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## The Mediating Role of Sleep in the Link between Attachment Styles and Conflict Styles in Romantic Relationships

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# The Mediating Role of Sleep in the Link between Attachment Styles and Conflict Styles in Romantic Relationships

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## Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine if sleep quality (e.g., onset latency, efficiency, daytime sleepiness) mediates the links between insecure attachment styles and conflict communication styles (i.e., criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling). About 244 undergraduate students answered questions about sleep, attachment style characteristics, and conflict characteristics in their current or previous romantic relationships. Sleep was found to explain the relationship between attachment styles and conflict communication styles when flooding was used as an indicator for stonewalling. However, further research is needed to better understand why people with insecure attachment styles tend to use negative styles of conflict communication.

## Introduction

- Conflict is prevalent in all relationships, but how conflict is handled can affect the relationship. Gottman (1994) explains there are four types of negative conflict styles and if all are present within a marriage it is likely to end in divorce. These conflict styles are the four horsemen of the apocalypse (i.e., criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling). An extension of the four horsemen of the apocalypse were suggested in the sound house theory of relationships indicating flooding (e.g., physical responses to stress), gridlock (e.g., not finding compromise), and negative perspective taking (e.g., focusing on negatives during conflict) may also be detrimental to romantic relationships
- One study used attachment characteristics as a predictor; such that, avoidantly attached people are more likely to use stonewalling and anxiously attached people are more likely to use criticism, contempt, or defensiveness (Fowler & Dillow, 2011).
- Sleep has also been examined as a potential explanation for use of negative conflict styles. Reduced sleep can lead to an inhibition of negative affect regulation which is suggested to increase use of negative conflict styles in relationships (Gordon & Chen, 2014).
- Other studies also suggest attachment styles play a role in sleep; insecurely attached individuals tend to have a reduced sleep quality than securely attached individuals (Adams & McWilliams, 2015). These studies help build a model of attachment characteristics and sleep having a role in increased use of negative conflict styles.

### Hypothesis:

Sleep factors (e.g., onset latency, quality, quantity, daytime sleepiness) mediate the link between attachment styles and negative conflict communication styles

## Methods

Two hundred and forty-four undergraduate students at a midwestern university were recruited from an introductory psychology course and were compensated 0.5 research credits for their participations. Participants in this study were primarily female (69.8%), white (90.5%), and heterosexual (87.1%). To be eligible to participate, participants had to currently be in or should have previously been in a romantic relationship lasting at least three months. After the students were recruited through an online university research platform, they completed two or three prescreening questions to assure they were eligible to participate in the study. Eligible participants continued through the study completing measures on sleep, attachment styles, and communication patterns.

**Measures**—Cleveland Adolescent Sleepiness Questionnaire (CASQ; Spilsbury et al., 2007):  $\alpha = .88$ ; Insomnia Severity Index (ISI; Morin, 1993):  $\alpha = .87$ ; Sleep-50 (Spoormaker et al., 2005):  $\alpha = .78$ ; Experiences in Close Relationships-Anxious Subscale (Fraley & Shaver, 2000):  $\alpha = .95$ ; Experiences in Close Relationships-Avoidance Subscale (Fraley & Shaver, 2000):  $\alpha = .94$ ; Flooding:  $\alpha = .95$

