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Couple conflict: insights from an attachment perspective

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The experience of conflict is often cited as a highly stressful relational phenomenon by romantic couples, and can have negative implications for relationship satisfaction and for the longevity of romantic relationships. In this paper, we review extant research on couple conflict in romantic relationships from an attachment theory perspective. The research we review is underpinned by two central tenets: firstly, severe or persistent conflict activates the attachment system; secondly, responses to couple conflict involve complex attachment dynamics, shaped by partners' attachment anxiety and avoidance. The research reviewed has important implications for both research and practice in the area of couple conflict, and clearly demonstrates how conflict can act as a stressor that shapes relationship functioning.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2017, 13:60–64

This review comes from a themed issue on **Relationships and stress**

Edited by **Gery C Karantzas, Marita P McCabe** and **Jeffry A Simpson**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.017>

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Conflict can be broadly defined as the presence of disagreement, difference or incompatibility between partners [1], and is inevitable in couple relationships: The high level of interdependence that characterizes couple bonds fosters intimacy, but also creates potential for conflict and exploitation. Further, when couple conflict arises, heightened emotionality often leads to attentional biases, polarized thinking and conflict escalation [2].

Three broad responses to conflict have been identified, variously labeled *constructive engagement* or cooperative behavior, *destructive engagement* or confrontation, and *conflict avoidance* or detachment [3]. Constructive engagement behaviors reflect positive problem-solving; these include attending to the partner, giving support, providing and soliciting disclosure, and accepting responsibility.

In contrast, destructive engagement is a dominating approach involving coercion, blame, and manipulation; conflict avoidance involves withdrawal, distancing, lack of openness, and refusal to discuss the topic. Whereas constructive engagement encompasses mutual discussion and negotiation, destructive engagement and conflict avoidance generally exclude these processes, fostering ongoing conflict (although avoidance may defuse conflict in the short-term).

Ongoing conflict threatens individual well-being and relationship quality [4]. Hence, it is crucial to understand why individuals respond differently to conflict. In recent decades, attachment theory has emerged as a key explanatory framework. Bowlby's influential work (e.g. [5]) highlighted the importance of infant-caregiver attachment bonds. Noting that the young of various species use similar behaviors to keep their mothers close, Bowlby argued that these behaviors serve vital protective functions for offspring: proximity-seeking (wanting closeness to the attachment figure and resisting separation), secure base (using the attachment figure as a base for exploration), and safe haven (retreating for shelter in times of threat).

Although infants form attachments in all but the most extreme circumstances, these bonds vary in quality. Ainsworth *et al.* [6] identified three major attachment styles, defined by infants' separation and reunion behaviors: secure (upset by separation from caregiver, but easily soothed at reunion), avoidant (little overt separation distress, but defensive avoidance at reunion), and anxious-ambivalent (extreme separation distress, and anger or ambivalence at reunion). Importantly, attachment styles are linked to caregivers' responsiveness, suggesting that they reflect learned rules about regulating distress [7,8]. Secure individuals learn to express distress and seek support from responsive caregivers. Avoidant individuals learn to inhibit distress (deactivating strategies), to avoid alienating distant caregivers, whereas anxious-ambivalent individuals learn that strident demands (hyperactivating strategies) are needed to garner support from inconsistent caregivers.

Subsequent research has applied attachment theory to couple relationships, noting that individual differences in security reflect internal working models, or relational beliefs and expectations based on attachment-related experiences [9]. Although researchers have variously described three and four 'adult attachment styles', individual differences are increasingly conceptualized in terms of two underlying dimensions [10^{*}]. Attachment anxiety

is characterized by fear of rejection, excessive dependence and reassurance-seeking, and desire for extreme closeness; attachment avoidance is marked by discomfort with intimacy, unwillingness to depend on others, and reluctance to seek or provide support. Attachment security, defined by low anxiety and low avoidance, involves the capacity to balance interdependence and autonomy.

Given the implications of conflict resolution for relationship stability and satisfaction, it is important to understand how individual differences in attachment security shape responses to conflict. Building on the model of attachment and emotion regulation developed by Mikulincer and Shaver [10^{*}], the tenets underpinning the work reviewed here are: firstly, severe or persistent conflict activates the attachment system; secondly, responses to couple conflict involve complex attachment dynamics, shaped by partners' attachment anxiety and avoidance (Figure 1).

