Attachment insecurities and interpersonal processes in Spanish couples: A dyadic approach

FERNANDO MOLERO, a PHILLIP R. SHAVER, b EMILIO FERRER, b ISABEL CUADRADO, c AND ITZIAR ALONSO-ARBIOL d

a Spanish Open University (UNED), Spain; b University of California, Davis; c University of Almería, Spain; d University of the Basque Country, Spain

Abstract

Several attachment-related phenomena in Spanish couples using dyadic-level analyses were examined. A sample of 295 heterosexual couples completed measures of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, self-esteem, social self-efficacy, and relationship satisfaction. Results, analyzed from a dyadic perspective using the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM), indicate that (a) there are actor but no partner effects of attachment insecurities on intrapersonal variables such as self-esteem and social self-efficacy, (b) there are actor and partner effects of avoidant attachment on relationship satisfaction, and (c) actor anxiety is associated with partner avoidance, and actor avoidance is associated with partner anxiety. Overall, the results reveal the importance of a dyadic perspective on couple members’ attachment insecurities and their associations with intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and relationship adjustment. They also show that attachment variables and correlates studied mainly in English-speaking countries are useful in understanding Spanish couple dynamics.

Attachment theory has stimulated hundreds of studies in the past two decades, showing how attachment insecurities of two kinds, anxiety and avoidance, are related to other psychological processes, such as affect regulation, and to dyadic processes, such as conflict and forgiveness, in close interpersonal relationships (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). Nevertheless, many of the studies have involved only individuals rather than members of established couples, and most studies have been conducted in English-speaking countries (i.e., the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia). These are the important limitations of research on couple relationships, because, first, couple relationships cannot be understood solely in terms of individual-level factors, and second, it cannot simply be assumed that relationship processes studied in one sociocultural context are universal. Although adult attachment studies conducted in different countries have so far suggested considerable universality, some cross-cultural differences have been reported (see Shaver, Mikulincer, Alonso-Arbiol, & Lavy, 2010, for a review and commentary). More germane to this study are recent findings showing that Spanish university students (Alonso-Arbiol, Balluerka, Shaver, & Gillath, 2008) and American students of Hispanic ethnicity (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Zakalik, 2004) score higher than the other groups examined so far on attachment anxiety. If higher levels of attachment anxiety are normative in Spanish populations, it may reduce the negative effects of this kind of insecurity on couple dynamics.

Understanding the universalities and cultural differences in adult attachment processes
depends on increasing the number of studies conducted in non-English-speaking societies. This study addresses this need by examining, from a dyadic perspective, attachment-related phenomena in couples residing in Spain.

**Attachment in romantic relationships**

Attachment theory was initially formulated by Bowlby (1969/1982) and tested empirically by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978), who identified three major patterns of infant attachment to primary caregivers (usually the infant’s mother), which here we will label secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment. Some years later, Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed applying Bowlby’s theory and Ainsworth and colleagues’ research findings to late adolescent and adult romantic love and couple relationships. Subsequently, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) argued that what Hazan and Shaver had called “romantic attachment” could be understood in terms of two conceptually independent dimensions—model of self and model of others—which together defined four attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing. Empirical analyses (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) supported this conception of attachment patterns, and most recent studies have been based on measures of the two main dimensions that underlie the four-category typology: anxious attachment (characterized by concerns about rejection and abandonment) and avoidant attachment (characterized by discomfort with closeness and interdependence and a preference for self-reliance). Numerous studies based on these two dimensions have been published, and the majority of them have been reviewed by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007).

Recently, the measure used in most of these studies, the Experiences in Close Relationships inventory (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998), was translated into Spanish and was shown to have good reliability and preliminary construct validity (Alonso-Arbiol, Balluerka, & Shaver, 2007). These early validity studies did not, however, include multilevel analyses to explore couple dynamics, self-esteem, and social self-efficacy, which are the focus of this study.

**Associations between attachment insecurities and intrapersonal processes**

Two intrapersonal variables have received considerable attention from social and personality psychologists, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Several authors (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) have characterized self-esteem as the read-out of a “sociometer” that may have evolved to monitor a person’s level of social inclusion or rejection by a relationship partner or group—a valuable psychological asset for members of a highly social species. Because attachment insecurities are thought to stem from the lack of adequate acceptance and support by caregivers during childhood, it is reasonable to expect measures of these insecurities, especially attachment anxiety (fear of rejection or abandonment), to be inversely correlated with measures of self-esteem. Such negative correlations have in fact been reported over the years by researchers ranging from Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) to Schmitt and Allik (2005), the latter of whom found a significant negative correlation between attachment anxiety and scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) in 49 countries including Spain.