## Figures

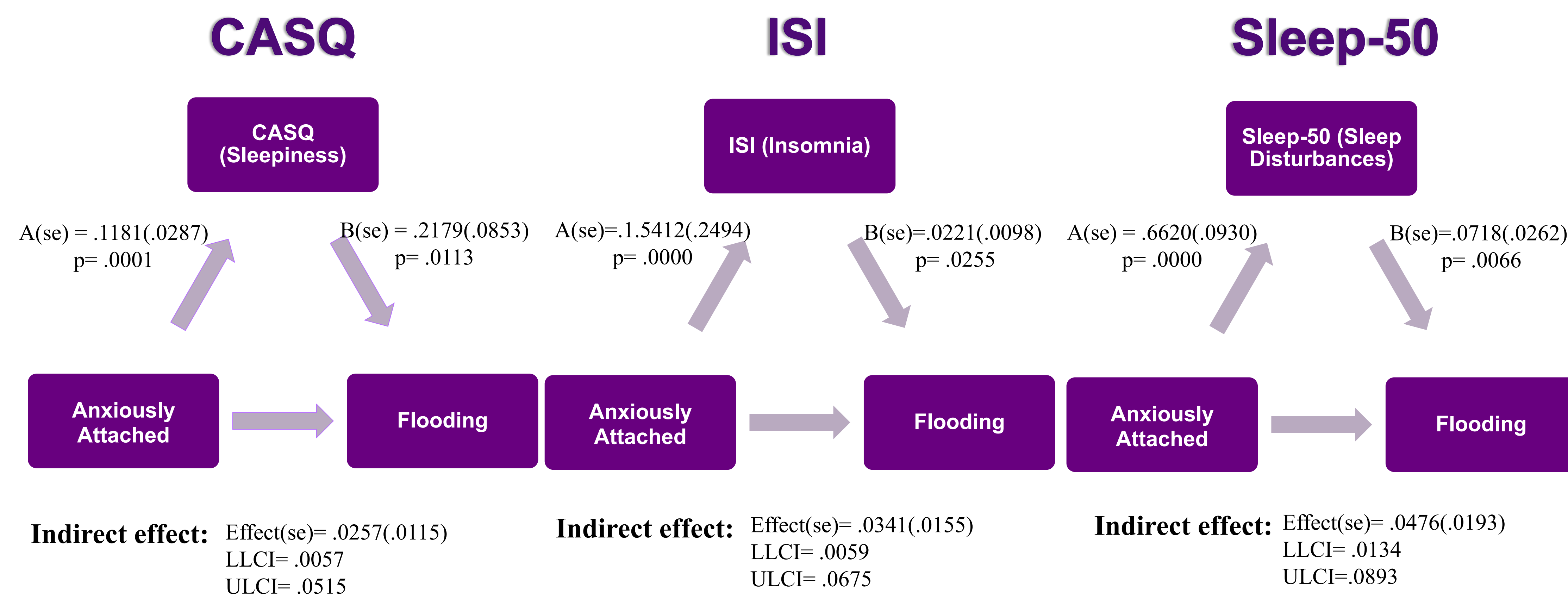


Figure 1. Total CASQ score as a mediator for anxiously attached individuals and flooding

Figure 2. Total ISI score as a mediator for anxiously attached individuals and flooding

Figure 3. Total Sleep-50 score as a mediator for anxiously attached individuals and flooding

