

The association between differentiation of self and romantic relationship outcomes and the mediating role of communication behaviors

by

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Abstract

This study examined the association between level of differentiation of self on romantic relationship outcomes (i.e., attachment, relationship satisfaction, and gridlock) while, additionally, examining the possibility of communication (i.e., validation and withdrawal) as a mediator. Participants ($N = 463$) were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete an online survey and had to be in a committed romantic relationship to be eligible. After controlling for psychological distress, relationship length, and gender, the results indicated a significant and direct relationship between differentiation and relationship outcomes and an indirect relationship through validation and withdrawal. Specifically, differentiation was directly, negatively associated with gridlock ($\beta = -.16, p = .003$), avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.13, p = .032$), and anxious attachment ($\beta = -.51, p < .001$). In addition to these direct associations, differentiation was also indirectly associated with gridlock and avoidant attachment through both validation and withdrawal. On the other hand, differentiation was only indirectly associated with relationship satisfaction through validation ($\beta = .44, p < .001$). Additionally, we tested an alternate model with attachment and differentiation as predictors of relationship satisfaction and gridlock, and, again, examined validation and withdrawal as mediators. Results indicated that our primary model was a slightly better fit to the data than this alternative model, supporting the idea that attachment can be seen not only as a predictor but also as a relationship outcome. These results suggest that differentiation might be usefully accessed through more overt communication behaviors, which in turn might be related to having desired relationship outcomes.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Romantic relationships can be challenging, yet they can greatly impact personal well-being. Adults in healthy romantic relationships report greater life satisfaction (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019) and experience fewer physical and mental health issues (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010). Many researchers and clinicians have been invested in trying to understand how to help people build healthy social and romantic relationships. For example, Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1976, 1978) and attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) have been important theoretical perspectives that provide a framework for making sense of relationships, including intimate partnerships. A critical concept in Bowen theory, differentiation of self, is the process of finding a balance between togetherness and individuality within relationships (Titelman, 2014). In the family context, the balance between autonomy and connectedness allows a child to think, act, and behave on his or her own while being able to experience intimacy within the family system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

This study utilizes differentiation theory as the primary framework for understanding relationship outcomes. Schnarch (1997) focuses on differentiation within intimate partnerships and posits that it is the ability to maintain individuality while also being intimately connected. The ability to maintain a clear sense of self in close proximity to intimate partners, rather than experiencing emotional fusion (e.g., pushing for sameness in order to reduce anxiety, seeking constant reassurance) or retreating during challenging moments, is a hallmark of differentiation. Schnarch (2009) operationalizes differentiation by describing Four Points of Balance™: Solid Flexible Self, Quiet Mind-Calm Heart, Grounded Responding, and Meaningful Endurance. Solid Flexible Self indicates that a person has a clear yet flexible sense of who he or she is, Quiet

Mind-Calm Heart means a person has the capacity to self-soothe and regulate anxieties, Grounded Responding means a person has the ability to stay calm and not overreact, and, lastly, Meaningful Endurance means a person can tolerate discomfort in order to grow. Ultimately, the more a person embodies those four points, the higher his or her level of differentiation. For instance, a person with a higher level of differentiation can have a solid sense of self even when closely connected to and dependent on others, can self-soothe and regulate when emotionally hurt, and is able to respond calmly and tolerate growth when difficult interactions with a partner occur. Further, people with higher levels of differentiation can determine what is important to them rather than conforming to what others want while simultaneously making deliberate attempts to remain close in their important relationships.

Though several studies have looked at differentiation as a mediator related to relationship outcomes (Bartle-Haring, Ferriby, & Day, 2018; Hainlen, Jankowski, Paine, & Sandage, 2016; Norona & Welsh, 2016; Toghroli Pour Grighani, Mousavi Nasab, & Rahmati, 2018), few studies have examined the mechanism underlying how differentiation might be related to romantic relationship outcomes (Choi & Murdock, 2018; Dell’Isola, Durtschi, & Morgan, 2019), and, to our knowledge, no study specifically focuses on relationship satisfaction, gridlock, and attachment as relationship outcomes. Therefore, we tested potential ways through which differentiation creates positive relationship outcomes via communication behaviors. Because differentiation is an internal selfhood issue, we posit that communication behaviors provide a potential external path through which differentiation influences how satisfied or gridlocked a partner feels. In this case, gridlock is a point within a relationship at which partners have reached a stalemate and are no longer willing to bend as they have reached their upper limits of accommodating (Gottman, 1999; Schnarch, 1997, 2009). In addition to differentiation theory,

attachment theory also plays an important framework for the study. Though attachment has often been examined as a predictor of relationship outcomes (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Siegel, Levin, & Solomon, 2019), we tested it as an outcome of current romantic relationships, as there is research that suggests that attachment security changes as a result of relationship experiences (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In this study, therefore, we examined how level of differentiation is associated with communication behaviors (both positive and negative) which, in turn, plausibly affect partner's attachment style (avoidant and anxious attachment), relationship satisfaction, and perceptions of gridlock, or relationship stuckness.

Chapter 2 - Background

Differentiation as a Predictor of Relationship Outcomes

There is substantial evidence that higher levels of differentiation are related to greater satisfaction in relationships (Dekel, 2010; Parsons, Nalbone, Killmer, & Wetchler, 2007; Peleg, 2008; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron, 2000; Spencer & Brown, 2007; for exceptions, see Cabrera-Sanchez & Friedlander, 2017; Patrick, Sells, Giordano, & Tollerud, 2007; Timm & Keilye, 2011). Though most studies have focused on heterosexual married couples, the connection between higher levels of differentiation and greater relationship satisfaction has been found for lesbian couples (Spencer & Brown, 2007), couples with at least one child (Peleg, 2008), and couples who have been remarried (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). This finding has also held true cross-culturally (Ferreira, Narciso, Novo, & Pereira, 2014; Rizkalla & Rahav, 2016; Rodríguez-González, Skowron, Cagigal de Gregorio, & Muñoz San Roque, 2016). Both theory and empirical evidence provide reason to consider the connection between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction.

