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The use of subtle strategies to have sex with an unwilling partner is harmful to a couple's sexual well-being but these strategies remain understudied. This research examined the mediating role of communication patterns in the associations between attachment insecurities and sustained sexual coercion in 145 same- and cross-gender couples, and the moderating role of partners' gender. In addition to actor and partner effects, results revealed significant indirect effects from attachment insecurities to sexual coercion via communication patterns, with moderating effects of gender. Results may help practitioners and researchers understand the ways attachment insecurities and dysfunctional communication patterns can manifest in the experience of subtle forms of sexual coercion within couples.

Keywords: Attachment insecurities; Sexual coercion; Couple communication; Intimate partner violence; Gender differences

Research on psychological and physical intimate partner violence (IPV) has yielded many insights into the individual and relational processes that affect their occurrence, whether it is from a biological, social, cultural, or psychological standpoint (for reviews see Capaldi et al., 2012; Spencer et al., 2019). The same cannot be said about sexual coercion towards a romantic partner, a less studied and often overlooked form of IPV (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015; Monson et al., 2009). Sexual coercion towards a romantic partner describes the use of verbal and non-verbal tactics to engage the partner in sexual activities despite their unwillingness or inability to consent (Black et al., 2011; Breiding, et al., 2015; Farris et al., 2008). These tactics include verbal insistence, threats of violence and the use of physical force, and/or weapons (Straus et al., 1996). Subtler forms of sexual coercion have received even less attention, possibly because they are sometimes confused with seduction tactics that are considered as appropriate (Karantzas et al., 2016) or because they are not recognized as being coercive within a relationship (Jeffrey & Barata, 2017). These subtle forms of sexual coercion describe the use of psychological manipulation to make a partner feel obligated to have sex, whether by hinting or threatening to withhold benefits or gifts, by using love or the relationship status as an excuse to make sexual activity obligatory, or by hinting at the possibility of pursuing casual or long-term relationships with other interested partners (Shackelford & Goetz, 2004).

Subtle forms of sexual coercion are reported by as much as 50% of community couples (Brousseau et al., 2011) and are associated with a host of psychological and relational consequences in both women and men victims (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2016; Salwen et al., 2015). In cross-gender couples in particular, subtle forms of sexual coercion can be normalized and minimized, and romantic partners do not always interpret these behaviors as prejudicial (Jeffrey & Barata, 2017). Research has suggested this might be partly due to the internalization of gender-asymmetric socio-cultural beliefs that place women as the “gatekeepers” of a couple’s

sexuality. Those beliefs also frame men's use of sexual coercion as a form of seduction tactic, fueled by physiological sexual needs and misinterpretations of their partner's sexual disinterest (Jeffrey & Barata, 2017; Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2013). The minimization of subtle forms of sexual coercion in romantic relationships has also been suggested to be the result of sexual precedence, the expectance of continued sexual availability when sexual access has already been established in the relationship (Livingston et al., 2004). However, feelings of guilt, fear, and vulnerability are commonly expressed by those who sustain this form of IPV (Jeffrey & Barata, 2017), with women being twice as likely as men to report subtle sexual coercion victimization (Brousseau et al., 2011). Data on sexual coercion also point out higher victimization rates in LGBTQ people (Edwards et al., 2015; Swiatlo et al., 2020). Yet, little is known about how the experience of subtler forms of sexual coercion might affect these populations.

Research aiming to better understand sexual coercion between romantic partners has identified many intrapersonal factors that are associated with this form of partner violence: a history of child sexual abuse (Girard et al., 2020) and the endorsement of traditional sex roles beliefs (Hartwick et al., 2007) have been associated with higher sexual coercion victimization, whereas substance abuse (Ngo et al., 2018) and difficulties with emotion regulation (Shorey et al., 2015) have been reported by sexual coercion perpetrators. Yet, examining sexual coercion using an individual perspective to identify its risk markers precludes us from understanding the relational nature of more subtle forms of violence between romantic partners. As put forward in recent studies (i.e., Grom et al., 2019; Katafiasz, 2020), a dyadic framework is necessary to better comprehend how both partners' characteristics contribute to their own experience of sexual coercion, but also how they are associated with interactional processes that increase the risk of sexually coercive exchanges between partners (Sommer et al., 2017). Attachment theory has recently been put forward as a relevant theoretical framework to understand the dyadic nature of

risk markers for sexual coercion (for a review, see Karantzas et al., 2016). The current study goes a step further, as it offers an examination of the dyadic mechanisms that underlie the associations between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion victimization.

Attachment Theory and Sexual Coercion

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) posits that a child's early experiences with their primary caregivers' responsiveness and sensitivity to their needs for security and comfort lead to the development of internal working models, a cognitive set of beliefs that influence one's expectations about how needs are met by others. These internal working models then influence the approach or distance behaviors one will use in relationships later in life (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). In adulthood, the romantic partner typically becomes the person with whom these internal working models are the most saliently activated, primarily because they turn out to be the main source for security, connection, and affection (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), internal working models are either conceptualized as secure or insecure and stem from experiences of consistent sensitivity and responsiveness by a primary caregiver to one's needs or signs of distress (security) or from relationships with insensitive or inconsistent caregivers (insecurity). In romantic relationships, this sense of security will not only influence one's capacity to trust and commit to a partner, to experience self-confidence and comfort with closeness, but will also increase one's ability to flexibly regulate internal distress and behaviors related to the perception of threats to the relationship. Attachment security can be observed by active proximity seeking in the face of internal distress or threats to the relationship, reduced perception of situations as threatening for the attachment bond, as well as emotional and sexual proximity and higher use of constructive communication (Brennan et al., 1998; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Kruger et al., 2013). In contrast, attachment insecurity describes struggling with regulating proximity (or closeness) and

distance (or independence) with the romantic partner and is conceptualized along two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998).

Those with high anxiety are excessively worried and hypervigilant to potential threats of rejection or unavailability from their partner. The hyperactivation of their attachment system leads them to behave in a compulsive and even intrusive manner to seek reassurance from their partner (Brassard et al., 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). High attachment anxiety is also associated with a tendency to rely on sex for reassurance (Birnbaum, 2010). Those with high attachment avoidance rather tend to deny their emotional experiences and needs (i.e., deactivation of the attachment system) and to compulsively seek self-reliance and emotional distance in relationships as a way to deal with their discomfort with closeness, and their difficulty depending on and trusting others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008). This relational distancing also takes place in sexuality, as those high in attachment avoidance are more affectively detached during sex and seek less frequent sexual activity with a committed romantic partner (Birnbaum, 2010; Brassard et al., 2007). Considering their role as a driving force behind behaviors and reactions aimed at regulating proximity and sexuality with the partner, attachment insecurities might thus manifest in the experience of subtle forms of sexual coercion.