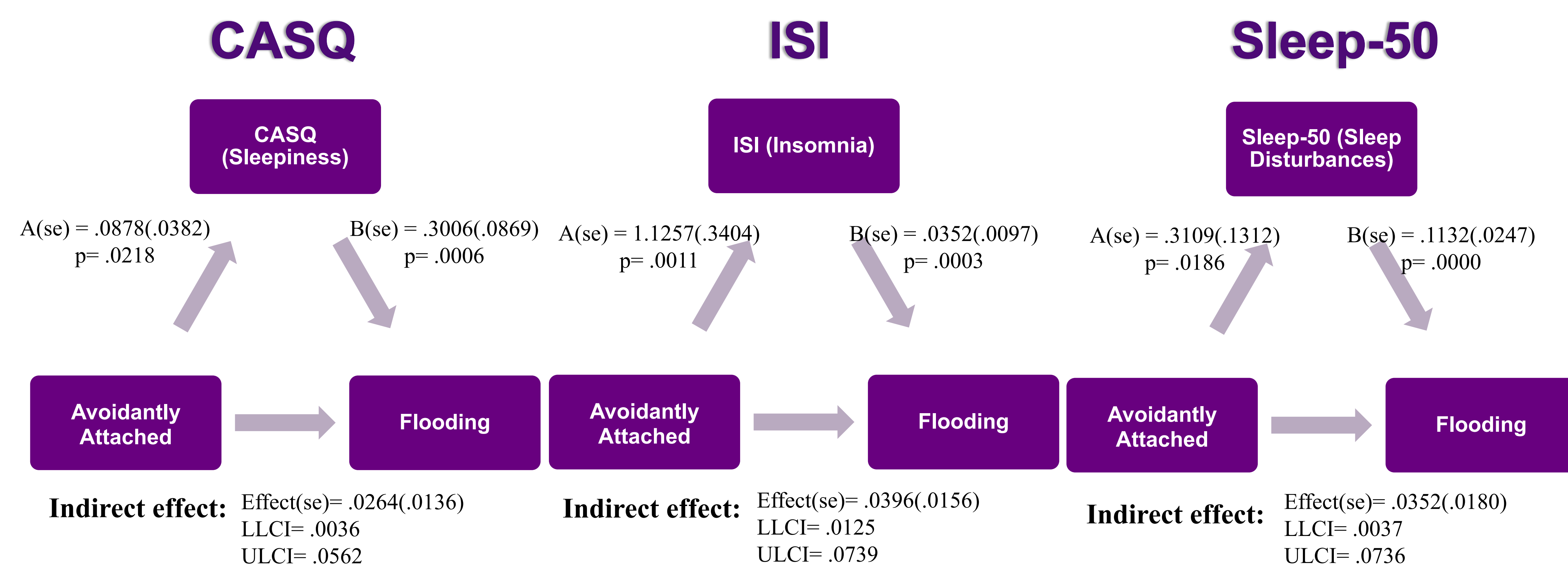


Figure 4. Total CASQ score as a mediator for avoidantly attached individuals and flooding

Figure 5. Total ISI score as a mediator for avoidantly attached individuals and flooding

Figure 6. Total Sleep-50 score as a mediator for avoidantly attached individuals and flooding

## Results

- As indicated in figure 1, CASQ scores significantly mediated the relationship between anxiously attached individuals and flooding
- As indicated in figure 2, ISI scores significantly mediated the relationship between anxiously attached individuals and flooding
- As indicated in figure 3, sleep-50 scores significantly mediated the relationship between anxiously attached individuals and flooding
- As indicated in figure 4, CASQ scores significantly mediated the relationship between avoidantly attached individuals and flooding
- As indicated in figure 5, ISI scores significantly mediated the relationship between avoidantly attached individuals and flooding
- As indicated in figure 6, sleep-50 scores significantly mediated the relationship between avoidantly attached individuals and flooding

## Conclusion

**Current study:** Investigated the **mediating** role of **sleep factors** (i.e. sleepiness, insomnia, and overall sleep disturbances efficiency, onset latency, wake after sleep onset, wake time, percent wake time, and average wake bouts) in the relationship between **insecure attachment styles** and **negative conflict styles** in **romantic relationships**

**Findings:** In general, sleep was not found to mediate the link between insecure attachment styles and negative conflict communication styles. However, when flooding was used as an indicator for stonewalling, sleep mediated the relationship between insecure attachment styles and flooding.

**Post Hoc Analyses:** The findings indicated in the figures were conducted using flooding as an indicator of stonewalling.

**Limitations:** College students tend to get less sleep due to school, jobs, etc. and it may be harder to observe if sleep does have a role in this association because of the reduced variability.

**Future Research:**

- Examining a wider range of the population to increase variability in sleep
- Integrate the use of recorded sleep data with a sleep watch or similar instrument to avoid biased self-reports of sleep data

**Conclusions and Implications:** The current study sought to investigate why those with insecure attachment styles tend to use negative conflict styles with a romantic partner. Despite not finding significance with the four horsemen of the apocalypse but finding significance with another style of conflict as an indicator of one of the four horsemen, this study suggests sleep may be a mediator and further research is required.