The association between avoidant attachment and self-esteem is less clear. Although avoidance is a form of attachment insecurity, avoidant individuals are highly motivated to be, and to view themselves as, independent and self-reliant, which may make them reluctant to acknowledge low or unstable self-esteem. In their review of the research literature on adult attachment, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) found negative correlations between self-esteem and avoidance in about half of the 60 studies they reviewed. These correlations suggest that the defensive strategies of avoidant people—which include suppressing thoughts of vulnerability and dependence—are not always successful.

Regarding the association between attachment insecurities and a slightly different
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construct, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), the results also differ with respect to attachment anxiety and avoidance. The majority of studies have found that attachment anxiety is associated with relatively low self-efficacy across all life domains studied (e.g., global, social, academic, and athletic). In contrast, avoidance is often associated positively with perceived self-efficacy in nonsocial domains, such as personal achievement, but associated negatively with self-efficacy in interpersonal domains (often referred to as relationship or social self-efficacy; e.g., Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, & Mikulincer, 2002; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). As with other studies of adult attachment and couple relationships, most of the studies published to date have involved only English-speaking participants.

Attachment and relationship satisfaction

Many researchers and literature reviewers have concluded that satisfaction or adjustment in long-term romantic relationships is important for people’s health and well-being (for a review, see Berscheid & Reis, 1998). In Spain, which is of special interest here, two national surveys (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas [CIS], 2002, 2004) showed that for almost all participants family was very (78.5%) or quite (20.4%) important, and most participants were highly satisfied with their families (averaging 8.2 on a 1–10 scale). In their comprehensive review of attachment studies (mostly conducted in English-speaking countries), Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) found that attachment insecurities (both attachment anxiety and avoidance) and relationship satisfaction were negatively correlated among both women and men. However, although anxiety and avoidance were roughly equally predictive of women’s dissatisfaction, avoidance was more consistently associated with relationship dissatisfaction in men.

Although the majority of studies have focused on the association between one person’s attachment insecurities and his or her own relationship satisfaction, there are some studies of the joint influence of both partners’ insecurities. This research generally shows that partners of relatively anxious or avoidant individuals have lower relationship satisfaction than partners of relatively secure individuals (Banse, 2004; Feeney, 2002; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005).

Some researchers (e.g., Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh Rangarajoo, 1996; Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, & DeBord, 1996; Klohnen & Luo, 2003) have considered whether partners’ attachment styles are related to each other, as might be expected based on the well-researched general hypothesis that similarity enhances attraction (Byrne, 1971). There is some evidence that secure individuals are more attracted to secure individuals, anxious individuals are more attracted to anxious individuals, and avoidant individuals are more attracted to avoidant individuals, although this pattern is not always found (see Holmes & Johnson, 2009, for a review). Regarding the effects of different attachment-style pairings on relationship satisfaction, it seems that the combination of an anxious person with an avoidant one is detrimental to relationship satisfaction, as is the combination of two anxious individuals (Allison, Bartholomew, Mayseless, & Dutton, 2008; Feeney, 1994; Roberts & Noller, 1998).

The dyadic perspective on adult attachment

As Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006, p. 144) noted: “Virtually all major theories of romantic relationships, including theories of equity, commitment, trust, interdependence, and attachment, acknowledge the idea that one partner’s attributes and behaviors can affect the other partner’s outcomes.” However, most of the research on adult attachment has been conducted at the individual level of analysis. Often, only one member of each couple is studied. Nevertheless, in the last few years several studies have been conducted from a dyadic perspective. For example, Brassard, Shaver, and Lussier (2007) and Butzer and Campbell (2008) documented the influence of both members’ attachment insecurities on both partners’ sexual and marital satisfaction. Millings and Walsh (2009) explored the relation between attachment and caregiving in
long-term couples, and Simpson, Winterhedl, Rholes, and Minda Oriña (2007) explored the relation between attachment and the reactions to different forms of caregiving from romantic partners. These studies all involved English- or French-speaking couples in the United States and Canada.

