I'm Secure, But You're Not: Implications of Attachment Matches for Conflict Resolution and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Recent research on communication in close relationships has focused on how relational uncertainty—or the inability to predict and explain behavior in relationships—is associated with poor relationship outcomes. Although the idea of relational uncertainty provides a useful framework from which the link between romantic attachment, conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction may be understood, research to date has largely ignored how specific matches (or mismatches) of attachment styles within couples contribute to these outcomes. To this end, the purpose of this project was to examine conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction among "attachment-matched" and "attachment-unmatched" couples. In two studies, couples completed measures of attachment, conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction. In contrast to some previous research, results suggest that it is more beneficial to have a partner that is securely attached than to have two similarly-insecurely-attached partners.

Keywords: Attachment, conflict resolution, relationship satisfaction, relational uncertainty

Over the past several decades, research has addressed the discomfort associated with experiencing uncertainty, which involves being unable to predict or explain behavior (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975). More recently, approaches involving investigations into relational uncertainty have begun applying this idea to relationships (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002). Relational uncertainty, or a lack of confidence within close relationships, has been linked to adult attachment styles (Simpson, 1990), which contribute to conflict resolution styles used within relationships and romantic relationship satisfaction (Pistole, 1989; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995). Although research has addressed these individual links, it has largely ignored how mismatches in attachment styles may contribute to relational uncertainty, leading to less effective conflict resolution styles and low levels of satisfaction in relationships. Thus, although not specifically measured in the current study, the framework of relational uncertainty provides a lens through which attachment researchers can understand the dynamics within couples. To this end, the purpose of this project was to examine conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction among "matched" and "unmatched" couples, setting the foundation for future studies on relational uncertainty.

Relational Uncertainty

Relational uncertainty refers to the amount of confidence that individuals have in their perceptions of involvement within close relationships, stemming from three sources: the self, the partner, and the relationship itself (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). The process of relationship uncertainty reduction is beneficial to the partner, but like conflict management and social support, the benefits of this reduction depend on communication choices that are sensitive to the circumstances in the relationship. In this way, individuals' relational uncertainty is also associated with their own turmoil, anger, sadness, and fear; however, partners' uncertainty also predicts turmoil, anger, and sadness for individuals (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010).

Relational uncertainty can also result in problems in communication within the relationship. Relational uncertainty is linked to the frequency and duration talking over the phone (Jin & Peña, 2010). Moreover, individuals' perceptions of affiliation and involvement in their spouses' messages negatively predict relational uncertainty, whereas reports of dominance and perceptions of self- and relationship threat in spouses' messages positively predict relational uncertainty (Knobloch, Miller, Bond, & Mannone, 2007). Similarly, relational uncertainty is positively associated with anger, sadness, and fear of being confronted with unexpected conversations. Relational uncertainty also increases the difficulty of message processing (Knobloch, 2007), such that it requires that people draw inferences in the absence of sufficient contextual information (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) and escalates the difficulty of accurate interpretations by amplifying the face of threats in conversation because partners now feel like they have to guard against all possible threats (Knobloch, 2007). Relational uncertainty is also associated with cognitive (more than emotional) jealousy (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001) and even moderates the link between couples' work on a relationship and perceived quality of the relationship (Young, Curran, & Totenhagen, 2013).

Attachment

Not surprisingly, relational uncertainty has been linked to adult romantic attachment styles (Simpson, 1990). Individuals in relationships do not experience what is actually said or what actually occurs in interactions with their partners; instead, their experiences are of memories of interactions that are filtered through their internal working models (Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). In fact, anxiety over relationships positively predicts self, partner, and relationship uncertainty, whereas comfort with closeness negatively predicts self, partner, and relationship uncertainty (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001).

Pietromonaco, Greenwood, and Bartlett (2004) used attachment theory to explore conflict in adult relationships. They theorized that attachment styles predict expectations and beliefs individuals have about their partners and their relationships, what relationship goals they have, and—in turn—what thoughts, feelings, and behaviors they have during conflict. Securely-attached individuals believe their partners are available, are responsive, and will not abandon them. Therefore, securely-attached individuals use conflict as opportunity to increase intimacy. That is, they engage in self-disclosure during conflict. In contrast, preoccupied-attached individuals fear partners will abandon or not be available; therefore, they interpret conflict as threat and display intense emotions. Pietromonaco and colleagues further proposed that dismissing-attached individuals feel pressured to self-disclose and they do not want to do so, therefore, they interpret conflict as threat and either withdrawal or minimize the significance of the conflict. Fearful-attached individuals display a mixture of behaviors, much like the mixture of emotions they experience.