In addition to examining relationship satisfaction, we also looked at the relationship between differentiation and gridlock. Couples experience gridlock when they refuse to accept influence from their partner and become cemented in their own stance (Gottman, 1999; Schnarch, 1997, 2009). Gridlock often develops around difficult issues such as finances, sexuality, or whether or not to have a baby. Instead of handling their differences, partners are unwilling to be influenced and further push back into their stance. In other words, they reach a point of “stuckness,” or are gridlocked, in their stances and have no desire to move. Further, they have also reached their limits of self-regulation, limiting their capacity to evaluate what is happening for them that might be making them resistant to adapting. Theoretically, the capacity

to self-regulate and to work through difficult issues as a couple is higher for more differentiated partners; therefore, lower differentiated partners will reach gridlock sooner. According to Schnarch (2009), “Emotional gridlock is Nature’s attempt to trigger differentiation” (p. 87). By working through emotional gridlock, partners are given the opportunity to grow. Although limited research has been done directly with gridlock, differentiation theory would suggest that higher levels of differentiation will be associated with lower levels of gridlock.

Finally, higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with lower levels of differentiation of self (Hainlen, Jankowski, Paine, & Sandage, 2016). These results support theory, which suggests that individuals who have a more solid sense of who they are, and are better at regulating their anxiety when handling differences with their partners, are less likely to regulate themselves through moving toward their partner in order to seek reassurance (attachment anxiety) or moving away from their partner in order to maintain their sense of self or to avoid anxiety (avoidant attachment). Thus, there is empirical support that higher levels of differentiation of self is related to positive relationship outcomes (relationship satisfaction) and lower levels of negative relationship outcomes (gridlock, anxious and avoidant attachment). But, what might account for the link between differentiation and relationship outcomes? More specifically, is there a modifiable pathway or mediator through which differentiation is related to relationship outcomes?

Communication as Potential Mediator

Differentiation theory would suggest that partners with higher levels of differentiation are better able to handle tough conversations as they can maintain who they are and what is important to them while also having the capacity to stay connected and attempt to understand their partner (even when they might disagree with them). When conversations are difficult, being

highly differentiated means that a partner can still regulate when hurt and tolerate growth even when the intensity is greater. Although there is limited research that specifically looks at the link between differentiation and communication behaviors, theory and research on self-determination (a concept similar to differentiation) suggest that this link exists. For example, higher levels of self-determination are related to a greater attempt to understand a partner (Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002) and to less defensiveness and more sensitive replies (Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005) during relationship conflict. Further, autonomy or self-determination has been related to partners seeking support in a clearer, more positive manner (Don & Hammond, 2017), and partners who are more autonomously motivated rather than motivated by control of partner are more open and willing to self-disclose (Gaine & La Guardia, 2009). These studies support differentiation theory in that greater use of positive communication (e.g., attempting to gain clarity) and less use of negative communication (e.g., defensiveness) will result when there are higher levels of differentiation.

Effective communication is also associated with relationship outcomes. For instance, intimate communication that is high in affection, depth, and reciprocity has been linked with higher marital quality (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013) while self-reported negative premarital communication has been associated with divorce (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Poor communicators report a decrease in relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction over time, while good communicators report an increase (Byers, 2005). Specifically, poor communication such as demand-withdraw patterns (McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen 2009), self-silencing and the tendency to give in to a partner (Harper & Welsh, 2007), and hiding distressing personal information from a partner (Uysal, Lin, Knee, & Bush, 2012) are all

associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Overall, evidence suggests that better communication is associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

While Gottman (1999) argues that relationship conflict is not inherently dysfunctional since perpetual problems that often have no real solution are normal within romantic relationships, he does discuss the possibility of partners becoming gridlocked. Gridlock is a felt sense of “spinning your wheels” as a couple and not being able to make any progress on hot button issues. This can occur, in part, because partners are not open to hearing what the other has to say; they might get defensive easily, and/or they become embroiled in escalating conflict when they struggle to handle their differences and compromise (Gottman, 1999). Though Schnarch (2009) argues that communication skills are not enough to carry a relationship, we suggest that communication behaviors are plausibly a part of explaining the connection between differentiation and gridlock such that highly differentiated partners can communicate in clearer, more curious, and positive ways rather than withdrawing, criticizing, or invalidating their partner because they, at least theoretically, have a stronger sense of self that can withstand higher levels of conflict.

Beyond connections with relationship satisfaction and gridlock, attachment has also been connected to communication. For example, dysfunctional communication (i.e., The Four Horsemen as described in Gottman (1994)—criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling) was associated with both anxious and avoidant attachment (McNelis & Segrin 2019). Additionally, less effective sexual communication is associated with avoidant attachment (McNeil, Rehman, & Fallis, 2018) or both avoidant and anxious attachment (Davis et al., 2006; Khoury & Findlay, 2014). Given this research, it is plausible that positive and negative

communication could be one pathway through which differentiation of self is associated with relationship outcomes.

Attachment as a Predictor or Relationship Outcome?

Attachment has been a well-studied area for years. Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980) developed attachment theory and proposed that infants' early experiences with caregivers influence feelings of security and insecurity within relationships as the infant begins to piece together an understanding of self and intimate relationships. Theoretically, responsive attachment figures help infants develop secure attachments that allow them to be comfortable and trusting within relationships while unavailable, rejecting, or unresponsive attachment figures lead infants to developing insecure attachments that are associated with discomfort or overreliance on intimacy (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). There has been an impressive amount of literature including reviews (Sutton, 2019) and debates (Fraley, 2019) that are focused on attachment theory as it has remained theoretically and empirically relevant. While attachment theory began with mother-child relationships, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) focused their attention on organizing the literature on attachment in adulthood. Further, many researchers have expanded the construct to other types of intimate relationships, including romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Feeney & Noller 1990; Nisenbaum & Lopez, 2015; Stanton, Campbell, & Pink, 2017).

One of the current arguments regarding attachment and romantic relationships is if attachment should be understood as a foundation for later relationships, or if it is better studied as an outcome of those current relationships (Kobak, 1994; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Brown, & Creswell, 2007). Most researchers can agree that attachment

experiences in childhood might have some effect on romantic relationships in adulthood; however, researchers have attempted to gain clarity regarding the stability of attachment security over time, and two main perspectives have developed—the prototype perspective (i.e., attachment behavior remains relatively stable as early attachment experiences are influential throughout the life course) and the revisionist perspective (i.e., attachment styles might not be as stable over the life course as early attachment experiences are potentially modified based on new attachment experiences). Though there has been support for the prototype perspective, research has only shown moderate stability of attachment orientation (Fraley, 2002; Pinquart, Feußner, & Ahnert, 2013) and many factors, such as family difficulties, moderate that stability (Jones et al., 2018). Though Fraley (2002) and Pinquart, Feußner, and Ahnert (2013) both found moderate levels of stability in their meta-analysis when comparing relatively short time intervals (i.e., less than five years), Pinquart and colleagues (2013) did not find significant stability in studies when longer time intervals (i.e., over fifteen years) were considered. Further, they found greater stability in shorter term intervals under two years than for longer time intervals of over five. Therefore, stability in attachment orientation seems to drop after longer periods of time which supports the revisionist perspective. In another study, positive parent-child attachment experiences during adolescence predicted attachment security at age 25 but not at 27, yet positive romantic relationship attachment experiences at 25 predicted attachment security at age 27 (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008). Again, this study provides partial support that attachment security is relatively stable but that, over time, it seems to decline and adds another layer that not only do parent-child interactions contribute to attachment styles but also suggests that experiences within current romantic relationships have the potential to modify attachment security.