To analyze the mutual influences between two couple members, a dyadic perspective is required. In this study, we adopt this perspective and analyze several correlates of attachment insecurities that have received little attention in the literature, especially in Spain. Specifically, we examine:

1. the effects of actor and partner attachment insecurities (attachment anxiety and avoidance) on intrapersonal processes such as self-esteem and perceived social self-efficacy;
2. the influence of actor and partner attachment insecurities on both partners’ relationship satisfaction;
3. the existence of similarity or complementarity between the attachment orientations of relationship partners.

Objectives and hypotheses

Our goal was to examine attachment-related phenomena within established couples residing in Spain, using both individual-level and dyadic-level analyses. On the basis of adult attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), the findings from previous studies, and advances in dyadic analysis methods, we tested several hypotheses using multilevel modeling (MLM), as suggested by creators of the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny et al., 2006). The APIM will be explained in more detail in the Analyses section.

H1 (Model 1): Actors’ attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) will be negatively correlated with their own self-esteem.

Inverse associations between actor attachment insecurities and actor self-esteem have been reported in the literature (e.g., Schmitt & Allik, 2005), but little is known about associations between one relationship partner’s insecurities and the other partner’s self-esteem. This association will be examined in our analyses, but we advance no a priori hypothesis about it.

H2 (Model 2): Actor attachment insecurities will be inversely associated with actor social self-efficacy.

As is the case of self-esteem, there are a number of studies reporting an inverse association between attachment insecurities and actor social self-efficacy (e.g., Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005; Wei et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the possible links between one partner’s insecurities and the other’s social self-efficacy are unclear. This will be explored in Model 2.

H3 (Model 3): Actor and partner attachment insecurities will be inversely associated with both partners’ relationship satisfaction.

Several studies have documented the negative associations between one person’s attachment insecurities and his or her own relationship satisfaction. The associations between one partner’s insecurities and the other partner’s satisfaction have been less often explored, although a few studies have found the expected negative associations (e.g., Banse, 2004).

H4 (Models 4 and 5): One partner’s attachment anxiety will be associated with the other partner’s avoidance and vice versa, because anxious individuals should cause their partners to draw away, and avoidant individuals should cause their partners to feel insecure, anxious, and desirous of greater closeness.

Method

Participants and procedure

The participants, 295 heterosexual couples, were recruited and interviewed by undergraduate psychology students at the UNED
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(National Open University, Spain) who received practicum credits for conducting the interviews. Each student was asked to interview both members of at least three heterosexual couples (regardless of relationship length) using the questionnaire described below. Participant couples resided in various parts of Spain, 26% in large cities (with a population of more than 1 million), 43% in middle size cities (with 50,000 to 1 million inhabitants), and 31% in small towns (with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants). The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 77 years (M = 34.3, SD = 12.05). Relationship length ranged from 6 months to 60 years, with a mean of 6.02 years and a SD of 9.21 years.

Instruments

Attachment
Participants answered a Spanish version (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2007) of the ECR (Brennan et al., 1998). The ECR contains two 18-item scales that measure attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. The measure has been used in scores of studies, in a variety of countries and languages, since 1998 (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). In this study, the internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach’s αs) of the Spanish versions of the scales were .84 and .85 for anxiety and avoidance, respectively.

Self-esteem
We used a Spanish translation (Expósito & Moya, 1999) of the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which contains items such as “I am able to do things as well as most other people” and “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” Ratings were made on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). In this study, the coefficient α for the scale was .76.

Social self-efficacy
We used the six-item Social Self-Efficacy Scale designed by Sherer and colleagues (1982) to measure self-perceived social and relationship skills. This scale was validated in Spain by López-Torrecillas, García, Cañadas, Uclés, and de la Fuente (2006). The following items are representative: “I do not handle myself well in social gatherings” (reversed), “It is difficult for me to make new friends” (reversed), and “I have acquired my friends through my personal abilities at making friends.” Items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). In this study, the coefficient α for this scale was .78.

Relationship satisfaction
The participants answered the following question, “To what extent are you satisfied with your current relationship?” using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Although single-item scales have psychometric limitations, they can be useful in the absence of more extensive measures and can be adequate alternatives to longer scales (Barrett & Paltiel, 1996; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001).

Sociodemographic variables
The participants also provided sociodemographic information (e.g., relationship duration, age, gender, and education level).