These adult romantic attachment styles are associated with various communication consequences, including conflict resolution styles and general levels of relationship satisfaction. For example, Creasy (2002) suggested that working models of attachment predict the emotional content of discussions during conflict management, and that this is at least as important as the strategies used to manage the conflict. In fact, secure attachment is associated with the use of constructive strategies and the inhibition of destructive strategies (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999; Jin & Peña, 2010; Reese-Weber & Marchand, 2002; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995; Shi, 2003). For example, securely-attached individuals engage in more self-disclosure and direct communication than insecurely-attached individuals because they believe in their own self-worth and they trust their partners to respond positively to them (Johnson, 2003). Similarly, securely-attached adults report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and are more likely to use integrated conflict resolution skills than individuals who are avoidantly or anxious/ambivalently attached (Pistole, 1989).

Attachment Style Matches

Not just the individual's attachment matters for the couple; that is, researchers should pay attention to the "match" of the attachment styles in the couple. Holmes and Johnson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis on attachment literature and found that when given a choice of hypothetical partners, individuals prefer others based on similarity (i.e., secure-secure; avoidant-avoidant; anxious-anxious). However, in terms of maintenance, preference by partners appears based on complementarity (secure-secure; avoidant-anxious; anxious-avoidant), suggesting that what may be most important is not self-enhancement or other relationship subgoals, but instead a confirmation of relationship expectations and a sense of self-consistency. Not surprisingly, securely attached partners are viewed as preferable to all types of individuals; however, among insecure partners, preoccupied were preferred over avoidant, where were preferred to ambivalent (Latty-Mann & Davis, 1996). In fact, some research has suggested preoccupied individuals are likely to be involved with dismissing individuals (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990), although other researchers have found little to no correlation between partners' attachment styles (Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1996; Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Watson et al., 2004).

Beyond preferences, matches in attachment styles themselves have consequences for the relationship partners. For example, Schmidt (2002) found that women with anxious attachment had partners with low levels of commitment and tended to also report low levels of commitment themselves, whereas women with avoidant attachment experienced low relationship satisfaction and their partners expressed low levels of relationship commitment. Schmidt also found that when categorized as similar or dissimilar (across personality traits, attachment styles, and sexual strategies), couples that were dissimilar had more positive outcomes than couples that were similar in style. In the same vein, couples in which both partners were secure reported more intimacy in their marriages and evaluated each other more favorably than couples in which one or both partners were insecure (Senchak & Leonard, 1992), although there were no differences between mixed and insecure couple types (i.e., similarity in insecurity did not lead to better adjustment than dissimilarity). However, this study did not differentiate between "dismissing avoidant" and "fearful avoidant" individuals and likely over-represented securely-attached individuals because of its limited focus on newly married couples.

Of particular interest, then, are the consequences associated with matched and un-matched attachment styles. That is, if insecure attachment is linked to relational uncertainty, then an insecurely attached individual should be prone to less effective conflict resolution styles and low levels of relationship satisfaction. But it is more beneficial for this individual to be in a relationship with a similarly-attached partner? Or should this person, for the sake of the relationship, seek a securely-attached one? To date, these questions have been relatively unaddressed, although one study found that couples in which both partners were securely attached reported healthier conflict communication than other couples (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Thus, the purpose of the current project was to examine differences in conflict resolution styles and satisfaction in romantic relationships by attachment match status.

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to determine if there is a difference in the average satisfaction and average use of conflict resolution styles between couples with "matched" attachment styles (i.e., secure-secure, dismissing-dismissing, fearful-fearful, and preoccupied-preoccupied) and "non-matched" attachment styles (i.e., every other combination of attachment). We expected that couples with "matched" attachment styles would report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and healthier conflict resolution styles (i.e., more problem solving as well as less conflict engagement, compliance, and withdrawal) than couples with "non-matched" attachment styles.

Method

Participants

Current and former non-traditional students (chosen because of their availability and because older students provide more opportunities for varied relationship experiences than younger, traditionally-aged students) from a small, private mid-western university were recruited in two ways. First, the researchers recruited participants from various classes providing a brief summary of the current research being conducted, methodology, and information about a gift card drawing as an incentive for research participation. An email signup sheet was distributed to

interested parties to receive a website link to access online questionnaires. Participants were informed the study consisted of four online questionnaires with an estimated completion time of 15 to 20 minutes. Second, participants were recruited through an e-mail that stated the nature of the study, the gift card drawing information, and included the survey link.