Other researchers found little evidence of attachment stability from early childhood to adolescence. For example, Groh and colleagues (2014) examined the stability of attachment security from the first three years of life to late adolescence and measured early attachment security three different ways at three different time points (i.e., 15 months, 24 months, and 36 months). Instead of just utilizing the Strange Situation Procedure, which is typical, they also used Attachment Q-Sort and Modified Strange Situation Procedure to help measure early childhood attachment security and measured adolescent attachment using the Adult Attachment Interview. Overall, they found both weak categorical and dimensional stability from early childhood to late adolescence. On the other hand, Theisen, Fraley, Hankin, Young, & Chopik (2018) found that anxious attachment remained stable over time, but the study also provided evidence that avoidant attachment did change, as it increased from childhood to adolescence. Ultimately, these mixed results have led to debates not only about the stability of attachment security, but also if attachment is better conceptualized as a unique predictor of relationship health or as a malleable relationship outcome. Because this debate has not been resolved, the primary stance in this study is that attachment is a relationship outcome (but the alternative possibility was also tested). Research has shown that having positive relationship experiences can buffer against some of the problems associated with being insecurely attached (Stanton, Campbell, & Pink, 2017); therefore, it is clinically important to continue considering if attachment style acts as a relationship outcome that is changeable within the context of relationships.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the association between level of differentiation of self on romantic relationship outcomes (i.e., attachment, relationship satisfaction, and gridlock) while, additionally, examining the possibility of communication as a

mediator. Considering previous literature, we hypothesized that higher levels of differentiation would be associated with lower levels of gridlock, higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and lower levels of anxious and avoidant attachment (i.e., secure attachment) via the pathway of communication (both positive and negative communication, see *Figure 1*). We tested whether these associations were fully or partially mediated through communication. In the study, we looked at validation as one form of positive communication and withdrawal as one example of negative communication behavior (Arellano & Markman, 1995). We hypothesized that higher levels of differentiation would be associated with more use of positive communication (i.e., validation) that we believe will then be associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction and lower levels of insecure attachment and gridlock. Likewise, we hypothesized that higher levels of differentiation would be associated with less use of negative communication behaviors (i.e., withdrawal) that would then be associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and higher levels of insecure attachment and gridlock. Though we have taken the stance that attachment is a relationship outcome, we recognized that it could plausibly be seen as a predictor. Hence, we tested an alternate model with attachment and differentiation as predictors of relationship satisfaction and gridlock, and, again, examined positive and negative communication as mediators (see *Figure 2*). To our knowledge, no studies have proposed these specific models and compared the two, and, further, few studies have focused on gridlock and attachment as relationship outcomes with communication as a potential mechanism underlying the association of differentiation on relationship outcomes.

In order to strengthen the model, we controlled for psychological distress, relationship length, and gender since they have been shown to be potential predictors of relationship outcomes. Specifically, psychological distress is negatively associated with relationship

satisfaction (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012), and spouses experiencing more symptoms of psychological distress use more negative behaviors and emotions with fewer satisfying resolutions during conflicts (Papp, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2007). Though several studies have found multiple trajectories of relationship satisfaction over time (e.g., Lavner & Bradbury, 2010), group mean comparisons of relationship quality with relationship duration find a general decrease in relationship satisfaction over time (Glass & Wright, 1977; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kurdek, 1999; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Lastly, a meta-analysis found small yet significant differences between husbands' and wives' relationship satisfaction, with wives being slightly less satisfied than husbands (Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014). Because previous literature supports that relationship outcomes might be influenced by psychological distress, relationship length, and gender, we controlled for those potential predictors to enhance the proposed models.

This study is important because it explores a mechanism for why differentiation is related to more positive relationship outcomes and fewer negative ones. It examines how differentiation plausibly is related to having a better romantic relationship which can be clinically important for professionals who aim to help couples develop more positive outcomes within the relationship that they have while minimizing negative outcomes. Further, by finding support for attachment as an outcome, this study can provide evidence for clinicians to help couples develop secure attachment within their current romantic relationship, rather than focusing on previous relationships and experiences that might no longer be modified. Lastly, this study looks at variables with less research, such as gridlock, that can provide insight, again, into working more effectively with couples who are feeling unable to create change within their romantic partnerships.

Figure 1 Proposed Primary Model of Differentiation Associated with Relationship Outcomes