Analyses
The analyses were conducted from a dyadic perspective using the APIM. When individuals are members of a couple, their outcomes cannot be assumed to be independent; they are likely to be a function of both their own characteristics (actor effects) and their partner’s characteristics (partner effects). Finding partner effects in the data provides evidence of the couple members’ interdependence (Kenny et al., 2006). To statistically estimate the actor and partner effects, we used MLM, a flexible approach that allows for the testing of interactions (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Kenny et al., 2006). In particular, our MLM approach treated data from each partner as nested within their dyad. We coded gender as a dummy variable (−1 for women and 1 for men).
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables, broken down by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>1.93*</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>-2.53*</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-2.31*</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social self-efficacy</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship satisfaction</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-3.16**</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Scores could range from 1 to 5.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

The means and standard deviations for all variables are shown in Table 1, separately for men and women. Because the sample size was large, there were significant gender differences on all variables, with the exception of social self-efficacy. Nevertheless, the effect sizes were small in all cases. Men were slightly less anxious, more avoidant, higher in self-esteem, and more satisfied with their relationships than women. These results fit with gender-role stereotypes (see, e.g., Deaux & Kite, 1993; Spence & Buckner, 2000). Table 2 displays the zero-order correlations among the variables, separately for men and women. Most of the correlation coefficients are in the same directions and of roughly similar sizes for men and women, but there are some significant differences in the correlations involving avoidance. The correlation between avoidance and self-esteem is more strongly negative for men than for women (z = 1.96, p = .05, two-tailed), and the correlation between avoidance and relationship satisfaction is more strongly negative for women than for men (z = 2.23, p < .05, two-tailed).

Table 3 presents the zero-order correlations between men’s and women’s variables. In the diagonal of this table, it can be seen that there are significant correlations between men’s and women’s avoidance, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction scores. These correlations indicate that the couple members’ scores are not independent, which indicates the value of a dyad-level analyses (Kenny et al., 2006, p. 28).

Hypothesis tests based on the APIM

To simplify the presentation of results we report only significant effects.

Model 1 (Hypothesis 1)

This model tests the actor and partner effects of attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) on self-esteem, and the result was expected to be a negative relation between the
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Table 3. Pearson correlations between men’s and women’s variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1 (W)</th>
<th>2 (W)</th>
<th>3 (W)</th>
<th>4 (W)</th>
<th>5 (W)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Anxiety (M)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Avoidance (M)</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>−.13**</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-esteem (M)</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Social self-efficacy (M)</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.11*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relationship satisfaction (M)</td>
<td>−.11*</td>
<td>−.23**</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.41**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. W = women; M = men.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

insecurity scores and self-esteem. The predictor variables in the model included gender and both actor and partner scores on the anxiety and avoidance scales. As can be seen in Table 4, actors’ attachment anxiety and avoidance scores were negatively associated with their own self-esteem, as predicted, but there were no partner or gender effects, suggesting that couple members’ self-esteem was not affected by their partners’ attachment insecurities.

Table 4. Actor and partner effects of anxiety and avoidance on self-esteem and social self-efficacy (Models 1 and 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Social self-efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>5.03**</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor effect</td>
<td>−.20**</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner effect</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor effect</td>
<td>−.33**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner effect</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. b represents an unstandardized regression coefficient.
** p < .001.

Model 2 (Hypothesis 2)

This model tests the actor and partner effects of attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) on social self-efficacy, and negative associations were expected. The predictor variables in the model included gender and both actor and partner scores on the anxiety and avoidance scales. As can be seen in Table 4, actors’ attachment anxiety and avoidance scores were negatively related to their own social self-efficacy, but as in the test of Hypothesis 1, there were no partner or gender effects.

Model 3 (Hypothesis 3)

This model tests the actor and partner effects of attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) on relationship satisfaction. The predictor variables in the model included gender and actor and partner scores on the anxiety and avoidance scales. As can be seen in Table 5, there were actor and partner effects of avoidance on relationship satisfaction. But in the case of attachment anxiety, there was only an effect of the partner; with the other variables in the model, actor attachment anxiety did not affect actor’s own relationship satisfaction. There was also a significant main effect of gender, as already seen in Table 1, indicating that men were, on average, more satisfied with their relationships than were women. Moreover, there was a significant interaction between actor avoidance and gender: Avoidant women were less satisfied than avoidant men.

