

Does dyadic coping mediate the association between attachment and relational outcomes?

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Abstract: The role of attachment insecurity in the development and quality of romantic relationships is well-established in the literature. However, not all mechanisms linking the constructs have been sufficiently explored. In this study, we used dyadic coping as a potential mediator between attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) and relational satisfaction and commitment. 147 individuals took part in the investigation. We found that attachment anxiety was negatively related to relational satisfaction and that attachment avoidance was negatively linked to commitment. The analyses also indicate that dyadic coping mediates the association between attachment avoidance and satisfaction. The results suggest that attachment insecurity decreases the levels of satisfaction and commitment, but dyadic coping can explain this effect only for avoidance.

Keywords: attachment, relational satisfaction, dyadic coping, commitment, mediation analysis

Introduction

Having a successful romantic relationship enhances the quality of life and brings a variety of advantages, such as higher levels of physical and mental health or longer life expectancy (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014; Kouros, Papp, & Cummings, 2008). Still, not all the people who are involved in a romantic relationship enjoy these benefits because not all people feel satisfied with their relationships. Thus, it is important to study what makes some individuals happy and content with their relationships. From a theoretical point of view, there is an array of constructs that can determine changes in how the partners feel about their relationship. Some of these constructs can be found on the individual level while others are more specific to the relationship itself (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Moreover, to achieve these benefits, people need to invest in their relationship. According to the investment model (Rusbult, 1980), a key mechanism for the success of a relationship is commitment (the attachment the individuals feel towards their relationships). Despite being different concepts, relational satisfaction and commitment are

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strongly related (Le & Agnew, 2003). With this study, we aimed to explore some mechanisms that can explain both of them.

In the last decades, one of the constructs that received increasing empirical attention in regards to relationship formation and maintenance was romantic attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Previous studies showed that attachment insecurity was a significant predictor of couple satisfaction and commitment (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Joel et al., 2020; Segal & Fraley, 2016). Still, the mechanisms of this association can be further explored. Stress and coping can play important roles in explaining the links between attachment and the quality of a romantic relationship. When exposed to stress, insecurely attached people respond in negative ways that can affect their well-being and the quality of their relationship (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Also, attachment security or insecurity can play a role in determining how the partners use dyadic coping (the joint process of responding to dyadic stress; Bodenmann, 2005), by enhancing or, on the contrary, by reducing the adaptive responses to stress. Thus, the current study examines how an intrapersonal construct such as adult attachment is linked to two couple specific outcomes, namely relational satisfaction and commitment. We were also interested to explore whether dyadic coping, an interpersonal construct, mediates these associations.

Attachment, relational satisfactio and commitment

This research is rooted in the framework of the adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This theory highlights the role of caregiving figures in the development of “working models” that can be described as mental representations of others (Bowlby, 1973). Based on the early interactions between the child and the caregiver (usually the mother) and on how well the caregiver responds to the child’s needs, the child develops different views on how those around may respond to his/her needs. On the one hand, the individuals consider that the others are dependable and ready to offer their support, thus developing a secure attachment style. On the other hand, they can doubt the others' readiness to help or their own deservingness to be helped, thus, developing an insecure attachment style. These “working models” remain relatively constant throughout one’s lifetime and influence how the individuals interact with their parents, peers, friends, or romantic partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). While the associations between secure attachment and relational satisfaction and commitment are positive, having an insecure attachment leads to negative outcomes in one’s romantic relationships (for a meta-analysis, see Candel & Turliuc, 2019). However, given that there are two insecure attachment styles, the pathways towards negative couple outcomes are different. Firstly, anxious individuals crave closeness but are perpetually afraid of being betrayed and abandoned by their partners. When they cannot fulfill their needs, they use hyperactivation strategies to maintain proximity to the partner (Mikulincer &

Shaver, 2016). However, they might also exaggerate in their mate retention behaviors, experience jealousy, but also ambivalence towards the partners, which may lower their satisfaction and commitment (Barbaro, Pham, Shackelford, & Zeigler-Hill, 2016; Meyers & Landsberger, 2002; Segal & Fraley, 2016). Secondly, avoidant individuals show more disinterest in the partner and more mistrust. They believe that their partners are not interested in fulfilling their needs and use deactivating strategies, further distancing themselves from their partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Thus, the doubts about the partner's care determine the individual to achieve lower satisfaction and further, lower commitment (Etcheverry, Le, Wu, & Wei, 2013; Segal & Fraley, 2016).

