



Short Communication

Sex differences in romantic attachment: A facet-level analysis



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ABSTRACT

Evolutionary models predict systematic sex differences in romantic avoidance and anxiety; however, observed effect sizes are typically small. Here I explore the possibility that larger and more reliable differences may emerge at the level of narrower attachment facets. In two datasets from the US and Italy, five facets could be identified in the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire. As predicted, attachment facets showed larger sex differences (US: $d = -.14$ to $.31$, Italy: $d = -.53$ to $.39$) than avoidance and anxiety (US: $d = .00$ and $-.03$, Italy: $d = .18$ and $-.40$); moreover, different facets of the same dimension showed opposite-sign effects. These findings suggest that sex differences in attachment can be fruitfully investigated at the level of facets.

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The existence of systematic sex differences in romantic attachment has been predicted based on evolutionary theory (see Del Giudice (2009); Del Giudice and Belsky (2010); Kirkpatrick (1998)). In this perspective, romantic avoidance can be partly understood as a male-biased strategy for *minimizing commitment* in long-term relationships, whereas anxiety can be interpreted as a female-biased strategy for *maximizing investment* from partners and relatives (Del Giudice, 2009). The available empirical data support evolutionary predictions: across countries, men tend to show higher avoidance and lower anxiety than women (Del Giudice, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2003). However, effect sizes are typically small, which raises questions about their biological and psychological significance.

Here I explore the possibility that broad dimensions such as avoidance and anxiety may fail to capture the true pattern of sex differences in attachment styles, and that larger and more reliable differences may emerge at the level of narrower attachment facets (see Del Giudice (2011)). As I show below, a facet-level analysis reveals a complex structure of sex differences within the domains of avoidance and anxiety; while some facets show differences in the usual direction, other facets display attenuated or opposite-sign associations with sex.

1. Methods and results

I reanalyzed two existing datasets of scores on the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The first was an aggregate sample of US undergraduates. I started

by extracting lower-level facets of the ECR with exploratory factor analysis; next, I computed sex differences in individual facets and compared them with those in avoidance and anxiety. I then replicated the analysis in a sample of Italian undergraduates. Analyses were performed in SPSS™ Statistics 20.0 and R™ 2.15.

2. Dataset 1: US undergraduates

The dataset was obtained by aggregating three samples from Allen and Baucom (2004; $N = 504$) and Nofle and Shaver (2006; $N = 285$ and 8310). Raw data were contributed by the authors and included in a previous meta-analysis (Del Giudice, 2011). Participants were undergraduates aged 17–24. In Nofle and Shaver's sample, 239 participants (3.2%) had answered all the items with the same score, had more than 50% missing answers, or had omitted to indicate their sex; they were dropped from analysis. Missing values ranged from 0% to 1%, and were imputed via multiple regression. Total $N = 8829$ (5793 females).

2.1. Facets of romantic attachment

Item-level data were analyzed with principal axis factoring of the correlation matrix. Five factors had eigenvalues > 1 , while parallel analysis suggested 6–7 factors. However, solutions with more than 5 factors contained uninterpretable factors with no sizable loadings. Thus, the 5-factor solution was retained and Oblimin-rotated. Factor loadings of ECR items and correlations between factors are shown in Tables 1 and 2. A five-factor extraction with Oblimin rotation was performed separately in the male and female subsamples. The similarity

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Table 1
Oblimin-rotated loadings of ECR items in the US dataset (pattern matrix).

ECR items (content summary)	1. SR	2. DC	3. PR	4. NE	5. RDC
<i>Avoidance</i>					
1. Shows feelings	.18	.46	.03	.03	-.08
3. Comfortable being close	.49	.32	.01	.00	-.08
5. Pulls away when close	-.05	.81	.06	-.02	-.03
7. Uncomfortable when close	-.03	.80	.00	-.02	-.01
9. Comfortable opening up	.18	.64	.07	.06	-.06
11. Wants to get close, keeps pulling back	.00	.77	.07	-.02	.06
13. Nervous when close	.03	.82	.00	-.01	.06
15. Comfortable sharing	.63	.08	-.02	.09	-.09
17. Avoids getting close	.05	.74	-.02	.01	.09
19. Easy to get close	.50	.23	.10	-.02	-.04
21. Difficult to depend	.07	.50	.04	.03	.05
23. Not too close	.12	.68	-.18	.00	.07
25. Tells everything	.68	.14	.06	-.01	-.07
27. Discusses problems	.81	.03	.02	.05	-.01
29. Comfortable depending	.44	.18	.09	-.13	-.04
31. Asks for comfort	.80	-.02	.02	.01	.06
33. Help in times of need	.79	-.07	-.06	-.07	.14
35. Comfort and reassurance	.77	-.03	-.08	-.12	.11
<i>Anxiety</i>					
2. Worries about abandonment	-.04	.08	.74	.04	-.03
4. Worries about relationships	-.10	.10	.57	.10	.08
6. Worries that partners won't care	-.07	.16	.59	.01	.19
8. Worries about losing partner	-.09	.10	.69	.04	.09
10. Wishes partner's feelings were as strong	-.02	.12	.41	.03	.34
12. Wants to merge completely, scares partners away	-.01	.03	.03	.00	.78
14. Worries about being alone	-.03	.07	.62	.10	.07
16. Desire to be close scares people away	-.01	.02	.01	.01	.78
18. Needs reassurance	-.11	.07	.36	.37	.04
20. Forces partners to show more commitment	-.01	-.01	.09	.33	.37
22. Worries about being abandoned	.19	-.19	.64	.00	-.03
24. Angry if partner does not show interest	.07	.06	.03	.59	.12
26. Partners don't want to get as close	.12	.06	.07	.10	.63
28. Insecure when not in a relationship	.04	.02	.24	.29	.16
30. Frustrated when partner is not around	-.02	-.10	.00	.79	-.03
32. Frustrated if partners are not available	-.09	.02	-.04	.81	-.09
34. Feels bad when partners disapprove	-.13	.06	.21	.37	.01
36. Resents it when partner is away	.08	-.01	.01	.58	.15