To determine whether the effect of actor’s avoidance on relationship satisfaction
Table 5. Actor and partner effects of anxiety and avoidance on relationship satisfaction (Model 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>$b$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>6.24**</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor effect</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner effect</td>
<td>−.13*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor effect</td>
<td>−.46**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner effect</td>
<td>−.21**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Avoidance $\times$ Gender</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $b$ represents an unstandardized regression coefficient.

$^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .001$.

An appropriate test statistic for this hypothesis is as follows:

$F_{1,N-K-1} = \left( \frac{(b_1 - b_2) - (\beta_1 - \beta_2)_{0}}{\sqrt{\sigma_{b_1}^2 + \sigma_{b_2}^2 - 2\sigma_{b_1,b_2}}} \right)^2$

In other words, the observed value minus the predicted value (from the null hypothesis $\beta_1 = \beta_2 = 0$) is divided by the standard error of the difference.

To explore the possible influence of actor and partner self-esteem and social self-efficacy on relationship satisfaction, we tested another model including these two variables together with the attachment insecurity variables (anxiety and avoidance). None of the four variables—actor self-esteem, partner self-esteem, actor social self-efficacy, and partner social self-efficacy—was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction, and their presence in the model did not change the pattern of associations between the two attachment insecurity variables and relationship satisfaction.

Models 4 and 5 (Hypothesis 4)

Model 4 examines the extent to which actor anxiety is related to actor or partner avoidance when the effects of gender are controlled. As predicted in Hypothesis 4, actor anxiety was positively associated with partner avoidance. Model 5 tests the extent to which actor avoidance is affected by actor or partner anxiety when the effects of gender are controlled. As predicted in Hypothesis 4, actor avoidance was positively associated with partner anxiety. Results for both models are reported in Table 6. These results indicate a potentially destructive relationship dynamic in which one partner’s anxiety increases the other’s avoidance, and one partner’s avoidance increases the other partner’s anxiety.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to examine attachment-related phenomena in a sample of Spanish couples. The study has three characteristics that distinguish it from most previous studies of adult attachment and romantic or marital relationships: Analyses were conducted at both the individual and the dyadic levels, participants were members of established couples living outside a college or university context, and the study was conducted in a non-English-speaking country, Spain. Overall, the results confirm links
Table 6. Actor and partner effects of anxiety on avoidance and vice versa (Models 4 and 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>Anxiety b</th>
<th>Anxiety SE</th>
<th>Avoidance b</th>
<th>Avoidance SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.64***</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>1.54***</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor effect</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner effect</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor effect</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner effect</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. b represents an unstandardized regression coefficient. 
***p < .001.

between partners’ attachment insecurities and personal and relationship well-being, and they also confirm the value of the APIM in couple relationship studies.

Intrapersonal effects of attachment insecurities

As predicted by Hypothesis 1, higher levels of anxiety and avoidance were associated with lower levels of self-esteem at the individual level when controlling for partner’s scores on attachment insecurities. These results are consistent with the literature on attachment anxiety (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Schmitt & Allik, 2005) and are compatible with a number of studies that have found an association between avoidance and low self-esteem (e.g., Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). The results suggest that attachment insecurity and more general forms of self-doubt are related, either because of shared genetic influences (Crawford et al., 2007; Donnellan, Burt, Levedosky, & Klump, 2008; Gillath, Shaver, Baek, & Chun, 2008) or because of the shared influences of personal history emphasized by attachment theory (see reviews in Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Within this constellation of insecurities, however, only the attachment insecurities were significantly related to partners’ relationship outcomes in our study.

There was a significant correlation between partners’ self-esteem levels. Longitudinal studies would be needed to determine whether people with similar levels of self-esteem tend to form relationships with each other or, alternatively, one partner’s self-esteem influences the other partner’s self-esteem, perhaps through associated personal qualities, such as assertiveness or communication skills, across time. Interestingly, in the APIM analyses, self-esteem did not predict relationship satisfaction when the attachment variables were included in the model.

As predicted in Hypothesis 2, attachment insecurities were inversely related to perceived social self-efficacy at the individual level when controlling for partner’s scores on attachment insecurities (see also Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005; Wei et al., 2005). As with self-esteem, there were no significant associations between one partner’s attachment insecurities and the other partner’s social self-efficacy or relationship satisfaction. Thus, social self-efficacy, at least when measured in general (rather than intimate relationship-specific terms), seems to be a self-perception that does not play a role in dyadic processes.