Attachment Insecurities and Sexual Coercion Victimization

Studies that have examined how attachment insecurities are associated with sexual coercion between romantic partners point to a general conclusion: attachment insecurity is associated with more sexual coercion victimization (e.g., Barbaro et al., 2018; Brassard et al., 2007; He & Tsang, 2019). Results from previous research (Bonache et al., 2019; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Impett & Peplau, 2002; Sommer et al., 2017) have highlighted the role of attachment anxiety in relation to sexual coercion victimization by demonstrating that an anxious person's excessive fear of

rejection and worry for the maintenance of the relationship might push them to give in or comply to unwanted sexual acts as a way to prevent negative reactions from the partner. Research has also emphasized that attachment avoidance is related to heightened sexual coercion victimization (Bonache et al., 2019; Brassard et al., 2007; Impett & Peplau, 2002). Indeed, since avoidantly attached partners are generally less interested in partnered sex and its related emotional intimacy (Birnbaum, 2010), it could inherently put them at higher risk of sustaining insistence or manipulation by their partner. Yet, these previous studies either did not account for the dyadic associations between variables or focused solely on women's experience of victimization.

Although some studies conclude in the absence of differences between men and women (Barbaro et al., 2018; Sommer et al., 2017), others conclude in potential gender effects. For instance, Brassard and colleagues (2007) have observed that men's attachment anxiety was significantly associated with sexual coercion perpetration whereas women's attachment avoidance was associated with sexual coercion victimization. To date, very few studies have examined individual and gender dyad effects, with most studies having either relied on samples of women (Impett & Peplau, 2002) or of heterosexual couples (Sommer et al., 2017). This precludes us from determining whether same- and cross-gender couples differ with regards to sexual coercion victimization. This is surprising considering that studies have emphasized that couples from sexual minority groups are disproportionately affected by IPV (Swiatlo et al., 2020). Yet, the literature on couples involving LGBTQ individuals is limited (Rollè et al., 2018), which indicates a critical need to increase efforts examining these differences.

Moreover, only a few studies have sought to understand what may underlie the associations between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion in couples and most of them have focused on individual-level mechanisms (e.g., low self-esteem; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). Although attachment theory offers an interesting framework to understand some of the internal

processes related to being at higher risk of sustaining sexual coercion victimization, it does not offer insight into the couples' interactional experiences that can potentially lead to subtle forms of sexually coercive behaviors. By examining how couple interactional processes can play a role in the occurrence of sexual coercion between romantic partners, we can unveil potential intervention targets that could prevent sexual coercion victimization, particularly in the presence of attachment insecurities. Although they have used a sample of undergraduates who were either single or in a relationship, Bonache and colleagues (2019) did offer a potential intervention target: they have found that attachment insecurities are associated with a higher occurrence of partner violence through partners' use of more destructive conflict resolution strategies. As conflicts can arise between partners when one asks for sexual contact and the other does not want to, and since they are heavily colored by attachment insecurities, couple communication patterns during conflicts might help explain how attachment insecurities relate to sexual coercion victimization.

Couple Communication Patterns

Conflicts in intimate relationships are inevitable. From an attachment perspective, the way they are handled can either threaten a couple's bond or provide an opportunity to increase intimacy and closeness (Johnson, 2003; Pietromonaco et al., 2004). The notion of couple communication patterns was put forward to better explain how conflicts can be experienced by couples (Christensen & Shenk, 1991) and has provided insights into the ways attachment security can affect couple interactions (Johnson, 2003). Researchers and clinicians have consistently observed that secure partners tend to engage in more constructive communication behaviors when faced with a conflict or a disagreement, because they are able to use self-disclosure, are more comfortable expressing their feelings, and can more easily use perspective-taking, negotiation,

and compromising (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Groh et al., 2012; Pietromonaco et al., 2004). On the contrary, attachment insecurities have been shown to increase the likelihood of harmful communication patterns, such as demand/withdraw (a pattern in which one partner complains, attempts to initiate changes, criticizes and nags, while the other becomes defensive, refuses to discuss an issue or withdraws) or withdraw/withdraw (both partners avoid a conflictual subject or walk away from each other during conflicts; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Fournier et al., 2011; Givertz & Safford, 2011). To our knowledge, however, no study has examined links between attachment insecurities and the demand/demand communication pattern (in which both partners reciprocally accuse, criticize, or blame one another; Christensen & Heavey, 1990).

As put forward by Pietromonaco and colleagues (2004), these differences in communication patterns by level of attachment insecurity might be explained by the individual's expectations and goals within the relationship, which will in turn influence the behaviors they engage in during conflict. For instance, partners high in attachment security might expect that opening up during conflict is safe and useful, which would make them better able to use constructive communication patterns such as self-disclosure and perspective-taking. However, in the presence of fears of abandonment (anxiety), one might easily feel rejected by their partner and, as they tend to hyperactivate their attachment system, make criticizing demands for reassurance (demand) with heightened emotions during conflicts. Individuals high in attachment avoidance might expect to lose their independence if they share their emotional experience and, as they tend to deactivate their attachment system, shut down (withdrawal) and avoid conflicts.

These expectations might be salient when partners approach discussions about sex, especially when one partner desires sexual contact and the other does not. Indeed, sex is a frequent source of conflict for couples (Papp et al., 2013), partly due to the vulnerability it requires to self-disclose one's sexual needs and desires (Montesi et al., 2011). In a sample of

undergraduate students who were either single or in a relationship, Bonache and colleagues (2019) reported that attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with higher sexual coercion victimization through the use of more demanding and withdrawing communication strategies in conflictual situations. The demand/withdraw communication pattern has also been associated with higher levels of sexual coercion victimization in women (Pickover et al., 2017). According to Katz and Myhr (2008), the use of verbal sexual coercion could even be considered as a specific case of demand/withdraw communication in which one partner insists on sex (demand) while the other refuses either actively or passively (withdraw). As such, sexual coercion between romantic partners could, in itself, represent a manifestation of a destructive communication pattern, highlighting the necessity of examining it using both partners' perspectives. Yet, empirical supports for these associations remain scarce as no study, to our knowledge, has examined whether such associations differ in same- and cross-gender couples, and no research on sexual coercion has included the examination of the withdraw/withdraw and demand/demand communication patterns. Still, an examination of the roles of communication patterns and their associations with attachment insecurities and sexual coercion could offer practitioners concrete intervention targets to reduce sexual coercion in couples.