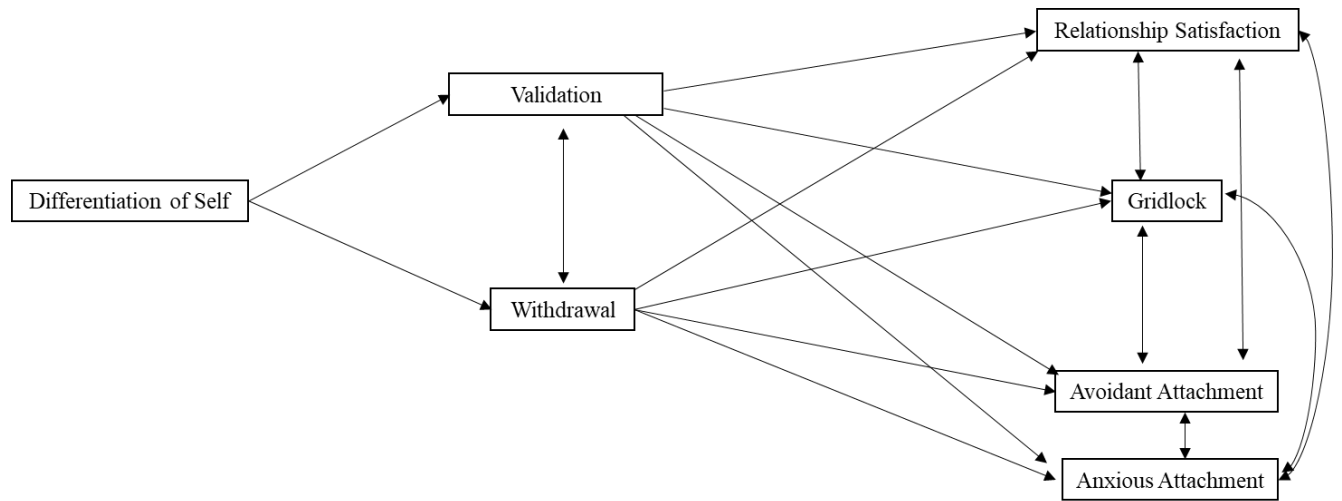
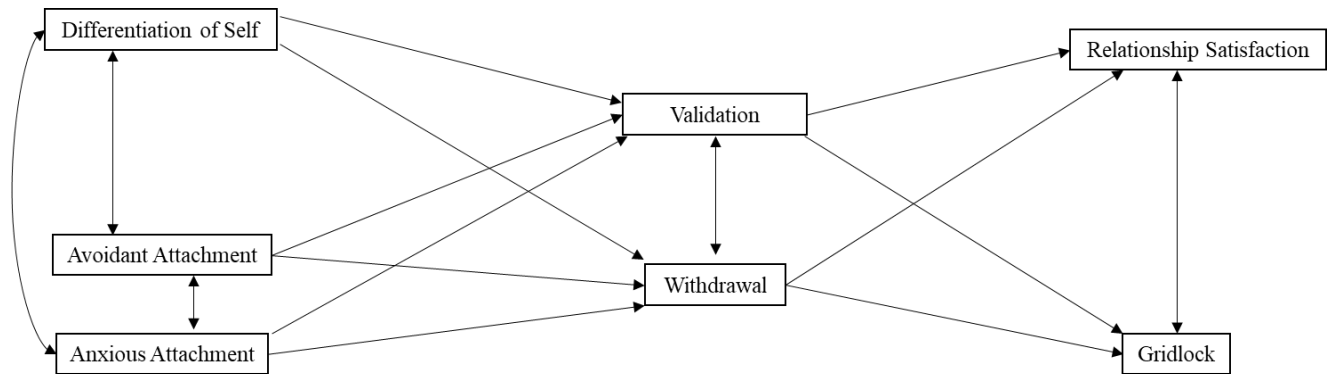


Figure 2 Proposed Alternate Model of Differentiation and Attachment Associated with Relationship Outcomes



Chapter 3 - Method

Procedures

Participants in this study were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an on-line open marketplace where various tasks (including research surveys) can be posted for MTurk workers to complete. Previous research has found that participants recruited through MTurk are as, or more, demographically diverse than those recruited through standard internet-based surveys, university-based samples, and the data obtained are at least as reliable as those obtained through traditional methods (Burhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). People who accessed the survey were first presented with the study consent form, and they were required to indicate their consent through checking a specified box before continuing with the survey. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University approved the study prior to implementation. Following MTurk conventions, participants were paid \$2.50 for their participation. To be eligible to participate in the online survey, participants had to be currently involved in a committed romantic relationship, be at least 18 years old, currently residing in the United States, and had to pass four attention checks in the survey. Two participants (0.4%) were not currently in committed romantic relationships, thirty-six participants (7.0%) did not pass the attention check, and nine participants (1.8%) completed the survey in a time deemed incongruent with careful attention (i.e., < 10 minutes). Therefore, these participants' data were not included in the current sample.

Participants

In the final sample ($N = 463$), participants (244 women, 216 men) ranged in age from 18 to 69 years ($M = 35.8$, $SD = 11.1$) and comprised a fairly diverse range of ethnic backgrounds; 71.9% were European American, 8.4% were African-American, 7.3% were Asian-American,

6.5% were bi or multi-racial, 5.2% were Latino/a, and 0.6% were American Indian/Alaskan Native. Participants were evenly split between those in committed relationships ($N = 230$, 49.7%) and those who were engaged/married ($N = 233$, 50.3%). Most were living together ($N = 355$, 76.7%), and the majority of participants were in opposite-sex relationships ($N = 439$, 94.8%). Participants had been in their current relationship between 3 months and 54 years ($M = 8.5$ years, $SD = 8.5$) and 36.9% of the sample had children ($N = 151$). The average yearly income range for participants was \$40,000-\$59,999, with 14.3% of the sample ($N = 66$) making less than \$20,000 a year and 11.5% of the sample ($N = 53$) making over \$100,000 per year. Finally, overall, the sample was highly educated with 51.7% of participants ($N = 239$) completing a bachelor's degree, graduate degree, or professional degree.

Measures

Differentiation. Differentiation was measured using the Crucible Differentiation Scale (Schnarch & Regas, 2012), which is a 63-item, Likert-type measure used to assess an individual's level of differentiation. The scale utilizes Schnarch's (2009) Four Points of Balance™: Solid Flexible Self, Quiet-Mind and Calm-Heart, Grounded Responding, and Meaningful Endurance. First, Solid Flexible Self is measured by clear sense of self (14 items) and connectedness (9 items). A sample item for clear sense of self includes "I have held on to principles and values when it did not make me popular" and for connectedness includes "My relationships are as much about caring for others as getting my own needs meet." Second, Quiet-Mind and Calm-Heart is measured by anxiety regulation through self-soothing (14 items) and anxiety regulation through accommodation (5 items). A sample item for anxiety regulation through self-soothing includes "I remain calm and cope with anxiety-provoking situations" and for anxiety regulation through accommodation includes "I put up with more than I should in

order to keep things as pleasant as possible.” Third, Grounded Responding is measured through reactivity through arguments (7 items) and reactivity through avoidance (5 items). A sample item for reactivity through arguments includes, “I often try to argue people out of their point of view” and for reactivity through avoidance includes, “When people disappoint me, I move away emotionally or physically.” Fourth, Meaningful Endurance is measured through tolerating discomfort for growth (9 items), and an example item is, “I am able to take criticism and learn from it.” Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all true* to 6 = *very true*, and mean scores were computed with higher scores indicating higher level of differentiation. Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the total scale in the current study was .84.

