuring up), and validates their adaptive longings for a closer and safer relationship. Over time, with greater awareness of own and partner’s reactive emotions and unmet needs, and collaborative efforts to interrupt negative interaction patterns, partners’ attributions for each other’s behaviors typically become more benign, and conflict deescalates.

Increased safety in day-to-day interactions allows for further exploration of individual experiences of pursue/demand and distance/placate dynamics in the relationship. Partners’ reciprocal soft disclosures of these experiences, fears, longings and needs are facilitated, as is acceptance of what is disclosed. In this way, partners are

supported to send new, clear signals that evoke more positive responses, thereby shaping a more secure bond [18].

Meta-analytic research into the efficacy of EFCT has found a mean effect size of 1.28 [21]. Importantly, more recent research has reported the first investigation of change in relationship-specific attachment dimensions across the course of EFCT [22**]. In this sample of 32 couples, significant decreases in relationship-specific attachment avoidance were observed. Further, those couples who achieved a 'blamer softening' (that is, a change event in which the pursuing partner discloses needs in a non-blaming way), decreased in relationship-specific attachment anxiety. Couples' behaviors increased toward attachment security, and these changes were also associated with increased relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, decreases in attachment avoidance were found quite early in the therapy process, whereas substantial change in attachment anxiety occurred much later; these findings confirm the recommendation of the EFCT model, in which the change events of cycle de-escalation, withdrawer reengagement and blamer softening are undertaken in that specific order.

In summary, clinical findings support the wealth of laboratory-based studies linking attachment insecurities to couple conflict and distress. Conversely, they highlight the fact that attachment insecurities do not condemn couples to experience escalating tension and dissatisfaction (Figure 1). Rather, the principles of attachment theory offer a solid framework for defining both the goals of interventions for couples, and the pathways to achieving those goals. For example, a key contribution of EFCT has been to unpack the appraisal, arousal and action tendencies that underpin many

maladaptive relationship behaviors. Further, by helping partners become more available and responsive to each other, EFCT is likely to improve not only the outcomes of specific conflict situations, but also the degree of security and emotional connection within the attachment bond [22**].

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Table 1

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

	Attachment anxiety	Attachment avoidance
Experience of couple conflict	<p>Reports of frequent and intense conflict</p> <p>Negative partner behavior seen as intentional and stable</p> <p>Conflict interactions perceived as more negative in tone</p> <p>Less accurate decoding of partner's positive nonverbal messages</p> <p>Physiological reactivity</p> <p>Hyperactivating strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - domination, coercion - criticism, blame - guilt induction - intrusive behaviors - demanding, clinging - less mutual negotiation 	<p>Downplaying frequency and impact of conflict</p> <p>Underestimation of own and partner's responsiveness</p> <p>Overestimation of intensity of partners' negative emotions</p> <p>Less accurate decoding of partner's negative nonverbal messages</p> <p>Physiological reactivity</p> <p>Deactivating strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - withdrawal, disengagement - defensiveness - lack of empathy - less disclosure, expressivity - resistance to guilt induction - less mutual negotiation
Conflict-related outcomes	<p>Dissatisfaction with couple communication</p> <p>Declines in love and commitment</p> <p>Negative appraisals of partner</p> <p>Ongoing rumination, hurt, and distress</p> <p>Relationship dissatisfaction</p> <p>Volatility in relationship evaluations</p>	<p>Dissatisfaction with couple communication</p> <p>Physical and emotional distancing</p> <p>Lack of connectedness and support</p> <p>Relationship dissatisfaction</p>

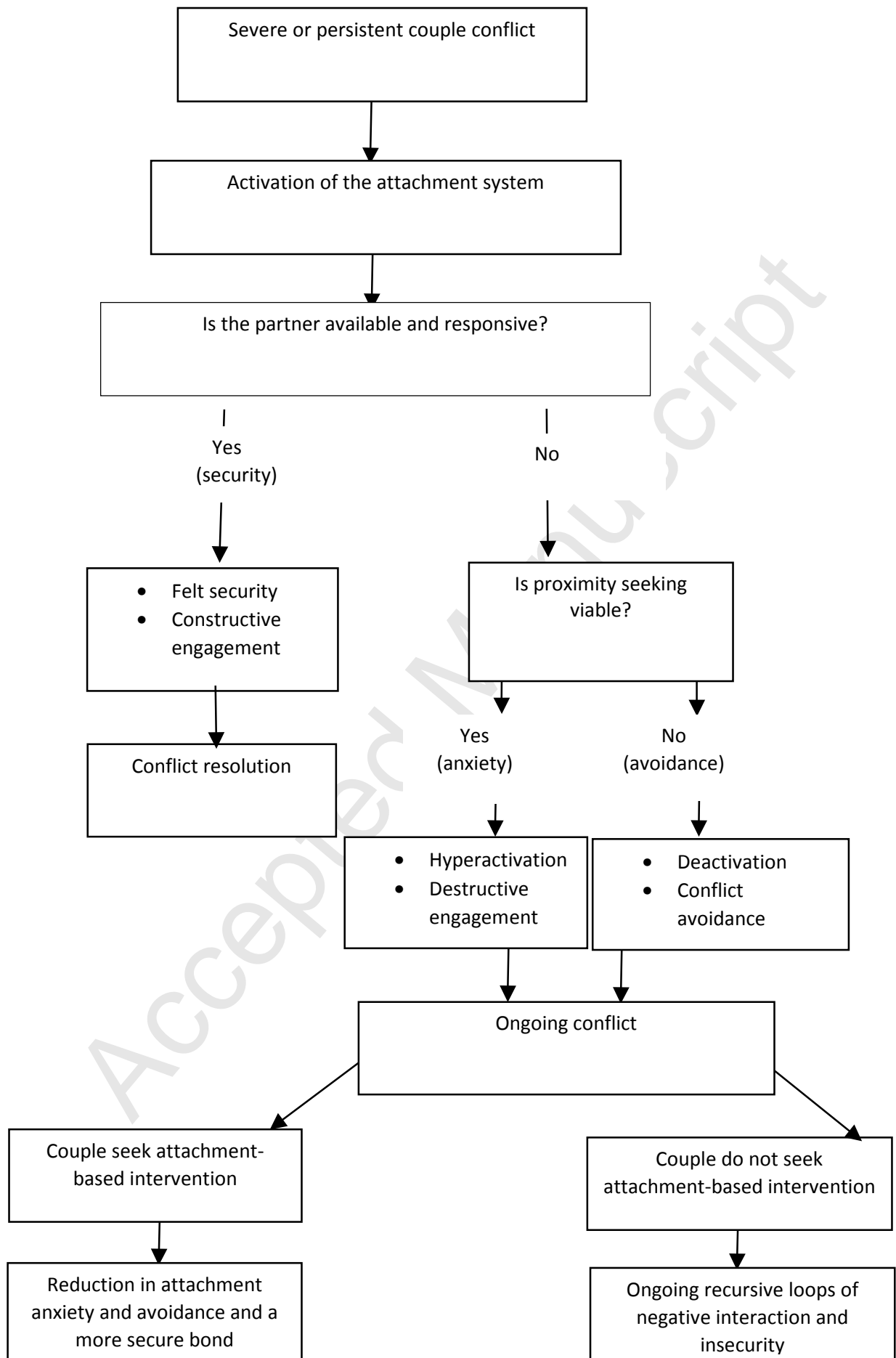


Figure 1. Attachment and conflict resolution: The role of attachment-related interventions