The Current Study

The current study aimed at exploring how attachment insecurities are related to sexual coercion victimization through their associations with the way couples communicate during conflicts using a community-based sample of couples (see Figure 1). To account for the limitations of previous studies, the current research used the couple as a unit of analysis to account for the dyadic nature of the study variables. Although the use of a dyadic framework to understand the factors related to couples' well-being and functioning is becoming increasingly popular (e.g., Callaci et al.,

2021; Dandurand et al., 2013), this framework has been less commonly used to study partner violence (Sommer et al., 2019), especially sexual coercion. In the current study, it was expected that attachment insecurities would be positively associated with more frequent sexual coercion victimization in respondents and their partners (direct actor and partner effects) and that these associations would be mediated by lower constructive communication and higher use of all types of destructive communication patterns (demand/withdraw, withdraw/withdraw or demand/demand). To date, very few studies have examined whether the associations between attachment, communication patterns, and IPV differ according to the gender of the participants and the gender of their partner. Yet, previous research has suggested gender differences in the associations between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion, as well as in the use of specific communication patterns (Eldridge et al., 2007). Considering these potential differences, and to account for the limitations of previous research, the current study explored whether the studied associations differ according to the gender of participants, the gender of the partner, and the gender of the dyad (i.e., same- and cross-gender).

Method

Participants

The sample was comprised of 145 French-Canadian couples recruited in the province of Quebec, including 123 cross-gender (women-men) and 22 same-gender couples (15 women-women, 7 men-men). One participant identified as a trans man and was analyzed as a man. On average, participants were aged 30.8 years ($SD = 10.5$, range = 18–79), had been in their current relationship for 6.3 years ($SD = 7.8$, range = 0–45), and had studied for 16 years ($SD = 3.0$), which is equivalent to an undergraduate studies degree. Participants defined themselves as Caucasian (57%), French-Canadian from the province of Quebec (68%), First Nations (1%),

Asian (2%), Hispanic or Latino (2%), Middle Eastern (1.5%), European (4%). The sample was comprised of full-time workers (57%), full-time students (29%), part-time workers (6%) and part-time students (3%), retirees (1.5%), unemployed (1.5%) and persons on parental leave (1.5%). Participants defined themselves as heterosexual (68%), homosexual (10%), bisexual (10%), pansexual (1%), and queer (1%). Couples were either in a cohabiting relationship (45%), dating (40%), married (11%), or polyamory (1%), and 29% had children.

Procedure

Participants were invited, through social media and research associations' and universities' email distribution lists, to complete an anonymous online survey on couples' sexuality. Eligible participants had to be 18 years and older, able to read French, reside in the province of Quebec and had to be involved in an intimate relationship for at least 12 months. To recruit both members of the couple, individuals who answered the survey (the Respondent) were invited to provide their partner's (the Partner) email address so that a link for the survey would be sent automatically to them. A total of 522 respondents completed the questionnaire and transmitted their partners' email address. Of the invited partners, 310 never replied to the invitation and 67 couples were removed because they did not fully complete the questionnaires (thus using their right to withdraw from the study). Couples in which both partners completed the questionnaires ($n = 145$) were then paired using an alpha-numerical code. As recommended by West and colleagues (2008) for the testing of gender effects, participants were then randomly assigned to "respondents" and "partners".

Measures

Sample Characteristics

Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, education, and occupation. Questions about their relationship status, the duration of the relationship, and the number of children were also included.

Attachment Insecurities

The short version of the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR-12; Lafontaine et al., 2016) was used to measure attachment insecurities. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and averaged to form two subscales, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, with higher scores indicating greater attachment insecurity. The ECR-12 was validated using five samples, including members of same-gender and cross-gender couples, and has good psychometric properties, including a test-retest stability of .53 to .82 over a 1-year period (Lafontaine et al., 2016). In the present sample, both subscales showed good internal consistency (anxiety, $\alpha = .85$ for respondents and $\alpha = .86$ for partners; avoidance, $\alpha = .84$ for respondents and $\alpha = .81$ for partners), which is comparable to the original (Brennan et al., 1998) and abridged scale (Lafontaine et al., 2016).

Couple Communication Patterns

The French version of the Communication Pattern Questionnaire-Short Form (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; translated by Lussier, 1995) was used to measure participants' perception of communication when attempting to resolve conflicts. For each of the eleven items, participants were asked to rate, on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely), to what extent did certain communication patterns occur in their relationship when they tried to solve a relationship problem. Scores for the five subscales were created by averaging the rating of relevant items, higher scores indicating a higher likelihood of the communication

pattern being present: constructive communication (four items: $\alpha = .74$ for respondents and $\alpha = .68$ for partners), “I demand/My partner withdraws” (three items: $\alpha = .65$ for respondents and $\alpha = .57$ for partners), “My partner demands/I withdraw” (three items: $\alpha = .56$ for respondents and $\alpha = .65$ for partners), Demand/Demand (one item), Withdraw/Withdraw (one item). Reliability coefficients for all subscales were similar to the original measure’s coefficients (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In our sample, interobserver reliability (i.e., the agreement between respondents and their partners in reports of communication patterns) was of .90 for items pertaining to constructive communication, of .83 for “I demand/My partner withdraws”, of .76 for “My partner demands/I withdraw”, of .72 for Demand/Demand, and of .87 for Withdraw/Withdraw.

Sexual Coercion Victimization

A French translation (Authors blinded for review) of the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004) was used to measure sexual coercion victimization by a romantic partner. The SCIRS shows adequate psychometric properties (Shackelford & Goetz, 2004), including good convergent validity ($r = .50, p < .01$) with the Violence Assessment Index (Dobash et al., 1995). Each of the 34 items invited participants to assess, on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (act did not occur) to 5 (act occurred 11 or more times), the frequency of each tactic of sexual coercion by the partner in the past 12 months (the original measure only assessed in the past month). Scores to each of the items were averaged to form a total score indicating the frequency of sexual coercion victimization in the past year, with higher scores indicating a higher frequency of victimization. In the present sample, scores showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$ for respondents and $\alpha = .86$ for partners), which is similar to the original scale (Shackelford & Goetz, 2004).