Communication behaviors. Communication behaviors were measured using the Managing Affect and Differences Scale (Arellano & Markman, 1995), which is a 118-item self-report assessment tool that measures twelve components of communication among intimate partners. The current study specifically focused on validation (5 items) and withdrawal (3 items). Arellano and Markman (1995) define those behaviors: “Validation is expressing value in partner’s perspective or point of view” (p. 332) such as by listening and paraphrasing while, “Withdrawal involves physically or emotionally withdrawing from discussions for fear of conflict” (p. 334). Example items for validation included: “I verbally communicate to my partner that I understand and value his/her position” and “When my partner has a complaint, I try to understand.” Example items for withdrawal included “When discussing issues, I remain silent” and “When problems arise, I often leave the room.” Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, and mean scores were computed for each skill separately, with higher scores reflecting greater use of the behavior. Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimates were calculated in the present study for the validation ($\alpha = .88$) and withdrawal ($\alpha = .74$).

Attachment. Adult attachment style was measured using the Relationship Structures questionnaire (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011), which is a 9-item self-report instrument. The measure can be used for relationship-specific attachment such as to mother, father, or partner, but the questions were modified slightly (e.g., “It helps to turn to this person in times of need” changed to “It helps to turn to people in times of need”) for this study to provide general attachment style. Items are scored from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, and separate means were computed for the six items assessing avoidant attachment and three items assessing anxious attachment. An example item for avoidant attachment is, “I don’t feel comfortable opening up to others” and for anxious attachment is, “I’m afraid that other people might abandon me.” Further, the first four items of avoidant attachment were reverse scored. Higher mean scores for avoidant attachment indicate greater avoidant attachment style, higher mean scores for anxious attachment indicate higher anxious attachment style, and lower scores for both indicate secure attachment style. Cronbach’s alpha reliability in the current study was .88 for avoidant attachment and .93 for anxious attachment.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Couples Satisfaction Index-4 (Funk & Rogge 2007), a 4-item self-report instrument with responses ranging from 1 = *extremely unhappy* to 7 = *perfect* for the first question, “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship” and 1 = *not at all true* to 6 = *completely true* for the remaining three questions. Another example question is, “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” Scores were summed across all four items with total scores ranging from 4 to 25 and higher scores indicating higher relationship satisfaction. Cronbach’s alpha reliability in the current study was .95.

Gridlock. Gridlock was measured using an adapted and condensed version of Gottman's Gridlock questionnaire (Gottman, 1999). The original questionnaire included twenty true or false questions, but the present study included seven items selected from the questionnaire that were modified slightly to be more inclusive (e.g. changing the word "spouse" to "partner"), as well as three additional author generated items. A sample item includes, "We rarely make much progress on our central issues." Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all true* to 6 = *completely true*, and mean scores were computed with higher scores reflecting more gridlock in the relationship. Cronbach's alpha reliability in the current study was .95.

Controls. *Psychological distress* was measured using the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams, & Löwe, 2009), which is a self-report inventory that contains the following four Likert-type items ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *nearly everyday*: "Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge," "Not being able to stop or control worrying," "Little interest or pleasure in doing things," and "Feeling down, depressed or hopeless." Mean scores were computed across all four items to assess psychological distress with higher scores reflecting higher psychological distress. Cronbach's alpha reliability in the current study was .91 for psychological distress. *Relationship length* was measured by asking "How long have you been in your current relationship?" Responses could be recorded in months or years but were all converted to years and ranged from 0.25 to 54.17. *Gender* was a dichotomized variable with 0 = female and 1 = male. The survey indicated, "I identify my gender as:" with male, female, transgender, and other as possible options. Only one participant identified as transgender and was not included in the analyses.

Analytic Plan

The present study used a cross-sectional path model to empirically test the proposed associations between differentiation of self and relationship outcomes (relationship satisfaction, gridlock, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment), mediated by communication behaviors (validation and withdrawal). First, we used SPSS to compute descriptive analyses and to determine the amount of missingness in the data. We used full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) procedures to address any missingness, as it has been found to be the preferred approach compared to listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, or mean substitution (Acock, 2005). Zero-order correlations between model variables were also computed. We used Mplus 6.12 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012) to test the path model and to test indirect effects; we used bootstrap analyses with 5,000 bootstraps (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). For path modeling, model fit is evaluated on several indices. In the present study, we used the following guidelines: a Chi-square statistic with a significant p-value, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index values greater than .95, a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value below .08, and a Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value below .08 to constitute evidence of acceptable fit between the model and the observed data (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2011). Finally, one alternative model was tested. When using cross-sectional data, alternative models provide empirical support for the theoretically proposed ordering of the constructs. If model fit indices suggest that the proposed model fits better than an alternative model, it suggests that the temporal ordering and modeling of the constructs in the original model are empirically supported. Specifically, we tested an alternative model in which attachment (i.e., anxious and avoidant) are predictors of relationship outcomes (prototype perspective) rather than as relationship outcomes. When comparing alternative models to the

proposed model, we used the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) indices for non-nested models in which the ordering of the constructs are changed but the number of estimated parameters might be equivalent. When conducting a non-nested comparison, smaller AIC/BIC values indicate better fit of the model to the data (Little, Boviar, & Widaman, 2006)

Chapter 4 - Results

Correlation Analysis

The correlation results revealed important information about the associations among the study variables (see *Table 1*). Differentiation was significantly positively correlated with validation, relationship satisfaction, and relationship length. It was also significantly negatively correlated with withdrawal, gridlock, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and psychological distress and was marginally negatively correlated with gender indicating a relationship between females and higher levels of differentiation. Validation was significantly positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and gender indicating a relationship between males and higher levels of validation. It was also significantly negatively correlated with withdrawal, gridlock, avoidant attachment, psychological distress, and relationship length. Withdrawal was significantly positively correlated with gridlock, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and psychological distress, and it was significantly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction and relationship length.

Relationship satisfaction was significantly positively correlated with gender, indicating a relationship between males and higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was also significantly negatively correlated with gridlock, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and psychological distress and marginally negatively correlated with relationship length. Gridlock was significantly positively correlated with avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and psychological distress. It was also significantly negatively correlated with gender indicating a relationship between females and increased feelings of gridlock. Avoidant attachment was significantly positively correlated with anxious attachment and psychological distress. It was marginally negatively correlated with gender indicating a potential

relationship between females and higher levels of avoidant attachment. Anxious attachment was significantly positively correlated with psychological distress and significantly negatively correlated with relationship length and gender indicating a relationship between females and higher levels of anxious attachment. In terms of the controls, psychological distress was significantly negatively correlated with relationship length and gender indicating a relationship between females and higher levels of psychological distress while gender and relationship length were significantly negatively correlated indicating a relationship between females and longer relationship lengths.