Seventy participants (35 couples) participated in the study for a chance to win a Simon gift card with a $50 value. Four couples were excluded because either they failed to identify gender or they indicated a same-sex relationship. Due to the small sample size, a homogenous sample of heterosexual couples was selected. Of the 31 remaining males, 87.10% were White; 6.45% were Black; 3.23% were American Indian or Alaska Native; and 3.23% were Hispanic or Latino. Men ranged in age from 25 to 64 years ($M = 40.29$, $SD = 11.61$). Of the 31 remaining women, 83.87% were White; 6.45% were Black; 3.23% were American Indian or Alaska Native; and 3.23% were Asian. The women ranged in age from 25 to 62 years ($M = 37.23$, $SD = 11.44$). Time in current relationships ranged from 2 to 43 years ($M = 12.76$, $SD = 11.01$), according to the men and from 2 to 43 years ($M = 11.52$, $SD = 9.64$) according to the women.

Materials

Satisfaction. Participants completed the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) to evaluate relationship satisfaction. Participants responded to seven items on a five-point scale. Sample questions from the RAS include "How well does your partner meet your needs?" How often do you wish you had not gotten into this relationship?" and "How many problems are there in your relationship?" In this study, internal consistency was high for both males and females (αs > .83). There were no differences in the levels of satisfaction reported by the partners. Thus, for the purposes of the study, an average level of satisfaction was computed for each couple.

Attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) is a 36-item scale used to evaluate attachment-related anxiety (i.e., the degree to which people were insecure vs. secure with respect to availability and receptiveness of intimate partners) and attachment-related avoidance (i.e., the degree to which people experienced distress in relation to proximity and interdependence). Participants responded to the 36 items on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). Sample questions from the ECR include "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down" and "I worry a fair amount about losing my partner." The two dimensions of attachment (i.e., anxiety and avoidance) can also be used to classify individuals into four attachment styles (secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful). The ECR has a high level of internal consistency for the anxiety and avoidance subscales when using an undergraduate sample (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). In this study, internal consistency was very high for both males and females (αs > .92).

Conflict. The Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994) is a 16-item measure that assesses four conflict resolution styles: constructive problem solving (e.g., "finding focusing on the problem at hand"), conflict engagement (e.g., "launching personal attacks"), withdrawal (e.g., "remaining silent for long periods of time"), and compliance (e.g., "not being willing to stick up for myself"). It is different from other conflict scales (e.g., Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009) in that it allows participants to rate their partners' conflict resolution behaviors separately from their own behaviors (which was preferable for this study). Thus, participants responded to the 16 items about their relationship partners' conflict resolution styles on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). In this study, internal consistency was high for both males and females, αs > .83.

For the current study, there was a difference in the levels of compliance reported by the couples, $t(30) = 2.52$, $p = .02$, such that men display more compliance ($M = 10.97$, $SD = 2.64$) than do women ($M = 9.32$, $SD = 3.43$). There were no differences reported, however, in the problem solving, conflict engagement, or withdrawal reported by the partners. Thus, for the purposes of the study, an average level of conflict resolution style was computed for each couple.

Procedure

Participants logged onto the survey site, submitted an electronic signature for a consent form, and supplied their student identification number or email address for the drawing. Upon receipt of the link, each couple could complete the surveys at any time provided they were submitted by the deadline. Neither the identification numbers nor the email addresses were ever linked to survey answers at any time. Upon giving consent, participants were directed to the RAS, the ECR, the CRSI, and the demographic portion of the survey. Subsequent to the final date of data collection, a participant was randomly selected to win the gift card for participating.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine differences in the average conflict resolution styles between "matched" ($N = 13$) and "unmatched" ($N = 18$) couples (see Table 1 for a breakdown of couple types). For conflict engagement, there was a difference between "matched" couples ($M = 7.38$, $SD = 2.15$) and "unmatched" couples ($M = 9.67$, $SD = 2.46$), $F(1, 29) = 7.21$, $p = .01$, partial eta squared = .20, such that "matched" couples use less conflict engagement in conflict resolution than do "unmatched" couples. For problem solving, there was a difference between "matched" couples ($M = 15.77$, $SD = 1.68$) and "unmatched" couples ($M = 13.94$, $SD = 2.00$), $F(1, 29) = 7.16$, $p = .01$, partial eta squared = .20, such that "unmatched" couples use less problem solving in conflict resolution than "matched" couples. For withdrawal, there was a difference between "matched" couples ($M = 8.46$, $SD = 1.82$) and "unmatched" couples ($M = 10.83$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 29) = 14.36$, $p = .001$, partial eta squared = .33, such that "matched" couples use less withdrawal in conflict resolution than "unmatched" couples. For compliance, there was a difference between "matched" couples ($M = 9.08$, $SD = 2.28$) and "unmatched" couples ($M = 10.92$, $SD = 2.35$), $F(1, 29) = 4.75$, $p = .04$, partial eta squared = .14, such that "matched" couples use less compliance in conflict resolution than "unmatched" couples. Finally, for satisfaction, there was a difference between "matched" couples ($M = 53.62$, $SD = 4.03$) and "unmatched" couples ($M = 47.06$, $SD = 7.08$), $F(1, 29) = 9.01$, $p = .005$, partial eta squared = .24, such that "matched" couples reported more relationship satisfaction than "unmatched" couples.