Attachment and dyadic coping

The “working models” of the insecure attachment style not only determine what the individuals feel towards their relationships but also how they respond to various external (from outside the relationships) or internal (from inside the relationship) events. Thus, attachment dictates how a person reacts in times of stress and what coping strategies he/she may use. Previous studies have shown that attachment insecurity is associated with lower coping efficacy and the use of more maladaptive coping strategies (Pascuzzo, Cyr, & Moss, 2013; Wright, Firsick, Kacmarski, & Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2017). Specifically for the romantic domain, Simpson and Rholes (2012) proposed the attachment diathesis-stress process model. According to this model, avoidant and anxious individuals use different pathways when responding to stress. The former become self-reliant and independent, underestimating their partners' intent to offer care and support. The latter desire immediate assistance from the partners, ruminates strongly, and might emotionally cling to their partners, which can become overwhelming for them (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). In a romantic relationship, however, coping is a process to which both partners contribute (Bodenmann, 2005). Both partners use various strategies to cope with stress together and when used correctly, dyadic coping can lead to higher levels of well-being, relational satisfaction, and commitment (Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015; Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013; Johnson & Horne, 2016; Rusu, Hilpert, Beach, Turliuc, & Bodenmann, 2015).

The present study

There is sufficient theoretical evidence showing that insecure attachment may influence satisfaction and commitment through dyadic coping. However, few empirical studies tried to approach this relationship. Previous research showed that insecurely attachment individuals use less dyadic coping (Levesque, Lafontaine, & Bureau, 2017; Alves et al., 2019). Still, to our knowledge, only one study included relational satisfaction as an outcome (Fuenfhausen &

Cashwell, 2013). The authors, studying young married couples, found that dyadic coping partially mediates the relationship between insecure attachment and relational satisfaction. Based on the previous theoretical and empirical evidence, we aimed to further this line of study by (1) adding commitment as an outcome and (2) testing the relationship on a Romanian sample. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis: (1) insecure attachment (both anxiety and avoidance) would be negatively associated with dyadic coping, relational satisfaction, and commitment; (2) dyadic coping would be positively associated with relational satisfaction and commitment and (3) dyadic coping would mediate the relationship between attachment insecurity (both dimensions) and couple satisfaction and commitment.

Method

Participants

The instruments were distributed in the general population using an online form posted on various social network sites (such as Facebook groups). Participation was voluntary and the potential participants were not rewarded for their involvement. The sample consisted of 147 participants who were in a relationship for more than 1 month. 28 participants were male and 119 were female. 131 participants were in a relationship without being married and 16 participants were married. For the whole sample, the mean age was 22.49 years ($SD = 4.32$ years, Min. = 18 years, Max. = 49 years) and the mean relationship duration was 38.28 months ($SD = 41.29$ months, Min = 1 month, Max = 312 months).

Measures

Attachment anxiety and avoidance. The attachment was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R, Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). This is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess the attachment style of each individual. It is composed of 36 items and it has two factors, Anxiety (eg, "I rarely worry about my partner leaving me") and Avoidance (eg, "I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners"). Each factor has a total of 18 items (some of them are reversed). The combined score of the two factors can also be used to assess a secure style of attachment. Such individuals have low scores on both anxiety and avoidance dimensions. In this study, we used the sub-scales separately. Both sub-scales had a good internal consistency (Anxiety: $\alpha = .88$; Avoidance: $\alpha = .85$).