Data analysis

Variables were screened for outliers and normality of distribution. Non-linear transformations were conducted for scores of attachment avoidance (square root), the withdraw/withdraw communication pattern (square root), as well as for sexual coercion victimization (logarithmic). Winsorization of the outliers was applied for sexual coercion victimization scores of one couple. Bivariate correlations were first conducted to assess preliminary associations among the study variables using SPSS 25. To account for the statistical interdependence that might exist between the study variables of partners from the same couple, an Actor-Partner-Interdependence-Model (APIM) framework (Kenny et al., 2006) was used. Data were analyzed using multilevel linear model analyses based on the Actor–Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM; Ledermann et al., 2011) in SPSS 25. As per recommendations from West and colleagues (2008), the gender of the participants and of the couples was analyzed using a factorial method, which allowed to examine three potential gender effects: respondent gender (RGender), partner gender (PGender), and dyad gender (i.e., same- or cross-gender, the interaction of RGender X PGender).

Analyses were conducted sequentially. First, direct actor and partner effects between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion victimization were examined, with the inclusion of gender effects as potential moderators. Second, couple communication patterns were analyzed as mediators of the dyadic associations between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion victimization. To do so, associations between both partners' attachment insecurities and couple communication patterns, moderated by gender variables (RGender, PGender, and RGender X PGender), were tested. Every couple's communication pattern, moderated by gender variables, was then examined in relation to sexual coercion victimization. When direct effects of attachment insecurities on couple communication patterns, and of couple communication patterns on sexual coercion victimization, were statistically significant, indirect effects were estimated (Hayes,

2018). These indirect effects were computed using Hayes's (2018) MCMED macro for SPSS with 95% confidence intervals based on 10,000 Monte Carlo samples. Confidence intervals that did not include zero indicated a significant indirect effect. The PROCESS macro for SPSS was used to interpret significant interactions with gender and dyad gender variables.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Mean scores and correlations for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Statistically significant correlations were found between most variables, which allowed us to test the APIMeM. In the current sample, 40% ($n = 58$) of respondents and 40% ($n = 58$) of partners reported having sustained sexual coercion by their romantic partner at least once in the past 12 months. A total of 54 couples (37%) reported no sexual coercion, whereas in 34 couples (23%) only the respondent reported sexual coercion victimization, in 34 couples (23%) only the partner reported sexual coercion victimization and in 24 couples (16%) both the respondent and the partner reported sexual coercion victimization in the last 12 months. For victimization differences according to the gender of the dyad, sexual coercion was experienced by 43% ($n = 53$) of cross-gender couples, 20% ($n = 3$) of same-gender women-women couples, and 29% ($n = 2$) of same-gender men-men couples. In cross-gender couples, 49% ($n = 61$) of women and 36% ($n = 44$) of men reported having sustained sexual coercion at least once in the past 12 months.

Direct Associations Between Attachment Insecurities and Sexual Coercion Victimization

Direct links between attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and sexual coercion victimization, moderated by gender, are presented in Table 2. Only one significant actor effect was found, indicating that respondents who reported higher attachment avoidance were more

likely to report that they felt sexually coerced by their partner. No other significant direct effect nor gender effect were observed.

The Mediating Role of Couple Communication Patterns

Results for the direct associations between attachment insecurities and communication patterns, as well as between communication patterns and sexual coercion victimization are reported in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively. Significant results and indirect effects (all small or very small), are summarized below.

Constructive Communication

In the paths between attachment insecurities and constructive communication, significant actor and partner effects were found: higher attachment avoidance was related to lower levels of constructive communication in respondents and their partners (Table 3). In turn, a significant actor effect suggested that the lower use of constructive communication was associated with respondents being more likely to report having felt sexually coerced by their partner (Table 4). Two significant indirect effects were supported by the data: respondents' ($B = .084$, 95% CI [.015, .182]) and partners' ($B = .103$, 95% CI [.022, .213]) attachment avoidance was related to higher sexual coercion victimization in the respondents through lower levels of constructive communication.

I Demand/My Partner Withdraws

Analyses conducted with attachment insecurities and the "I demand/my partner withdraws" communication pattern (the respondent demands/the partner withdraws) yielded two significant effects: respondents with higher attachment anxiety, and partners with higher attachment

avoidance, reported higher levels of the “I demand/my partner withdraws” communication pattern (Table 3). In turn, significant actor and partner effects were found between this communication pattern and higher levels of the respondents’ and their partners’ sexual coercion victimization (Table 4), indicating that the more respondents and partners reported experiencing the “I demand/my partner withdraws” pattern, the more both partners felt they had sustained sexual coercion. The partner effect between the communication pattern and partners’ report of sexual coercion victimization was moderated by dyad gender: it was significant in participants involved in same-gender couples, but not in participants involved in cross-gender couples. Four significant indirect effects were identified. Respondents’ attachment anxiety was associated with higher levels of sexual coercion victimization in both respondents ($B = .075$, 95% CI [.016, .156]) and partners ($B = .062$, 95% CI [.010, .135]) through higher levels of the “I demands/my partner withdraws” communication pattern. Partners’ attachment avoidance was also associated with higher levels of sexual coercion victimization in both respondents ($B = .104$, 95% CI [.031, .198]) and partners ($B = .085$, 95% CI [.018, .172]) through higher levels of this communication pattern.

My Partner Demands / I Withdraw

Analyses conducted between attachment insecurities and the “my partner demands/I withdraw” communication pattern (the partner demands/the respondent withdraws) also yielded significant actor effects: respondents with higher attachment anxiety and with higher attachment avoidance reported higher levels of the “my partner demands/I withdraw” communication pattern (Table 3). In turn, significant actor and partner effects were found between the “my partner demands/I withdraw” communication pattern and higher levels of sexual coercion victimization reported by respondents and their partners (Table 4), indicating that the more respondents and partners reported experiencing the “my partner demands/I withdraw” pattern, the more they both felt they

had sustained sexual coercion. Four significant indirect effects were also found. Respondents' attachment anxiety was associated with higher levels of sexual coercion victimization in both respondents ($B = .082$, 95% CI [.020, .160]) and partners ($B = .042$, 95% CI [.001, .102]) through higher levels of the "My partner demands/I withdraw" communication pattern. Respondents' attachment avoidance was also associated with higher levels of sexual coercion victimization in both respondents ($B = .112$, 95% CI [.041, .203]) and partners ($B = .058$, 95% CI [.002, .130]) through higher levels of the "My partner demands/I withdraw" communication pattern.

