



## Brief Report

# Attachment and relationship satisfaction in expectant first-time parents: The mediating role of relationship enhancing behaviors

Christopher A. Pepping<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, W. Kim Halford<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Behavioral Basis of Health, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

<sup>c</sup> School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 19 August 2012

## Keywords:

Adult attachment  
Transition to parenthood  
Pregnancy  
Relationship satisfaction  
Relationship self-regulation

## ABSTRACT

Individual differences in attachment are well established as a correlate of couple relationship satisfaction. However, less is known about the role of attachment in predicting satisfaction at specific milestone points in couple relationships. The present study explored the role of attachment in predicting relationship satisfaction during couples' first pregnancy, and the mediating role of relationship enhancing behaviors. Male and female attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted their own low relationship satisfaction, and this was partially mediated by relationship enhancing behaviors. Male attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted low female satisfaction, and this was fully mediated by relationship enhancing behaviors. This study is the first to highlight the important role of male attachment during pregnancy, and the mediating role of relationship enhancing behaviors.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

There has been much research showing that attachment insecurity is related to poor relationship satisfaction. However, less is known about the role of attachment in predicting relationship satisfaction at specific milestone points in couple relationships. The present research investigated whether adult attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted relationship satisfaction in couples during their first pregnancy, and explored the mediating role of relationship enhancing behaviors (relationship self-regulation).

Attachment anxiety is characterised by sensitivity to rejection and abandonment, and is associated with clingy and dependant behavior in relationships. Attachment avoidance is characterised by discomfort with intimacy and closeness in relationships, and is associated with behaviors that reduce intimacy, such as emotional withdrawal (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Numerous studies have assessed if an individual's attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with their own, and their partner's low relationship satisfaction (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Almost all studies find an association between attachment insecurity and one's own low relationship satisfaction, but there are variable findings between an individual's attachment

and their partner's relationship satisfaction. However, the impact of attachment on relationship satisfaction during specific milestone events in relationships has remained relatively unexplored. The present research investigated the impact of attachment on relationship satisfaction in couples prior to the birth of their first child.

The transition to parenthood is joyous but challenging, and is a high-risk time for the development of couple relationship distress (Mitnick, Heyman, & Slep, 2009). The attachment behavioral system is likely to be activated during times of such stress, and attachment related behaviors are therefore likely to be salient (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Importantly, attachment anxiety and avoidance are related to low relationship satisfaction across the transition (Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001; Simpson & Rholes, 2002). However, little attention has been paid to the role of attachment during pregnancy itself. Relationship adjustment during pregnancy has implications for relationship satisfaction and well-being across the transition to parenthood. For example relationship adjustment during pregnancy is one of the strongest predictors of post-partum depression (O'Hara and Swain, 1996). It is critically important to explore factors that contribute to satisfaction during this period, as well as *how* these factors impact on satisfaction, as this can inform interventions designed to enhance satisfaction during pregnancy and across the transition.

Only one study has explored the impact of attachment on relationship satisfaction prior to the birth of couples' first child. Rholes et al. (2001) found that ambivalent women (high in attachment

\* Corresponding author. Address: School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, 176 Messines Ridge Road, Mt Gravatt, QLD 4122, Australia. Fax: +61 7 3375 3388.

E-mail address: [c.pepping@griffith.edu.au](mailto:c.pepping@griffith.edu.au) (C.A. Pepping).

anxiety), and women high in avoidance experienced low relationship satisfaction, as did their partners, during pregnancy. However, the role of male attachment was not the focus of their research. Males experience pregnancy as the most stressful period during the transition to parenthood (Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004), and attachment-related behaviors are therefore likely to be salient during this time. Thus, it is important to explore the role of males' attachment on their own, and their partners' relationship satisfaction during the couple's first pregnancy, as well as female attachment.

It would also be useful to understand the mechanisms by which an individual's attachment orientation affects their own, and their partner's, satisfaction during pregnancy, as this can inform interventions to reduce the impact of insecure attachment on satisfaction. Longitudinal research has found that changes in perceptions of spousal support mediate the association between female attachment anxiety and male and female satisfaction across the transition to parenthood (Simpson & Rholes, 2002). However, the association between attachment and satisfaction is complex, and one mediator is unlikely to be solely responsible for this association. Further, there has not been any research on mediators of this association during pregnancy. In the present research, we explored the much neglected area of relationship enhancing behaviors (relationship self-regulation) as a possible mediator of the attachment-satisfaction association during pregnancy.