Dyadic coping. Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI) is an instrument developed by Bodenmann in 2008 to measure how people involved in a relationship cope with stress. For this study, we used the Romanian version (Rusu, Hilpert, Turliuc, & Bodenmann, 2016). This scale consists of 37 items

(eg., “My partner lets me know that he/she appreciates my practical support, advice, or help”) for which the respondent must choose an answer on 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents “very rarely”, and 5 represents “very often”. An example of an item would be “I often want my partner's feelings towards me to be as strong as mine for him / her”. The total score is calculated by summing the answers given for each item. Two items (36 and 37) are not included in the total score, as recommended by the authors. Higher total scores indicate a higher level of coping with dyadic stress, while a lower total score indicates a lower level of coping with stress. For the present study, the scale demonstrated very good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

Commitment. The commitment was measured using a sub-scale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). This sub-scale was designed to assess the level of commitment the partners feel for their relationship. It contains 7 items (eg. “I want my relationship to last for a very long time”), with answers from 0 (total disagreement) to 8 (total agreement). The total score is computed by summing the answers given for each item. Therefore, the higher the total score, the more committed the respondents declare to be in their relationship. The results show a good internal consistency for the items ($\alpha = .86$).

Relational Satisfaction. The participants’ satisfaction level was measured using the Couple Satisfaction Index 16 (CSI 16, Funk & Rogge, 2007). This is the short version of a 32-item instrument that assesses an individual’s level of satisfaction with their romantic relationship. The CSI was created by selecting the best items from the already existing measures of satisfaction. Thus, the anchoring differs across items, but a low score generally indicates disagreement and a high score indicates agreement. Respondents indicated how content they feel in their marital relationship (eg, “Please indicate the level of happiness of your relationship, taking into account all aspects of the relationship”) on a 7-point Likert scale for one item and a 6-point Likert scale for the others. The items demonstrated a very good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

Procedure

The questionnaires were filled in an electronic format. The participants received their questionnaires, which they completed at home. Before the study, the participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and were reassured of their anonymity.

Statistical Analyses

The descriptive statistics and the correlational analyses were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20. The analyses regarding the mediation model were performed using the IBM SPSS AMOS 20, a statistical software that allows the

creation of Structural Equation Models. Bootstrapped confidence intervals were used to empirically validate the indirect effects.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations between the variables. All the associations were significant at a $p < .001$. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were positively associated ($r = .42$). Attachment anxiety had negative relations with dyadic coping ($r = -.34$), commitment ($r = -.32$) and couple satisfaction ($r = -.40$). Attachment avoidance also presented negative correlations with dyadic coping ($r = -.74$), commitment ($r = -.62$) and couple satisfaction ($r = -.58$). However, the effect sizes were higher in magnitude. Dyadic coping was positively linked with commitment ($r = .50$) and couple satisfaction ($r = .74$). Finally, we found a positive association between commitment and couple satisfaction ($r = .52$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations between the study's variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Attachment Anxiety	51.95	20.27	1			
2. Attachment avoidance	40.08	14.30	.42***	1		
3. Dyadic coping	148.43	20.21	-.34***	-.74***	1	
4. Commitment	50.11	8.27	-.32***	-.62***	.50***	1
5. Relational Satisfaction	75.64	11.55	-.40***	-.58***	.74***	.52***

Note: *** $p < .001$

Hypotheses testing

To test the proposed model, we used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with mediation. Thus, the two attachment styles were considered predictors, couple satisfaction and commitment were entered as outcomes and dyadic coping was used as the mediator. We controlled for both age and relationship length. We also included some co-variances, separately, between the two predictors, the two outcomes, and the two control variables. The resulting model achieved a very good fit: $\chi^2 = 8.52$, $df. = 6$, $p = .20$, $CFI = .99$, $GFI = .98$, $RMSEA = .054$.

We found that attachment anxiety has a significant and negative total effect on couple satisfaction ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .04$) and a non-significant total effect on commitment ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .25$). Attachment avoidance has significant and negative total effects on both couple satisfaction ($\beta = -.49$, $p = .006$) and

commitment ($\beta = -.58, p = .007$). After introducing dyadic coping into the analysis, we found that it fully mediates the relationship between attachment avoidance and couple satisfaction. Attachment avoidance has a significant and negative association with dyadic coping ($\beta = -.73, p = .004$). The link between attachment anxiety and coping was not significant ($\beta = -.03, p = .79$). Dyadic coping has a positive and significant relation with couple satisfaction ($\beta = .69, p = .008$) and a non-significant one with commitment ($\beta = .09, p = .31$). Finally, the only significant indirect effect was the one of attachment avoidance on couple satisfaction, through dyadic coping ($\beta = -.59, p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.63; -.41]$).