Demand / Demand

In the paths between attachment insecurities and the demand/demand communication pattern, significant actor and partner effects were found, indicating that respondents and their partners with higher attachment avoidance reported higher levels of the demand/demand communication pattern (Table 3). In turn, a significant actor effect suggested that the more respondents reported experiencing the demand/demand communication pattern, the more likely they felt sexually coerced by their partner (Table 4). However, a significant interaction with the gender of the partner was found, indicating that this association was only significant in respondents who were partnered with men, but not with women. One significant indirect effect was found: partners' attachment avoidance was related to higher sexual coercion victimization in respondents through higher levels of the demand/demand communication pattern ($B = .144$, 95% CI [.036, .286]).

Withdraw / Withdraw

Significant actor effects were found, indicating that respondents with higher attachment avoidance reported using more of the withdraw/withdraw communication pattern (Table 3), and

in turn, the more they felt sexually coerced in their relationship (Table 4). Despite these significant paths, the indirect effect was not significant.

Discussion

The current study is the first that has highlighted the mediating role of destructive communication patterns, and the moderating role of the gender of the participants and the dyad, in the associations between attachment insecurities and subtle forms of sexual coercion victimization within couples. By means of a dyadic approach, our results extend previous research, as they reveal some of the interactional mechanisms linked with the victimization of subtle forms of sexual coercion, while accounting for potential variations within same- and cross-gender couples. Overall, results showed that: 1) attachment insecurities are associated with the perception of the use of more destructive communication patterns which are, in turn, related to more sexual coercion victimization; 2) attachment avoidance is more consistently associated (actor and partner effects) with communication patterns and sexual coercion victimization than attachment anxiety and; 3) few gender effects were found, indicating that the gender of the participants and of the dyad rarely modifies the strength of associations between variables.

Results supported our hypotheses and suggest that attachment insecurities are related to the perception of a diminished ability to express one's needs and emotions constructively and to be open to negotiation and compromise during conflicts with a romantic partner. Results also imply that the perception of engaging in less constructive communication in the face of conflicts with the partner might manifest in the sexual aspects of one's relationship, through the more frequent feeling of being coerced by the partner. In other words, attachment insecurities might manifest in dysfunctional communication patterns with the partner in ways that refrain individuals from asserting their emotions or their needs, which might extend to how they

experience sex with the partner. Our results thus emphasize the presence of indirect associations, rather than direct ones (except for the association between respondents' attachment avoidance and sexual coercion victimization) between the study variables. This is in line with the results of Bonache and colleagues (2019), who also found that attachment insecurities were indirectly associated with sexual coercion through the use of destructive communication behaviors. Yet, our results go a step further as our sample of couples allowed to unveil the dyadic associations between the study variables, which was not possible with the sample of undergraduates recruited by Bonache and colleagues (2019).

Attachment Avoidance

Results from this study emphasized the key role of attachment avoidance, in respondents and their partners, in understanding sexual coercion victimization through avoidant individuals' lower use of constructive communication and higher use of demand/withdraw and demand/demand communication patterns. More precisely, we found that respondents and partners who reported more attachment avoidance were more likely to withdraw when their partner demands, which in turn, was related to more frequent instances of sexual coercion victimization in both partners. Avoidant individuals' tendency to withdraw from a demanding partner during conflicts has been observed in past studies (Pietromonaco et al., 2004) and might reflect participants' discomfort with interpersonal dependence, intimacy, and vulnerability (Fournier et al., 2011). In turn, considering that those with elevated attachment avoidance are more likely to avoid sexual contacts in the context of committed relationships (Brassard et al., 2007), this avoidance might, inadvertently, put them at higher risk of sustaining sexual pressure from their partner. As suggested by Davis (2006), avoidantly-attached individuals might experience coercion through their partner's use of increasingly insisting strategies as a result of unsuccessful attempts to

engage in consensual sex. These relational experiences show similarities with the demand/withdraw communication pattern, which often takes place when one person attempts to get their partner to meet a need, or to connect with them, and the partner either refuses, remains still, or withdraws. In response, the demanding partner increases their demands for connection, which are answered with further attempts to avoid the subject, withdrawing or opposing behaviors (Pietromonaco et al., 2004). In accordance with results of a study led by Katz and Myhr (2008), our results suggest that subtle forms of sexual coercion could reflect similar interactional patterns to the demand/withdraw communication pattern when couples negotiate sexuality.

Yet, our results showed that withdrawing was also associated with sexual coercion victimization in partners, indirectly suggesting that avoidant respondents also use sexual coercion. This is in line with the results of previous studies that have found that avoidantly attached individuals tend to engage in sex as a way to fulfill their own needs with little consideration for their partner's needs and desires (Karantzas et al., 2016). Attachment avoidance is also known to be associated with emotional suppression as a way to deal with discomfort with intimacy or negative emotions (Brassard et al., 2014). In circumstances surrounding sex with a romantic partner, this tendency might prevent them from either asserting their own sexual needs or acknowledging their partner's sexual interest or disinterest, thus possibly increasing their likelihood of being both the victim and the perpetrator of sexual coercion.

Surprisingly, when respondents reported the "I demand/my partner withdraws" communication pattern, their partner reported higher sexual coercion victimization, but only in same-gender couples. These results suggest that some same-gender couples might be more likely to experience coercion in their sexual exchanges as a result of engaging in demand/withdraw communication patterns. For the demanding partner, the demand/withdraw communication

pattern is about trying to have one's needs met from their elusive partner. For LGBTQ people, this might trigger known feelings of betrayal, helplessness, or aloneness (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Indeed, these individuals have been found to show an elevated risk of exposure to discrimination trauma and attachment insecurities, which is also related to more difficult relational experiences, including victimization (Keating & Muller, 2019). The demanding partner might perhaps become coercive in an attempt to get reassurance from the partner through sexuality, as a way to get rid of feelings of isolation and powerlessness. For the withdrawing partner, the demand/withdraw communication pattern is about trying to respect one's boundaries and individuality in the face of an attacking, blaming, or demanding other. As such, it is possible that when they try to respond to a demanding partner in a way that will protect the relationship or avoid known negative interpersonal experiences, they find it particularly difficult to either set limits, express their unwillingness or refuse their partner's advances.