Path Analysis Results

An initial, fully mediated model was first tested, but model fit was poor, therefore a second model was tested that allowed for paths from the predictor (differentiation) to be directly and indirectly associated with relationship outcomes. The final path model results can be viewed in *Figure 3*. Initially, all the variables in the model were regressed on each control variable. Control variables that were not significantly associated with model variables were trimmed one at a time to ensure model fit was not significantly reduced (based on chi-square difference tests) and were omitted from the final model for the sake of parsimony. An initial, fully mediated model was tested, but was not a good fit to the data, therefore a partial mediation model was tested, and this final model proved to fit the data well: $\chi^2(6) = 10.491, p = .105$; RMSEA = .040 (CI .000, .080); CFI = .996; TLI = .975; SRMR = .019. The model explained 24% of the variance in couple satisfaction, 32% of the variance in gridlock, 16% of the variance in avoidant attachment, and 47% of the variance in anxious attachment.

Turning to the model results, as hypothesized, higher levels of differentiation were associated with higher levels of validation ($\beta = .37, p < .001$) and lower levels of withdrawal ($\beta =$

-.40, $p < .001$). Higher levels of differentiation were also directly related to lower levels of gridlock ($\beta = -.16, p = .003$), avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.13, p = .032$), and anxious attachment ($\beta = -.51, p < .001$), but not significantly related to relationship satisfaction. In turn, higher levels of validation were associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .44, p < .001$) and lower levels of gridlock ($\beta = -.31, p < .001$) and avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.12, p = .009$). Validation was not significantly related to anxious attachment. Higher levels of withdrawal were associated with higher levels of gridlock ($\beta = .14, p < .001$) and avoidant attachment ($\beta = .15, p < .001$), but were not significantly related to relationship satisfaction or anxious attachment. Validation was negatively related to withdrawal ($\beta = -.16, p < .001$) and relationship satisfaction was negatively related to gridlock ($\beta = -.44, p < .001$) and avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$), but not significantly related to anxious attachment. Gridlock was positively associated with both avoidant attachment ($\beta = .09, p = .057$) and anxious attachment ($\beta = .11, p = .017$) and avoidant and anxious attachment were positively related ($\beta = .18, p < .001$).

Regarding the control variables, psychological distress was negatively related to differentiation ($\beta = -.54, p < .001$) and relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.16, p = .002$) and positively related to gridlock ($\beta = .19, p < .001$), avoidant attachment ($\beta = .16, p < .001$), and anxious attachment ($\beta = .27, p < .001$), and not significantly related to validation and withdrawal.

Relationship length was negatively related to validation ($\beta = -.10, p = .022$), withdrawal ($\beta = -.12, p = .009$), and anxious attachment ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$), but not related to the other model variables. Gender was not significantly related to any of the model variables.

Model Comparison

We compared our final trimmed model to one theoretically plausible alternative—a model where anxious and avoidant attachment were predictors rather than outcome variables.

The AIC and BIC values were smaller for the proposed model (AIC = 15309.420; BIC = 15508.031 versus AIC = 15310.454; BIC = 15509.065), signifying our proposed model is a slightly better fit to the data—although the difference is minimal, suggesting that both models are relatively similar in fit to the data.

Test of Indirect Paths

Model indirect effects (see Table 2) were tested with 5000 bootstraps and a 95% confidence interval (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Three significant indirect effects through validation were found: differentiation → validation → relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .16, p < .001, C. I. = .11, .22$); differentiation → validation → gridlock ($\beta = -.11, p < .001, C. I. = -.16, -.07$); differentiation → validation → avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.05, p = .018, C. I. = -.08, -.008$). In addition, two significant indirect effects through withdrawal were also found: differentiation → withdrawal → gridlock ($\beta = -.06, p = .008, C. I. = -.10, -.015$) and differentiation → withdrawal → avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.06, p = .004, C. I. = -.10, -.02$). Using the first indirect effect as an example, this can be interpreted as follows: a one standard deviation unit increase in differentiation is associated with a .16 standard deviation unit increase in relationship satisfaction via the prior effect of differentiation on validation.

Table 1 Correlations and descriptive statistics for study variables ($N = 463$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Validation	-									
2. Withdrawal	-.27***	-								
3. Relationship Satisfaction	.46***	-.19***	-							
4. Gridlock	-.43***	.32***	-.56***	-						
5. Avoidant Attachment	-.23***	.26***	-.29***	.28***	-					
6. Anxious Attachment	-.15**	.23***	-.17***	.36***	.34***	-				
7. Psychological Distress	-.15**	.15**	-.20***	.34***	.28***	.55***	-			
8. Gender	.11*	-.03	.10*	-.09*	-.09†	-.07	-.10*	-		
9. Relationship Length	-.12*	-.12*	-.09†	.03	.02	-.19***	-.15**	-.12*	-	
10. Differentiation	.36***	-.42***	.23***	-.45***	-.33***	-.64***	-.56***	-.08†	.12*	-
Mean	3.89	1.90	1.30	2.22	3.28	3.41	2.56	.47	8.50	1.30
SD	.77	.76	1.13	1.16	1.26	1.79	3.18	.5	8.54	1.13
Range	1.6-5	1-5	-2-4	1-6	1-7	1-7	0-12	0-1	.25-54	4-25