Table 2. Total, direct and indirect effects from attachment anxiety and avoidance to dyadic coping, relational satisfaction and commitment

	<i>Beta</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
<i>Total Effects</i>				
Avoidance – Relational Sat.	-.49	.06	.006	
Anxiety – Relational Sat.	-.19	.07	.04	
Avoidance – Commitment	-.58	.06	.007	
Anxiety - Commitment	-.08	.07	.25	
<i>Direct Effects</i>				
Avoidance – Relational Sat.	.01	.08	.95	
Anxiety – Relational Sat.	-.17	.06	.01	
Avoidance – Commitment	-.51	.10	.005	
Anxiety - Commitment	-.08	.07	.31	
Avoidance - Dyadic Coping	-.73	.04	.004	
Anxiety - Dyadic Coping	-.03	.05	.79	
Dyadic Coping – Relational Sat.	.63	.07	.008	
Dyadic Coping - Commitment	.09	.09	.31	
<i>Indirect Effects</i>				
Avoidance - Dyadic Coping - Relational Sat.	-.59	.05	.005	[-.63;-.41]
Anxiety - Dyadic Coping - Relational Sat.	-.02	.04	.77	[-.08;-.04]
Avoidance - Dyadic Coping - Commitment	-.07	.07	.31	[-.19;.31]
Anxiety – Dyadic Coping - Commitment	-.01	.01	.32	[-.03;.003]

Discussions

This study examined the relationship between attachment insecurity and some aspect of romantic relationships (relational satisfaction and commitment) as well as whether dyadic coping mediates these associations. The findings

derived from the SEM model partially confirm the hypothesis: (1) attachment avoidance was negatively associated with relational satisfaction, commitment, and dyadic coping; attachment anxiety, however, had a significant negative association only with relational satisfaction; (2) dyadic coping was positively linked with relational satisfaction; (3) dyadic coping mediated the relationship between avoidance and relational satisfaction.

In regards to the relationship between attachment insecurity and relational satisfaction, our results fully support previous findings (Candel & Turliuc, 2019). Not only that anxiety and avoidance had a negative contribution to relational satisfaction, but the presence of the avoidant attachment was more strongly related to a decrease in satisfaction. Avoidant individuals tend to use deactivating strategies, thus distancing themselves from their partners. This adds up to their already existent denial of attachment needs and might determine them to consider their partners as even less interested in fulfilling their needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). On the contrary, anxious individuals tend to overthink and ruminate on the negative aspects of their relationship and use hyperactivation strategies when feeling something is not working. They might become dependent on their partner and every change in their partner's behavior might determine them to be less satisfied (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

In the case of commitment, the associations were more nuanced. The negative link between avoidance and commitment supports previous findings (Pistole & Vocaturo, 1999; Segal & Fraley, 2016). The negative expectations of the avoidant individuals, the perceived lack of availability of their partner, and the constant feeling of being trapped in a relationship might make them less interested in the relationship, less willing for its continuation, overall, less committed to their partner (Mikulincer, 1998; Tran & Simpson, 2009). For attachment anxiety, however, we found a non-significant association. These results align with other findings showing that the association between attachment anxiety and commitment might depend on other constructs. For example, Etcheverry and his colleagues (2012) showed that this relationship is mediated by both satisfaction and investment. Also, anxious individuals put more weight on satisfaction when considering their general level of commitment (Carter, Fabrigar, MacDonald, & Monner, 2013).