Our results emphasized another gender effect: both partners' attachment avoidance was related to higher levels of the demand/demand communication pattern (which arises when both partners mutually criticize or blame one another), which in turn, was associated with higher sexual coercion victimization in respondents, but only when they were partnered with men. These results are counterintuitive because conflictual patterns of mutual blame have been previously associated with higher attachment anxiety (not avoidance) in both partners as a result of hostile reciprocity when they feel they are not being acknowledged (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Yet, it is possible that, since those high in attachment avoidance are less comfortable expressing their needs and emotions and tend to suppress them, they might accumulate frustrations over time (Brassard et al., 2014) and come to express them in a criticizing and blaming way. Perhaps respondents who are high in attachment avoidance, and whose partner is also high in attachment avoidance, perceive conflicts as more explosive since they occur when both partners' suppression

of frustrations and other negative emotions fires back into mutual blame. In turn, avoidant respondents who experience a demand/demand communication pattern when discussing conflictual issues may feel they are even less able to assert their sexual needs or unwillingness to have sex when they are partnered with men. Indeed, since sex is often a conflictual issue in couples (Papp et al., 2013), and since verbal attacks by men partners are known to exert more harrowing consequences to one's sense of security as opposed to attacks from women partners (Ansara & Hindin, 2011), those partnered with men may be more susceptible to experience sexual coercion as a way to avoid conflicts with the partner. Previous research has indeed revealed that, during disagreements, men tend to engage in more dominant behaviors than women (Katz & Myrh, 2008). More research must be conducted to better understand these ramifications.

Attachment Anxiety

Results from this study have yielded no significant direct association between attachment anxiety and sexual coercion victimization. Yet, findings showed small significant indirect associations between attachment anxiety and sexual coercion victimization, which partly supports results from Karantzas and colleagues' (2016) systematic review and this study's hypotheses. Specifically, our results suggest that reporting higher levels of attachment anxiety was associated with reporting using the demand/withdraw communication pattern, which was in turn related to more sexual coercion victimization (actor effect). As such, those who are preoccupied with fears of abandonment and rejection, who overestimate threats to the relationship and who are hypervigilant to signs of unavailability from their partner, tend to engage in communication patterns in which one partner makes demands, criticizes or nags while the other avoids confrontation, becomes defensive or withdraws. Extending past research (Rodriguez, 2000) that has highlighted the role of attachment anxiety in the use of demanding behaviors towards a

withdrawing partner, the current results suggest that attachment anxiety is associated with either position in this communication pattern (“I demand/my partner withdraws” and “My partner demands/I withdraw”). This suggests that those high in attachment anxiety tend to fluctuate between demanding and withdrawing behaviors during conflicts as a result of conflicting needs for proximity and protection against rejection by the partner (Bonache et al., 2019; Fowler & Dillow, 2011). In turn, these communication behaviors, fueled by a chronic need for approval and connection, are related to more frequent instances of sexual coercion victimization. When anxiously attached individuals experience conflicts in which demands for connection are met with avoidance, dismissal or defensiveness, it is possible that they generalize their experience to discussions about sex, and infer that, in order to protect the relationship and avoid rejection or withdrawal, they must comply with their partner’s needs (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Harper et al., 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012).

Results also showed that when respondents reported higher levels of attachment anxiety, their partner reported higher levels of sexual coercion victimization and that these partner effects were also mediated by the use of the demand/withdraw communication pattern (“I demand/my partner withdraws” and “My partner demands/I withdraw”). Results are in line with previous studies showing links between attachment anxiety and sexual coercion perpetration in couples (Brassard et al., 2007) indicating that anxiously attached individuals might become insisting or coercive as a way to obtain reassurance through sexuality. This explanation is also consistent with our discussion presented above regarding sexual coercion as a manifestation of the demand/withdraw communication pattern during which one partner insists on a sexual connection while the other withdraws or resists.

Taken together, the actor and partner effects of attachment anxiety suggest that, in couples in which one partner is hypervigilant to signs of rejection and unavailability from their partner,

both partners report sustaining sexual coercion. Results are in line with research that has emphasized that those who show higher attachment anxiety tend to perceive sex as a way to alleviate their insecurities and get reassured about the love of their partner (Birnbaum, 2010). This perspective on sex, might, on one hand, render anxiously-attached individuals more susceptible to comply with their partner's sexual needs despite their unwillingness as a way to protect the relationship and, on the other, incite increasingly pressuring and threatening verbal behaviors to engage in sexual activity as a way to alleviate attachment insecurities (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012).

Implications for Clinical Work with Couples

The current study holds significant implications for couple therapy. Our results highlight the especially high occurrence of sexual coercion within romantic relationships which accentuates the need for practitioners to 1) systematically assess whether couples experience subtle forms of sexual coercion and 2) educate and guide couples in recognizing these sexual practices and their detrimental effects on their relationship in order to prevent further victimization. However, as stated by Maas-DeSpain and Todahl (2014), sexual coercion has received very little attention in the psychotherapy literature. As such, practitioners who specialize in couple therapy may know very little about ways to assess and treat sexual coercion in couples. Assessing a couple's sexual scripts (i.e., cognitive guidelines that instruct the behaviors and expression of sexuality; Gagnon & Simon, 1973), especially how partners show sexual interest to each other, and what happens if one partner makes sexual advances and the other does not want to engage in sexual activities (Stern & Heise, 2019), could allow practitioners to assess and target subtle forms of sexual coercion. Assessment for sexual coercion can also be introduced using self-report measures (i.e., using the SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004), or by asking directly – during joint or individual

sessions (Stith et al., 2004) – whether or not they sometimes engage in sexual activities because they fear their partner’s reaction if they refuse. The high occurrence of this form of sexual coercion in our sample also supports the need to educate couples, from the general population and in clinical settings, as well as practitioners, on the distinction between normative seduction tactics, and behaviors reflecting psychological manipulation to have sex with their partner. Results also offer specific empirically-based levers of change for couples to decrease sexual coercion within their relationship. To this effect, couple interventions that aim to increase constructive communication and reduce destructive communication patterns, such as Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy (Baucom et al., 2015) could help prevent sexual coercion within couples by helping partners identify their positions in detrimental patterns of interactions and learn new ways to express their needs. Interventions drawn from Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (Johnson, 2020), which focus specifically on helping partner voice their unmet attachment needs in a constructive manner, could also decrease the potential effect of attachment insecurities on sexual coercion. With these interventions, practitioners could help couples to communicate their attachment needs effectively, including those related to sexuality. This could contribute to increase the feeling of safety within the relationship, and thus prevent some of the manifestations of attachment insecurities on sexually coercive interactions.