Note: SR = Self-reliance; DC = Discomfort with closeness; PR = Preoccupation; NE = Neediness; RDC = Rejected desire for closeness. Facet scores were computed with bold-face items.

of factor loadings in males and females was assessed with Tucker's coefficient of congruence (CC; see Abdi(2007)). $CC > .80$ indicates high similarity; $CC > .90$ indicates very high similarity. Congruence ranged from $CC = .98$ to $.99$, i.e., solutions were virtually identical in the two sexes.

Some ECR items had nontrivial cross-loadings on two or more factors (Table 1). Since the ECR was designed to measure broad attachment dimensions, some of its items can be expected to tap multiple facets. To minimize spurious overlap between facets, only items with primary loading $>.50$ and secondary loadings $<.20$ (boldface in Table 1) were used to interpret facets and compute facet-level scores. This somewhat conservative criterion was chosen to maximize facet reliability and interpretability.

Table 2
Factor correlation matrix in the US dataset.

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Self-reliance	1.00			
2. Discomfort with closeness	.52	1.00		
3. Preoccupation	.05	.28	1.00	
4. Neediness	-.22	.12	.55	1.00
5. Rejected desire for closeness	.05	.26	.46	.43

2.1.1. Avoidance facet 1: self-reliance

The first avoidance facet was defined by reluctance to ask one's partner for help and comfort, share feelings, and discuss problems (items 15, 25, 27, 31, 33, 35). I labeled this facet *self-reliance*. High scores indicate reduced emotional need for one's partner, and a failure to rely on him/her as a "safe haven" in distress.

2.1.2. Avoidance facet 2: discomfort with closeness

The second avoidance facet was defined by discomfort with, and ambivalence toward, emotional closeness (5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 17, 21, 23). I labeled this facet *discomfort with closeness*. The overarching theme of this facet is a difficulty in finding the right emotional distance in relationships, often implying *ambivalence* toward closeness—a psychological theme that overlaps with both avoidance and anxiety. Indeed, this facet was also positively correlated to *anxiety* facets (Table 2).

2.1.3. Anxiety facet 1: preoccupation

The first anxiety facet was defined by persistent worry about being abandoned or neglected by one's partner (2, 4, 6, 8, 14, 22). I labeled this facet *preoccupation*.

2.1.4. Anxiety facet 2: neediness

The second anxiety facet was defined by reactions of frustration, anger, and resentment when the partner is perceived as unavailable or uninterested (24, 30, 32, 36). Accordingly, I labeled this facet *neediness*.

2.1.5. Anxiety facet 3: rejected desire for closeness

The third anxiety facet indicates unreciprocated desire for emotional closeness, which ends up scaring partners away (12, 16, 26). Items loading on this facet are unique in that they explicitly describe the *failure* of a relational strategy. This complicates the interpretation of this facet, as high scores do not simply indicate a strong desire for closeness, but rather a combination of attempts to get emotionally closer *and* rejection of those attempts by one's partners (which may be confounded by attractiveness and mate value). Accordingly, I labeled this facet *rejected desire for closeness*.

2.2. Sex differences

Sex differences in the US dataset are reported in Table 3. Effect sizes (d) were corrected for unreliability (d_c) as recommended by Hunter and Schmidt (2014). Positive values indicate higher scores in males. There were no detectable sex differences in avoidance, while the effect size for anxiety was very small; neither was significantly different from zero. In contrast with avoidance and anxiety, sex differences in the five attachment facets were all significantly different from zero. Males scored higher than females in self-reliance and somewhat lower than females in discomfort with closeness. Females were higher in both preoccupation and neediness, whereas males reported higher levels of rejected desire for closeness. (Higher levels of rejected desire for

Table 3
Sex differences in the US dataset.

	Effect sizes				
	α	d	95% CI	d_c	95% CI
<i>Attachment dimensions</i>					
Avoidance	.93	.00	[-.04, .05]	.00	[-.04, .05]
Anxiety	.92	-.03	[-.07, .02]	-.03	[-.07, .02]
<i>Attachment facets</i>					
Self-reliance	.89	.15	[.11, .19]	.16	[.12, .20]
Discomfort with closeness	.91	-.07	[-.12, -.03]	-.08	[-.13, -.03]
Preoccupation	.86	-.13	[-.17, -.08]	-.13	[-.18, -.09]
Neediness	.79	-.14	[-.18, -.09]	-.16	[-.20, -.10]
Rejected desire for closeness	.82	.31	[.27, .36]	.34	[.30, .40]

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