Associations between actor and partner attachment insecurities and relationship satisfaction

As predicted by Hypothesis 3, both actor and partner avoidance were negatively associated with both partners’ relationship satisfaction. That is, avoidant people tended to be less satisfied with their relationships, and their relationship partners were also less satisfied. For attachment anxiety, however, we found partner but not actor effects in the APIM analyses, suggesting that anxious people may feel satisfied with their relationships even if their attachment-related behavior reduces their partner’s satisfaction.

There was also a main effect of gender: Men reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction than women. There was also an interaction between actor avoidance and gender, indicating that for women avoidance was
more closely related to dissatisfaction. This is similar to findings from the United States reported by Collins and Read (1990), and it may be a result of men’s avoidance being more congruent than women’s avoidance with gender roles and stereotypes.

The model including self-esteem and social self-efficacy in addition to the two attachment insecurity scores revealed no significant effects of self-esteem or social self-efficacy on relationship satisfaction. This is not surprising in the case of social self-efficacy, because it was not correlated with satisfaction in Table 2 either, but it suggests that the negative correlation between self-esteem and satisfaction in Table 2 was a function of the connection between self-esteem and attachment insecurities. (And in fact, in an analysis not reported in the Results section, we found that the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction disappeared when the attachment insecurity variables were partialed.) The failure of social self-efficacy as measured in this study to be related to relationship satisfaction may be a result of our having measured it in a general rather than in relationship-specific way.

The results suggest that avoidance is more detrimental than anxiety to relationship satisfaction, at least in Spain, where adults generally report higher attachment anxiety scores than adults in the United States (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2004). Attachment anxiety may be more acceptable in Spain than in the United States—an issue that should be examined directly in future studies.

Joint effects of attachment insecurities in both members of a couple

The results for Hypothesis 4 indicate that couple members’ attachment insecurity scores were interrelated. In particular, one partner’s anxiety was related to the other partner’s avoidance (see Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994, and Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994, for comparable findings in the United States). Because our study was cross-sectional, we cannot determine whether anxious and avoidant individuals were attracted to each other because of preexisting attachment orientations, or the two people’s insecurities developed over time as one partner withdrew and the other pursued (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). This is another important topic for future research.

Although our study contributes to the understanding of the role of attachment insecurities in long-term couple relationships, it is limited in certain respects. First, we used only self-report measures rather than behavioral observations. Second, although the study was cross-sectional in design, we conceptualized the analysis mainly in terms of the effects of attachment insecurities on other variables, including both partners’ relationship satisfaction. It is also possible that difficulties in a relationship, leading to lower satisfaction, affect attachment anxiety and avoidance over time, perhaps especially avoidance, which involves backing away from intimacy and interdependence. Attachment theory views attachment insecurities primarily as outcomes of actual relationship experiences, so the causal model in the case of adults may involve bidirectional forces operating over time. That is, all variables in the model are subject to change and therefore warrant study over time.

Finally, regarding the issue of cultural differences and similarities, we obtained many findings similar to those obtained in prior English-language studies. Attachment insecurities were related, at the individual level, to lower self-esteem and lower social self-efficacy, and men’s avoidance scores were slightly higher than women’s avoidance scores, which sometimes occurs in English-language studies as well. Avoidance was more associated than anxiety with low relationship satisfaction, which is also common in English-language studies (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). One partner’s anxiety was related negatively to the other partner’s satisfaction and avoidance, suggesting that attachment anxiety causes difficulties in a relationship, especially for avoidant partners.

In some English-language studies, women’s attachment anxiety seems to be a greater problem for their male partners’ satisfaction than men’s attachment anxiety is a problem for their female partners’ satisfaction (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990), but this was not
the case in this study. If anything, men’s anxiety was a greater problem for their female partners than women’s anxiety was a problem for their male partners, as indicated by the correlation coefficients of −.22 and −.11 in Table 3, but these coefficients were not significantly different.

Thus, overall, the pattern of findings for Spanish couples was very consistent with the pattern of findings in most English-language studies, suggesting cross-culturally general patterns, as have been found in studies of infant–parent attachment as well (see review by van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). It remains to be seen if this generality extends to nations and cultures more different than Spain and Anglo-American countries and cultures.

References