Finally, the presence of significant gender effects highlights the need for practitioners to account for the potential specificities in the experience of sexual coercion in partners from same-gender couples or who identify as LGBTQ people as their experience of victimization, even within romantic relationships, differs from cross-gender couples. Indeed, our results emphasize that attachment insecurities and destructive communication patterns can be more deleterious for participants’ sexuality when they are in a same-gender relationship, which supports the need for practitioners to consider the potential influence of minority stress (i.e., internalized homophobia,

stigma conscientiousness) on victimization experiences in LGBTQ couples (Edwards et al., 2015). Results have also accentuated that interactions of mutual blame were associated with higher victimization only in participants who were in a relationship with a man. These results suggest that practitioners should pay particular attention in the therapeutic context to potential gender imbalances during conflicts, which tend to be experienced by those in a relationship with a man, as opposed to with a woman.

Limitations and Future Research

A few limitations should be considered when interpreting our findings. First, the design of this research being cross-sectional, the direction or temporal order of the associations between the study variables cannot be ascertained. Future studies should examine these associations using longitudinal designs, which could help inform on the directions of effects between variables. For example, sexual coercion might lead to more destructive communication patterns, which could affect partners' attachment insecurities. These future studies could also include the examination of additional variables related to sexual coercion victimization, such as the endorsement of normative beliefs about sexual coercion (Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2018), sex motives (Brousseau et al., 2012), and the occurrence of other forms of partner violence in the relationship (Sommer et al., 2017). Second, even though they have been observed in previous studies (see Crenshaw et al., 2017), the low reliability of the communication patterns scale might alter the questionnaire's ability to measure couple communication validly. Future studies could resort to observational methods to better assess communication patterns and could assess how partners formulate their demands and refusals for sex more specifically. Third, the SCIRS includes subscales that allow differentiating between different sexually coercive acts such as resource manipulation or violence (i.e., withholding or giving benefits to make the other feel obligated to have sex, threatening or

using violence and/or physical force), commitment manipulation (i.e., using the relationship to force sex, as a way to prove commitment or love) or defection threat (i.e., hinting or threatening to pursue sex or a relationship with another person). Future research could thus examine whether attachment insecurities and communication patterns are associated, similarly or differently, with each subscale. Finally, since our sample was limited in size and was mostly comprised of young highly educated working participants, the generalization of the results might be limited. Future studies could aim at examining whether the associations found in this study are also observable in couples who seek therapy for issues regarding communication or sexuality. Future research could also examine, using a larger sample, whether the associations between variables vary according to the relational status of couples, for instance, whether they are dating, cohabiting, or married.

Conclusion

The current study found empirical support for the mediational role of communication patterns in the associations between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion victimization in cross- and same-gender couples from the community. Findings emphasize the importance of increasing awareness and prevention efforts aimed at helping couples understand the ways attachment insecurities and destructive communication patterns can manifest in the experience of subtle forms of sexual coercion victimization, with a specific focus given to couples from the LGBTQ community.

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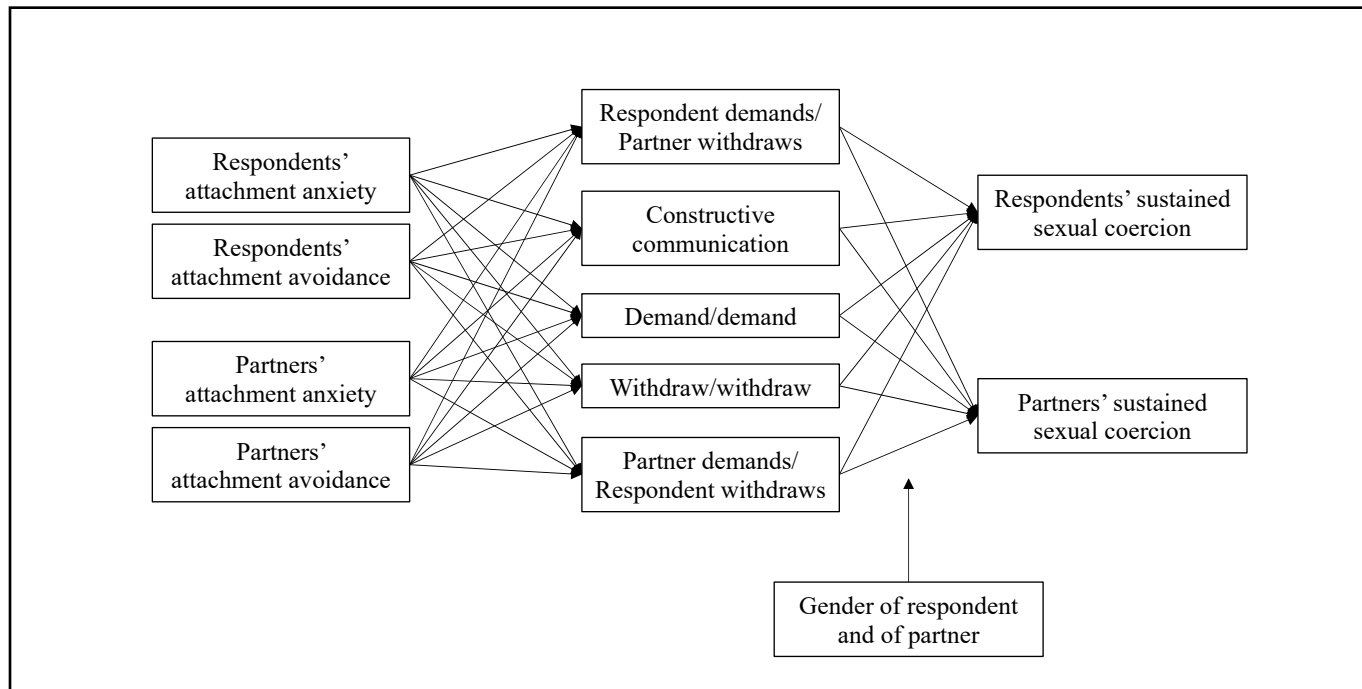
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Figure 1. Associations among Attachment Insecurities, Couple Communication Patterns, and Sexual Coercion Victimization, Moderated by the Gender of Respondents and Partners



Note. Direct associations between attachment insecurities and sexual coercion victimization were also tested, but are not shown in the figure for clarity.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for Romantic Attachment, Couple Communication Patterns, and Sexual Coercion Victimization