Relationship self-regulation is the extent to which partners work at their relationship, and engage in relationship enhancing behaviors (Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin, 2005). It involves self-appraisal of the impact of one's own behavior on the quality of the relationship, and identifying aspects of one's behavior that may be modified in order to enhance the quality of the relationship. Relationship self-regulation is associated with relationship satisfaction in newlywed and long-term married couples (Wilson et al., 2005), and also longitudinally predicts relationship satisfaction (Halford & Wilson, 2009).

Relationship self-regulation might mediate the association of attachment and relationship satisfaction. Individuals high in attachment anxiety interact with their partners with hostility, and communicate in a nagging and defensive manner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). It is likely that individuals high in attachment anxiety attempt to change their partners' behavior rather than reflecting on what they themselves can do to enhance the quality of the relationship. These behaviors related to attachment anxiety function as attempts to change the partner in an effort to meet attachment needs, rather than the self-change involved in relationship self-regulation. Individuals high on attachment avoidance engage in behaviors that reduce the intimacy within the relationship, and are therefore less likely to engage in relationship enhancing behaviors. Individuals high in attachment avoidance rarely self-disclose, and withdraw from their partners during conflict (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These behaviors are not relationship self-regulatory behaviors. Rather than making active efforts to enhance their relationships, individuals high in attachment avoidance withdraw from their partner, and avoid engaging in behaviors that increase the intimacy within the relationship.

In brief, it is likely that individuals high in attachment anxiety and avoidance are lower on relationship self-regulation than their secure counterparts, and this might mediate the association between attachment and satisfaction in couples expecting their first child. The following hypotheses were therefore proposed: Male and female attachment anxiety (Hypothesis 1) and avoidance (Hypothesis 2) would be associated with their own, and their partner's low relationship satisfaction, and these associations would be mediated by relationship self-regulation.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 69 heterosexual couples recruited for a study evaluating a couple relationship education program for new parents through a large maternity hospital in Brisbane, Australia. The average age of female participants was 29 years ( $SD = 4.9$ ), and 31 years ( $SD = 5.6$ ) for males. The mean duration of the couple relationship was 5.1 years ( $SD = 3.1$ ). Couples were recruited while attending antenatal services.

### 2.2. Measures

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) is a 32-item measure which assesses each partner's satisfaction with the current state of the relationship (Spanier, 1976). The DAS is a commonly used measure of relationship satisfaction, has high construct validity (Spanier, 1976), and in the current sample had high internal consistency for males ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and females ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

The Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale (SRERS; Wilson et al., 2005) is a 16-item measure of the degree to which each partner uses relationship enhancing behaviors. The SRERS has good psychometric properties (Wilson et al., 2005), and had high reliability for the present sample,  $\alpha = .86$  and  $.80$  for males and females, respectively. Example items include "I try to apply ideas about effective relationships to improving our relationship", and "I tend to put off doing anything about problems in our relationship in the hope that things will get better by themselves".

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Scale (ECR-R) is a 36-item self-report measure of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Fraley et al., 2000). Internal consistency in the present study was high for both attachment avoidance ( $\alpha = .87$  and  $.86$  for males and females, respectively) and attachment anxiety ( $\alpha = .87$  and  $.91$  for males and females, respectively).

### 2.3. Procedure

Couples were recruited when the woman was between 20 and 35 weeks pregnant with their first child. Couples completed the questionnaires relating to the present research approximately 6-weeks prior to the birth of their child. The initial phase of the research focussed on attachment and satisfaction in couples during pregnancy. In the second phase of the research, which is unrelated to the present study, couples were randomly assigned to one of two approaches to supporting couples in the transition to parenthood. The focus of the present paper is on the pre-intervention data.

## 3. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix for attachment, satisfaction and self-regulation. MLwiN version 2.10 was used to conduct a gender-specific multilevel model (MLM). This analysis models gender-specific actor effects (attachment on one's own satisfaction) and partner effects (attachment on one's partners' satisfaction). We first tested whether attachment (anxiety and avoidance in separate analyses) predicted actor and partner relationship satisfaction. The coefficients for the MLM analysis of the association of relationship satisfaction with attachment anxiety and avoidance are displayed in Table 2. Male attachment anxiety was associated with both low male and female relationship satisfaction. Female attachment anxiety predicted low female but not male relationship satisfaction. Male attachment avoidance was associated with low male and female relationship

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/951490>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/951490>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)