We also found some differences when considering the link between attachment and dyadic coping. Again, avoidance was negatively related to dyadic coping, which confirms the attachment diathesis-stress process model (Simpson & Rholes, 2012) and previous empirical findings (Alves et al., 2019; Levesque et al., 2017). However, anxiety was not linked to dyadic coping, a result that may be explained by the more ambivalent relationship between anxious individuals and their romantic partners. When stressed, anxious individuals desire immediate responses from their partners, doing whatever it takes to increase the security they feel in their relationship. However, they still

consider and think about the “worst-case scenario” and somewhat distrust their partners and their ability to fulfill their needs. Moreover, the partners of anxious individuals can grow weary of responding to the overwhelming need for support, which can be interpreted as a sign of rejection (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). As such, the behavior of the anxious person might sometimes foster dyadic coping, and other times diminish it. Thus, it can be difficult to establish a stable relationship between the two. Finally, the dissatisfaction felt by the anxious individuals can determine them to contribute less to the effort of diminishing the effects of common stressors and to provide poorer support to their partners, which is an integral part in the process of dyadic coping (Lafontaine et al., 2019).

Dyadic coping was related to relational satisfaction. This finding partially supports our second hypothesis and confirms previous results pointing in a similar direction (Falconier et al., 2015; Fuenfhausen & Cashwell, 2013; Herzberg, 2013; Rusu et al., 2015). This provides crucial information showing that, even for younger, the way the partners try to regulate and reduce each others’ levels of stress is an important predictor of their overall assessment of satisfaction. However, the link between dyadic coping and commitment was not significant. This non-significant association might reflect the apparent lack of commitment’s importance in many young couples’ lives and also the fact that dyadic coping has lower levels in younger couples (Acquati & Kayser, 2019; Konstam et al., 2019). Firstly, although young people value commitment, close and long-term relationships, some of them seem to avoid talking about commitment to their partners, fearing to appear vulnerable (Konstam et al., 2019). Moreover, they seem to have some problems with evaluating the best potential partners for a committed relationship, which also might accentuate the lower importance they put on commitment in the earlier stages of their relationship (Konstam et al., 2019). This, along with the fact that most studies that present a link between dyadic coping and commitment used samples higher both in age and in relationship length (Johnson & Horne, 2016), can provide some evidence on why, in this study, the association was non-significant.

Finally, the third hypothesis was partially supported. Dyadic coping mediates the relationship between attachment avoidance and relational satisfaction. Similar results were found by Fuenfhausen and Cashwell (2013). This shows that avoidant individuals tend not to engage in dyadic coping and when forced to deal with stressors, they lack an important mechanism that helps them to maintain a positive view of their relationship. Their dismissive, distant relationship with the partners does not allow them to receive the necessary support (Meyers & Landsberger, 2002), which might be an indicator of their poor ability to create a mutually beneficial relationship in terms of offering and receiving help in the moments of distress. In this case, their needs are not met and the evaluation of the relationship becomes negative. Also, their

determination to be independent might determine the partners' decision to distance themselves from the relationship, which perpetuates the lower levels of dyadic coping and relational satisfaction.

Limitations

As with all empirical research, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample was not homogenous. Although the majority of the participants were young and unmarried, some of them were both older and married. Still, the reduced number of participants from the second category did not allow us to compare the two groups. Moreover, gender disparity creates a similar limitation. Future studies could expand the sample and include numerically balanced groups of younger and older participants, as well as similar numbers of men and women. Future studies could also use longitudinal designs that can address the inherent limitations of the cross-sectional design that we used in this study. Finally, these studies can verify all the dimensions of the Dyadic Coping Inventory to create a complete overview of the importance of dyadic coping and its relationships with attachment, relational satisfaction, and commitment.

Conclusion

Despite its limitation, there are some strengths in both the theoretical and the methodological aspects of this study. Firstly, it combines the attachment model (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and the investment model (Rusbult, 1983), two models that, for a long time, competed to explain the variation in relational outcomes. However, taken together, these models, as outlined by our study, can offer some insights on how attachment insecurity can affect both satisfaction and commitment. Moreover, we also included dyadic coping, a couple-level construct that links the individual concept of attachment, and the proposed couple outcomes. Secondly, we found that dyadic coping mediates the association between attachment avoidance and relational satisfaction. This information is precious from a therapeutical standpoint and indicates that, by strengthening the process of dyadic coping, therapists can buffer the maladaptive effects of attachment avoidance. Finally, we tested our hypotheses on a young, Romanian sample, thus exploring a rarely studied sample from Eastern Europe.

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