Attachment and conflict: empirical research

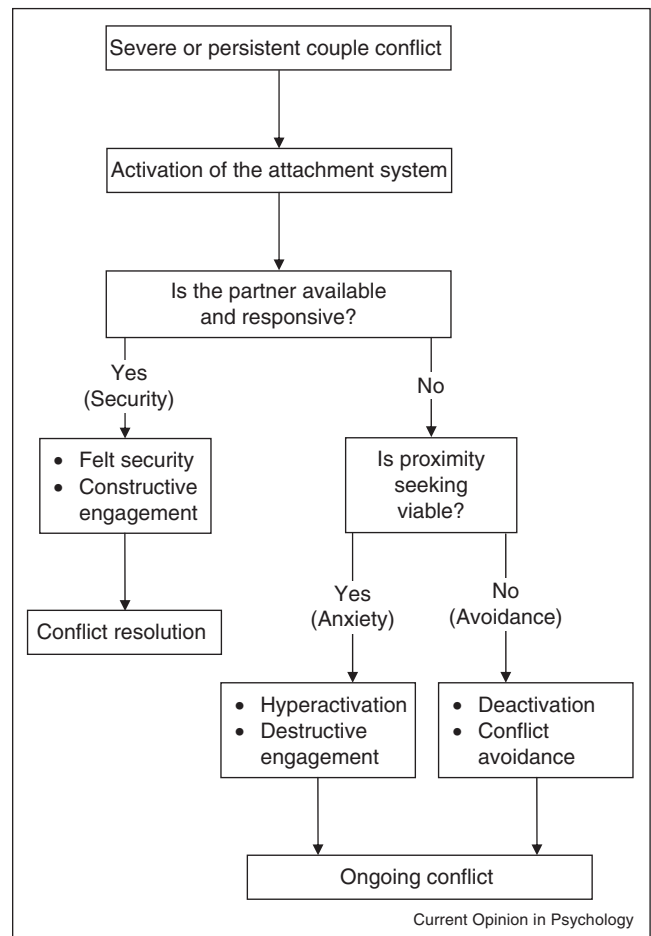
A huge body of research has addressed attachment-related differences in conflict behavior. The earliest research relied on global self-reports of conflict, but many subsequent studies have examined specific interactions, or used multiple reporters and/or research methods. This review focuses on the latter studies.

In the 1990s, two laboratory studies of dating couples tested the proposition that severe or persistent conflict activates attachment concerns. Simpson *et al.* [11] randomly assigned couples to discuss either a minor or major relationship conflict. Anxious participants reported feeling more hostility and distress during the discussions, and perceived their relationships more negatively afterwards; observers rated them as showing more anxiety, and also rated the interactions of avoidant men as lower in quality. These effects were stronger for couples discussing *major* problems, highlighting the impact of relational stress.

In the second study [12], couples engaged in three conflict interactions: one involved a concrete issue (leisure activity), whereas the others were designed to elicit attachment-related anxiety by having either the male or the female partner rebuff the other's attempts to maintain closeness. For all three interactions, attachment avoidance and anxiety were linked to more negative expectations of partners' behavior, and to less satisfaction with the couple interaction. Attachment dimensions also predicted observers' ratings of more negative affect, verbal and nonverbal behavior (e.g. coercion), but only in response to partners' distancing. Thus attachment exerts pervasive effects on *global perceptions* of relationships, but is most evident in *observable behavior* in stressful situations.

As the second study suggests, attachment dynamics are central to closeness-distance struggles. Closeness-distance

Figure 1



Attachment and conflict: theoretical links. The figure illustrates that conflict is a stressor that activates the attachment system, which in turn, yields attachment dynamics that bring about resolution of the conflict (security-based behavioral responses) or maintain the conflict (insecurity-based behavioral responses). The insecurity-based responses can be parsed into two distinct attachment strategies: hyperactivation, which gives rise to a conflict pattern of destructive engagement, and deactivation, which results in a conflict pattern of avoidance.

(autonomy-connection) is a core relational dilemma: Intimate partners must relinquish some autonomy in order to forge a connection, but too much connection stifles individual identities. Proximity-seeking is a key function of attachment behavior, but varies with individuals' attachment goals. Research has linked closeness-distance struggles to attachment insecurities, and in particular, to the pairing of two insecure partners [13,14]: the pairing of an anxious and an avoidant partner can create pursuing-distancing cycles, whereas pursuer-pursuer struggles may arise between two anxious partners. Although both patterns are problematic, insecurity does not invariably preclude distance regulation. In a recent observational study of couple conflict [15], for example, the negative association between attachment avoidance and desired level of

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