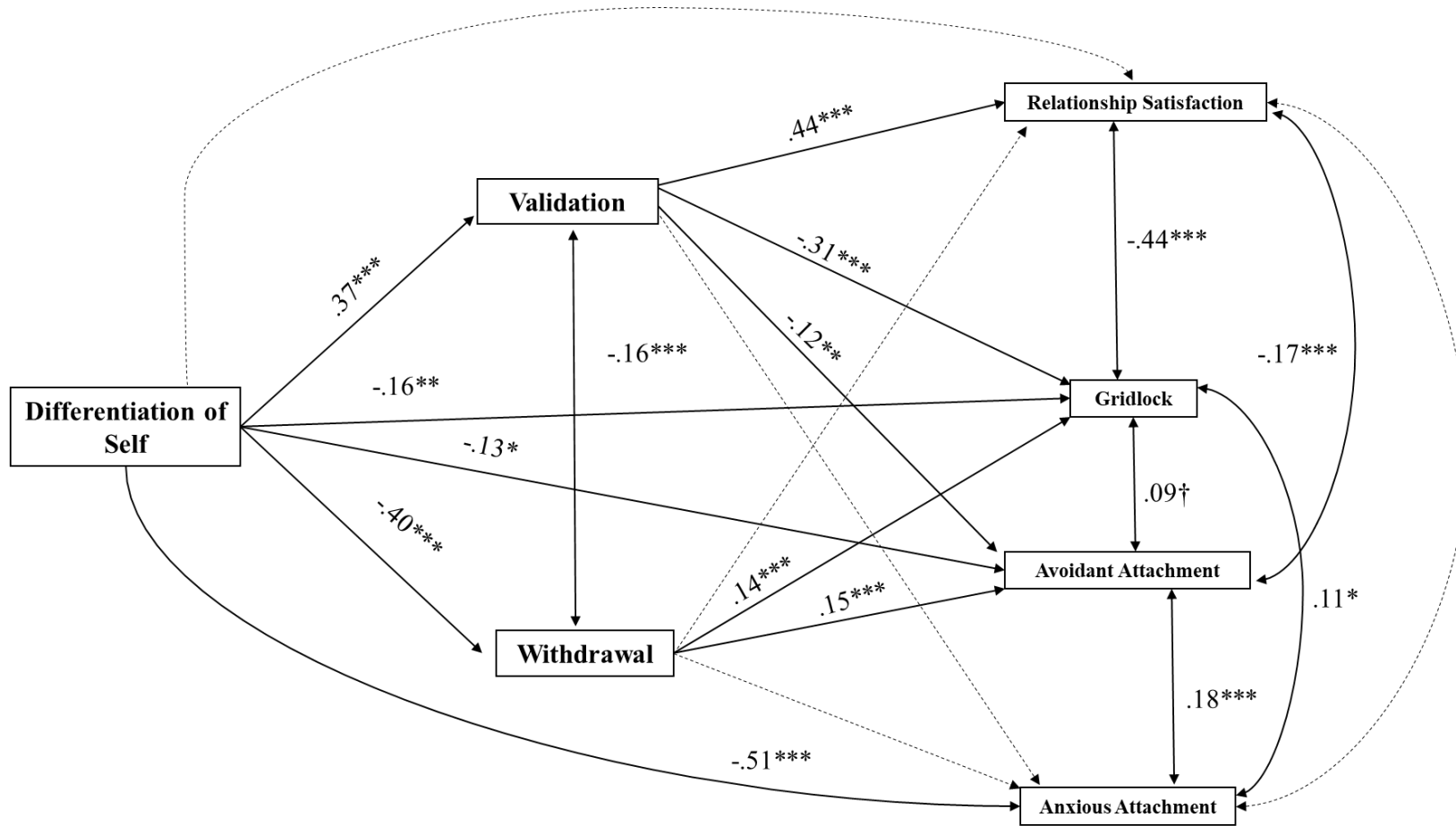
† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

Table 2 Indirect effects (standardized solution; $N = 463$)

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	β	CI	p value
Differentiation →	Validation →	Relationship satisfaction	.16	.11, .22	< .001
Differentiation →	Validation →	Gridlock	-.12	-.16, -.07	< .001
Differentiation →	Withdrawal →	Gridlock	-.06	-.10, -.02	.008
Differentiation →	Validation →	Avoidant attachment	-.05	-.08, .01	.018
Differentiation →	Withdrawal →	Avoidant attachment	-.06	-.10, -.02	.004

Indirect paths tested with 5000 bootstraps. CI = 95 % confidence interval.

Figure 3 Final Model of Differentiation Associated with Relationship Outcomes



$^\dagger p < .10$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$ (two-tailed)

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between level of differentiation of self and romantic relationship outcomes (i.e., avoidant and anxious attachment, relationship satisfaction, and gridlock) while, additionally, examining the possibility of communication behaviors (i.e., validation and withdrawal) as mediators. When controlling for psychological distress, relationship length, and gender, differentiation was found to be directly related to relationship outcomes as evidenced by higher levels of differentiation being associated with lower levels of gridlock, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment. The only control that had several significant connections in the model was psychological distress. Specifically, it was negatively related to differentiation and relationship satisfaction, and positively related to gridlock, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment. These significant connections confirm previous literature connecting psychological distress to the variables within the model. Despite these connections, differentiation was still found to be an important predictor. While the model provides support for direct connections between differentiation and gridlock and attachment insecurity, the more interesting part of the story is the pathways through which higher levels of differentiation are related to those relationship outcomes. For instance, differentiation of self was also *indirectly* related to relationship outcomes through both positive communication (i.e., validation) and negative communication (i.e., withdrawal). In other words, communication behaviors are plausibly a bridge between differentiation and relationship outcomes such that validation and withdrawal act as mechanisms through which differentiation relates to them.

Differentiation was found to be significantly associated with both communication behaviors included in the study (i.e., validation and withdrawal). Having higher levels of differentiation indicates having a solid sense of self, while also being deeply connected to and

dependent on others. This allows a person to self-soothe and regulate when emotionally hurt and have the capacity to respond calmly and tolerate growth when difficult interactions with a partner occur. Individuals who were more highly differentiated reported greater use of validation and less use of withdrawal as communication tactics. Consequently, differentiation theory would suggest that having higher levels of differentiation would produce validation as that partner would be comfortable in who they are and what is important to them but at the same time would aim to stay intimately connected within their romantic relationship. Therefore, that partner would express openness to their partner's views and experience as one way to maintain that connection. At the same time, higher levels of differentiation would be connected to less withdrawal because partners would have the capacity to tolerate discomfort, self-soothe, and self-regulate even during times of tension rather than having to escape mentally or physically.

In terms of indirect links, differentiation was connected to relationship satisfaction, gridlock, and avoidant attachment through a mediator. To the best of our knowledge, literature has not focused much on the underlying reasons why differentiation is connected to relationship outcomes, yet previous research has suggested that higher levels of differentiation are connected to greater relationship satisfaction (Dekel, 2010; Parsons, Nalbone, Killmer, & Wetchler, 2007; Peleg, 2008; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron, 2000; Spencer & Brown, 2007). At the same time, the results from this study suggest that the connection to relationship satisfaction may be better explained indirectly through validation than directly since higher levels of differentiation were connected with higher levels of relationship satisfaction specifically through greater use of validation. Based on the measure used, validation means expressing value in a partner's words and feelings (Arellano & Markman, 1995); therefore, it makes sense that partners would likely feel more satisfied within a relationship in which they feel valued and

better understood. While differentiation and relationship satisfaction were only indirectly related through validation, differentiation and gridlock and differentiation and avoidant attachment were connected through both validation and withdrawal.