Table 1
"Matches" and "Non-Matches" of Attachment Styles for Couples in Study 1.

Males' Attachment Styles	Females' Attachment Styles			
	Secure	Fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissing
Secure	10	2	0	1
Fearful	4	1	4	0
Preoccupied	2	3	0	0
Dismissing	0	2	0	2

Note: Numbers on diagonal represent "matched" couples. $N = 31$ couples.

STUDY 2

Method

The results of Study 1 suggest that couples with "matched" attachment styles experience better relationship outcomes than couples with "non-matched" attachment styles. However, almost all of the couples in the "matched" sample reported secure attachment styles. Thus, it is still unclear whether the effect observed in Study 1 is a "match" effect or merely a secure attachment effect. Thus, the purpose of Study 2 was to determine if there is a difference in the average satisfaction and average use of conflict resolution styles by the number of partners in the couple with a secure attachment style (i.e., secure-secure, secure-insecure, insecure-insecure). Based on the results of Study 1, we expected that couples in which both partners reported secure attachment styles would report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and healthier conflict resolution styles (i.e., more problem solving as well as less conflict engagement, compliance, and withdrawal) than couples with only one or couples with no partners with secure attachment styles.

Participants

Two hundred thirty-four couples at a large public university participated in an online study in exchange for credits toward their research requirement for their General Psychology courses. All of the couples included a male-female pair; however, four of the couples were excluded because of failure to follow directions. Of the 230 remaining men, 66.09% were White; 13.91% were Black; 3.48% were American Indian or Alaska Native; 0.87% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 5.65% were Asian; 7.39% were Hispanic or Latino; and 2.61% were "Other" race/ethnicity. The men ranged in age from 18 to 53 years ($M = 21.29$, $SD = 4.19$). Of the 230 remaining women, 68.70% were White; 8.70% were Black; 3.91% were American Indian or Alaska Native; and 7.83% were Asian; 7.39% were Hispanic or Latina; and 3.48% were "Other" race/ethnicity. The women ranged in age from 18 to 43 years ($M = 20.19$, $SD = 3.36$). Time in current relationships ranged from 0 to 300 months ($M = 21.30$, $SD = 29.73$), according to the men, and from 0 to 300 months ($M = 21.57$, $SD = 29.90$) according to the women (note: the differences reported must reflect difference in perception or memory, because the males and females were reporting on the same relationships).

Of the men, 75.22% were single, never been married, not living with significant other; 13.91% were single, never been married, living with significant other; 2.61% were divorced; 0.43% were legally separated; and 7.83% were married. Of the 230 men, 97.37% reported that they were exclusively heterosexual, 0.88% reported that they were bisexual, and 1.75% reported that none of the options accurately represented their sexual orientation. Of the women, 75.22% were single, never been marred, not living with significant other; 14.78% were single, never been married, living with significant other; 0.43% were divorced; 1.30% were legally separated; and 8.26% were married. Of the 230 women, 92.11% reported that they were exclusively heterosexual, 0.44% reported that they were gay/lesbian, 3.95% reported that they were bisexual, and 3.51% reported that none of the options accurately represented their sexual orientation.

Materials

Satisfaction. Participants completed the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) to evaluate relationship satisfaction. Internal consistency in the present study was moderately high ($\alpha = .83$ for men and .85 for women). As in Study 1, there were no differences in the levels of satisfaction reported by men ($M = 28.99$, $SD = 4.89$) and women ($M = 28.69$, $SD = 5.19$). Thus, for the purposes of the study, an average level of satisfaction was computed for each couple.

Attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) was used to evaluate attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. Internal consistency for males and females was moderately high for both anxiety and avoidance ($\alpha s \geq .86$).

Conflict. Participants also completed the Conflict Resolution Scale Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994). Each member of the couple rated not only their own conflict resolution styles, but also their perceptions of their partners' conflict resolution styles. In the current study, internal consistency was moderate to moderately high for all subscales, for both males' and females' self-ratings and partner ratings ($\alpha s \geq .74$).

For the current study, there was a difference in the level of women's problem solving reported by the women ($M = 14.59$, $SD = 2.97$) and their partners ($M = 14.09$, $SD = 3.50$), $t(229) = -2.20$, $p = .03$, and there was a difference in the level of men's problem solving reported by the men ($M = 14.60$, $SD = 3.04$) and their partners ($M = 14.06$, $SD = 3.27$), $t(229) = 2.80$, $p = .006$. Both men and women reported greater use of problem solving as a conflict resolution scale than their partners reported about them. There were no differences in reports of men's use of conflict engagement ($M_{self} = 8.92$, $M_{partner} = 8.73$), withdrawal ($M_{self} = 9.58$, $M_{partner} = 9.34$), and compliance ($M_{self} = 8.60$, $M_{partner} = 8.64$), $ts(299) \leq 1.33$, ns. There were also no differences in reports of women's use of conflict engagement ($M_{self} = 9.12$, $M_{partner} = 9.36$), withdrawal ($M_{self} = 9.81$, $M_{partner} = 10.14$), and compliance ($M_{self} = 8.95$, $M_{partner} = 9.04$), $ts(229) \leq 1.66$, ns. There were also no differences in self-reports of men and women for any conflict resolution styles; thus, for the purposes of the study, an average level of conflict resolution style was computed for each couple.

Procedure

General Psychology students currently in romantic relationships volunteered to participate in the study. Once registered, these participants received a link directing them to an online survey site, where they completed the RAS, ECR, and CRSI (randomly ordered). Upon completion, these students were directed to have their partners complete the remaining questionnaires (consisting the same measures).

Results

The purpose of this study was to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1 to examine whether the advantages of attachment "matches" between couples is true of securely attached couples only. Thus, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine differences in average conflict resolution styles between "matched" ($N = 121$) and "unmatched" ($N = 109$) couples to replicate the results of Study 1 (see Table 2 for a breakdown of couple types). There were no differences in conflict engagement ($M_{matched} = 9.22$; $M_{unmatched} = 8.85$), problem solving ($M_{matched} = 13.76$; $M_{unmatched} = 14.42$), withdrawal ($M_{matched} = 9.77$; $M_{unmatched} = 9.70$), and compliance ($M_{matched} = 8.91$; $M_{unmatched} = 8.76$). There was a difference in satisfaction ($M_{matched} = 28.05$; $M_{unmatched} = 29.72$), $F(1, 228) = 7.71$, $p = .006$, partial eta squared = .03, such that "unmatched" couples reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction than "matched" couples, unlike the results of Study 1. These results clearly indicate that the advantages of attachment matches among couples disappear when matches include a greater variety of insecure attachment styles.

Next, a MANOVA was performed to examine the specific advantages associated with having a securely attached partner. Although the representation of specific combinations of attachment styles represented in the sample was much greater than in the Study 1, sample sizes for several specific combinations prevented analyses examining differences at this level. Therefore, analyses examined differences in the average conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction between three types of couples: those in which both partners have secure attachment styles (secure-secure; $n = 35$), those in which one partner has a secure attachment style and one partner has an insecure attachment style (secure-insecure; $n = 124$), and those in which both partners have insecure attachment styles (insecure-insecure; $n = 71$). Table 3 displays these results. To summarize, secure-secure couples reported lower levels of conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance, as well as higher levels of problem solving and satisfaction than insecure-insecure couples. Secure-secure couples reported lower levels of conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance than secure-insecure (but there were no differences on problem solving or satisfaction). Secure-insecure couples reported lower levels of conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance, as well as higher levels of problem solving and satisfaction than insecure-insecure couples.

Table 2
"Matches" and "Non-Matches" of Attachment Styles for Couples in Study 2.

Males' Attachment Styles	Females' Attachment Styles			
	Secure	Fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissing
Secure	35	8	21	2
Fearful	10	63	12	5
Preoccupied	18	16	22	2
Dismissing	6	6	3	1

Note: Numbers on diagonal represent "matched" couples. $N = 230$ couples.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics Measures of Conflict Resolution and Satisfaction by Attachment Styles.