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
. Attachment Anxiety R	—															
. Attachment Avoidance R ¹	.15	—														
. Constructive Communication R	-.30	-.48	—													
. RDemands/PWithdraws R	.32	.11	-.55	—												
. PDemands/RWithdraws R	.27	.30	-.49	.42	—											
. Demand/Demand R	.33	.34	-.77	.55	.55	—										
. Withdraw/Withdraw R ¹	.26	.30	-.60	.26	.34	.38	—									
. Sexual Coercion Victimization R ²	.17	.16	-.36	.31	.26	.44	.19	—								
. Attachment Anxiety P	.15	.24	-.24	.26	.22	.17	.20	.14	—							
0. Attachment Avoidance P ¹	.08	.30	-.41	.23	.09	.36	.30	.19	.20	—						
1. Constructive Communication P	-.04	-.42	.44	-.27	-.34	-.42	-.29	-.27	-.11	-.45	—					
2. RDemands/PWithdraws P	.05	.26	-.45	.27	.44	.48	.22	.24	.20	.33	-.56	—				
3. PDemands/RWithdraws P	.13	.24	-.38	.40	.12	.39	.14	.14	.23	.42	-.51	.54	—			
4. Demand/Demand P	.12	.28	-.41	.34	.37	.49	.10	.35	.10	.18	-.67	.64	.41	—		
5. Withdraw/Withdraw P ¹	.03	.26	-.27	.14	.22	.23	.23	.08	.07	.41	-.55	.32	.35	.29	—	
6. Sexual Coercion Victimization P ²	.06	.11	-.19	.05	.12	.16	-.03	.03	.03	.19	-.30	.41	.32	.24	.25	—
<i>M</i>	3.59	1.95	7.26	3.60	3.25	3.25	2.12	2.82	3.74	2.10	7.38	3.48	3.19	3.02	2.17	3.29
<i>SD</i>	1.47	.91	1.46	1.74	1.82	2.18	1.70	6.37	1.43	1.06	1.30	1.91	1.74	2.19	1.63	14.06

Note. R = Respondent. P = Partner. Significant correlations are in bold ($p < .05$). ¹A square root transformation was applied to minimise the departure from normality. ²A logarithmic transformation was applied to minimise the departure from normality.

Table 2. Standardized Effect Estimates of Direct Associations Between Attachment Insecurities and Sexual Coercion Moderated by Gender

Parameters	Effect estimates
RGender	-.107
PGender	.062
RAnxiety	.041
RAvoidance	.208*
PAnxiety	.165
PAvoidance	.184
RGender x PGender	-.106
RGender x RAnxiety	-.173
PGender x RAnxiety	-.132
RGender x PGender x RAnxiety	-.018
RGender x PAnxiety	.037
PGender x PAnxiety	.030
RGender x PGender x PAnxiety	.106
RGender x RAvoidance	.040
PGender x RAvoidance	.012
RGender x PGender x RAvoidance	.100
RGender x PAvoidance	.001
PGender x PAvoidance	.015
RGender x PGender x PAvoidance	.175

Note. RGender = respondent gender; PGender = partner gender; RAnxiety = respondent attachment anxiety; RAvoidance = respondent attachment avoidance; PAnxiety = partner attachment anxiety; PAvoidance = partner attachment avoidance.

* $p < .05$.

Table 3. Standardized Effect Estimates of Paths Between Attachment Insecurities and Couple Communication Patterns Moderated by Gender

Parameters	Effect estimates				
	Constructive communication	RDemands/ PWithdraws	PDemands/ RWithdraws	Demand/ Demand	Withdraw/ Withdraw
RGender	-.079	-.027	.057	-.026	.098
PGender	-.006	-.018	-.002	-.048	.106
RAnxiety	-.147	.260**	.271**	.160	.090
RAvoidance	-.302***	.075	.376***	.205*	.204*
PAnxiety	.032	.027	.040	.062	-.044
PAvoidance	-.369***	.307**	.110	.305**	.154
RGender x PGender	.025	-.095	-.029	-.060	.012
RGender x RAnxiety	.005	-.021	.070	-.009	-.020
PGender x RAnxiety	-.073	-.009	.036	-.037	-.024
RGender x PGender x RAnxiety	-.046	.060	.090	.006	.027
RGender x PAnxiety	.111	-.070	-.180	-.027	-.079
PGender x PAnxiety	.023	-.113	-.111	-.001	-.010
RGender x PGender x PAnxiety	.058	-.051	-.071	.008	-.085
RGender x RAvoidance	.037	-.107	-.037	-.020	-.022
PGender x RAvoidance	.028	-.056	-.021	.051	.032
RGender x PGender x RAvoidance	.012	-.050	.118	.095	-.098
RGender x PAvoidance	-.131	.187	.016	.115	.048
PGender x PAvoidance	-.062	.128	-.050	.019	.030
RGender x PGender x PAvoidance	-.063	.193	.105	.072	-.046

Note. RGender = respondent gender; PGender = partner gender; RAnxiety = respondent attachment anxiety; RAvoidance = respondent attachment avoidance; PAnxiety = partner attachment anxiety; PAvoidance = partner attachment avoidance; RDemands/PWithdraws = Respondent demands/Partner withdraws; PDemands/RW = Partner demands/Respondent withdraws.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Standardized Effect Estimates of Paths Between Couple Communication Patterns and Sexual Coercion Victimization Moderated by Gender

Parameters	Effect estimates				
	Constructive Communication	RDemands/ PWithdraws	PDemands/ RWithdraws	Demand/ Demand	Withdraw/ Withdraw
RGender	-.130	-.031	-.102	-.053	-.134
PGender	.046	.116	.074	.106	.030
RCommPattern	-.282**	.282***	.305***	.475***	.293**
PCommPattern	-.173	.230**	.156*	.030	.133
RGender x PGender	-.076	-.023	-.067	-.050	-.094
RGender x RCommPattern	-.074	-.083	.102	.247	-.008
PGender x RCommPattern	-.066	-.024	.055	.302*	.045
RGender x PGender x RCommPattern	.008	-.053	.052	.216	.098
RGender x PCommPattern	.005	.132	-.005	-.219	.096
PGender x PCommPattern	-.021	.070	.018	-.215	.126
RGender x PGender x PCommPattern	-.128	.249**	.125	-.053	.205

Note. RGender = respondent gender; PGender = partner gender; RCommPattern = respondent communication pattern; PCommPattern = partner communication pattern; RAnxiety = respondent attachment anxiety; RAvoidance = respondent attachment avoidance; PAnxiety = partner attachment anxiety; PAvoidance = partner attachment avoidance; RDemands/PWithdraws = Respondent demands/Partner withdraws; PDemands/RWithdraws = Partner demands/Respondent withdraws
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.