With that, the results indicated that higher levels of differentiation were connected with lower levels of gridlock through increased levels of validation and lower levels of withdrawal. A relationship in which partners are validating might mean that hot button issues are challenging, but manageable, as partners feel heard during those tough discussions. Further, having lower levels of withdrawal means partners would be able to stay present to have those conversations, which would be related to having less gridlock and being at a standstill within the relationship in which those conversations are potentially going nowhere or are not even happening. Similarly, higher levels of differentiation were associated with lower levels of avoidant attachment through increased levels of validation and lower levels of withdrawal. Partners who are experiencing validation would likely feel less avoidantly attached as they might feel better able to stay engaged because they feel that their side of the relationship is important, while less withdrawal within the relationship might be connected to lower levels of avoidant attachment because partners are able to be responsive toward each other rather than disengaging in order to stay regulated. Interestingly, neither communication behaviors were related to anxious attachment. Instead, the connection between differentiation and anxious attachment was a direct and strong relationship. That might be explained as the two concepts are overlapped with both being about managing interpersonal and intrapersonal anxiety. Additionally, anxious attachment, unlike avoidant attachment, might rely more heavily on relational interaction, so a partner might be more sensitive to functioning of the relationship.

When looking at attachment insecurity, the primary model includes anxious and avoidant attachment as outcomes variables, which is based on the revisionist perspective that attachment is not necessarily stable over a person's lifetime. However, we also compared the primary model to an alternate model which was based on the prototype perspective that attachment remains relatively stable over time and, thus, is an enduring vulnerability that people bring to relationships and, therefore, are better conceptualized as predictors of relationship outcomes. Ultimately, we found that the primary model fit slightly better than the alternate one; however, the models both fit the data well indicating they are about equally plausible. Unfortunately, the results do not provide any further clarity on which perspective may be better, but they do support that attachment can not only be conceptualized as an enduring vulnerability that is brought into the relationship, but can be just as easily seen as an outcome of current relationships.

Implications

One area to explore further would be differentiation's strong direct link with anxious attachment, as it was the only relationship outcome that was not mediated at all by communication behaviors. Additionally, it could be important to expand positive and negative communication behaviors to more than just one example of each. With that, relationship satisfaction was only linked to differentiation through validation, so it would be potentially useful to analyze if that same pattern appears with relationship satisfaction being associated with differentiation through other positive communication behaviors while not being linked through negative communication behaviors. If that pattern continues to exist, it has potential implications for clinicians to specifically help clients increase positive communication behaviors that might be acting as external manifestations of higher levels of differentiation rather than trying to focus on minimizing negative communication behaviors.

At the same time, skills training for couples has not been shown to be significantly different than simply raising relationship awareness (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013). Further, there has not been longitudinal support showing that relationship education programs focused on delivering communication skills are effectively targeting the right problems (Johnson, 2012). Simply teaching communication skills may not be getting at the deeper layer (i.e., level of differentiation of self), but utilizing communication behavior as manifestations of differentiation may be an entry point in helping partners better understand ways in which their reactivity (i.e., difficulty in emotion regulation) shows up in the relationship. Therefore, clinicians might want to use communication as a more exposable point of entry while simultaneously aiming to increase differentiation (e.g., increase self-regulation, self-soothing, and understanding of self in the context of others).

One potential model is Ellyn Bader's Development Model of Couples Therapy that integrates attachment, differentiation, and basic neuroscience (Bader, 2019). This model helps therapists lead couples to enacting their potential by recognizing the stage that the couple is in and using interventions that best fit that stage. Bader identifies five stages from symbiosis, or attachment/exclusive bonding, to mutual interdependence, or synergy. The movement from the first stage to the fifth stage is one of developing higher differentiation in which both partners are able to maintain who they are while being intimately connected rather than being problematically intertwined or overly distant. One useful intervention from the model is Initiator-Inquirer that helps both partners practice self and partner discovery all while discussing an issue in which the couple is experiencing gridlock. Though this process utilizes communication skills, the purpose is to increase self-regulation rather than to simply practice useful communication tactics. Hence,

this intervention is a concrete example of using communication behaviors to enhance levels of differentiation.

Lastly, the results indicated that both the primary and alternate models were about the same, with the primary one being an only slightly better fit. While we cannot make an overarching claim that attachment insecurity is better suited as a relationship outcome, it does seem plausible, based on the results, that anxious and avoidant attachment can be effectively understood as relationship outcomes. Though understanding attachment as a predictor can provide a useful framework, making sense of attachment within a current relationship can be more hopeful for not only clinicians but also clients who may be overwhelmed and disheartened by seeing attachment insecurity as a flaw from their past that continues to affect them. Instead, if attachment insecurity is understood as a relationship outcome, it can act as a motivating and changeable factor within current intimate relationships.

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

Like every study, this one has important limitations to consider. One of the main ones being that we were looking at a dyadic process through the lens of one person. In other words, we were trying to tell a story about how couples work but only had one partner's side. Consequently, it would be useful to gather information from both partners to have a more holistic representation of their relationship. Another significant limitation can be attributed to common-method variance such that we used the same method, in this case a single survey, to obtain all the information, which can lead to an inflation of correlations. Therefore, it would be potentially useful to gather the dyadic data in more than just a self-report survey such as through observation of communication behaviors. Lastly, this was a cross-sectional study, so we cannot truly analyze the temporal relationship between differentiation and relationship outcomes. With that, a

longitudinal analysis would be useful especially for identifying attachment as a predictor or an outcome. Another possibility is to look at these, and potentially other, relationship outcomes before and after an intervention focused on not only relationship communication but increasing differentiation by addressing self-regulation especially during high intensity situations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we aimed to examine the potential importance of differentiation within romantic relationships specifically looking to explore possible underlying mechanisms that connect differentiation to positive and negative relationship outcomes. The results showed that differentiation of self is not only directly but also indirectly related to relationship outcomes through communication behaviors. Differentiation might be usefully accessed through more overt communication behaviors, which in turn might be related to having desired relationship outcomes.

Chapter 6 - References

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