Variable	Secure-Secure		Secure-Insecure		Insecure-Insecure		F (2, 227)
	M	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	
Conflict engagement	6.81[a]	(2.09)	8.66[b]	(2.95)	9.90[c]	(3.03)	16.57[***]
Problem solving	15.81[a]	(2.36)	15.02[a]	(2.46)	13.04[b]	(2.88)	20.90[***]
Withdrawal	7.64[a]	(2.64)	9.45[b]	(2.82)	10.49[c]	(2.83)	14.64[***]
Compliance	6.80[a]	(2.12)	8.34[b]	(2.38)	9.71[c]	(2.70)	20.19[***]
Satisfaction	31.80[a]	(2.68)	31.84[a]	(3.47)	26.70[b]	(4.56)	38.83[***]

Note. Measures of conflict resolution and satisfaction represent averages within couples. $N_{couples} = 230$. [***]$p < .05$.

Discussion

Taken together, the results of the current project indicate that the advantages of attachment matches among couples are instead advantages only of the presence of securely attached partners; that is, it is more beneficial to have a partner that is securely attached than to have two similarly-insecurely-attached partners. These findings contradict—at least in part—results from previous research suggesting that "matched" couples experience more relationship satisfaction than "unmatched" couples (cf. Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004) but supports findings proposing that attachment styles are linked to conflict resolution behaviors (e.g., Shi, 2003). Consequently, these results imply that clinicians who work with couples and families should consider the link between attachment styles and potential couple outcomes.

In addition to these findings, an interesting result of note is the pattern of differences in outcomes between secure-secure and secure-insecure couples. That is, although both sets of couples reported better outcomes than insecure-insecure couples, they differed from each other on negative (i.e., conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance) but not positive (i.e., problem solving and satisfaction). Recent research has suggested that, contrary to popular thought, positive information is remembered in better detail than negative information (Libkumen, Stabler, & Otani, 2004). Thus, it is possible that in relationships in which there is at least one securely-attached individual, positive experiences in the relationship are clearly remembered by the couple and enhance reports of problem solving as means of conflict resolution as well as overall relationship satisfaction. In contrast, without these enhancements present for negative information, fewer experiences are recalled and differences between couples with two securely-attached partners and only one securely-attached partner become evident. It is also possible that the difference is the result of information processing biases. That is, personal importance is associated with better memory for attitude-relevant information than unimportance (Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005). For couples with at least one insecurely-attached individual, there may be enhanced importance placed on negative relationship outcomes (i.e., in this case, problematic communication strategies), such that differences are only evident for negative—but not positive—relationship outcomes.

Strengths and Limitations

Although these findings are robust, it is important to remember that the data are correlational; therefore, cause-and-effect relationships cannot be determined. One alternative explanation might be that individuals with healthy conflict resolution styles are more likely than individuals with unhealthy conflict resolution styles to seek partners with secure attachment styles. Another source of hesitation regarding the application of the research findings results from the limited number of specific combinations of insecure-insecure and secure-insecure attachment styles among couples. That is, although there is confidence in the findings that having at least one securely-attached partner provides advantages over two insecurely-attached partners, there is still much left to be determined regarding the nature of specific pairings of attachment styles among couples. Certainly, this is an area of

research that should be further examined.

Although this study provided valuable insight into the differing conflict styles between "matched" and "unmatched" couples, more research needs to be conducted to explore why attachment security might serve as protection from unresolved traumatic experiences. Future studies could also include the investigation of the conflict behavior sequences themselves. For example, it is possible that individuals with insecure attachment styles could be apt to intensify conflict whereas adults with secure attachment styles might demonstrate behaviors that lead to more positive conflict resolution (Creasey, 2002). In addition, because attachment theory proposes individual internal working models play a key role in relationship dynamics, future research should examine attachment and dyadic support dynamics under stressful conditions (Davila & Kashy, 2009). It is possible that secure individuals seek and give support and anxious or ambivalent individuals use avoidant strategies within the relationship. Finally, although this study did not focus on sexual behavior in romantic relationships, future studies could make important contributions by investigating the links between attachment styles and sexual satisfaction within intimate relationships. It is possible that although "matches" do not produce desirable outcomes for overall satisfaction and conflict behaviors, having similar attitudes toward specific areas within relationships—such as sexual preferences— may result in more favorable outcomes.

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