

Own and Partner Attachment Insecurity Interact to Predict Marital Satisfaction and Dissolution

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Sierra D. Peters¹ , Andrea L. Meltzer¹, and James K. McNulty¹

Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Echoing this sentiment, theoretical perspectives on close relationships suggest that the synergistic combination of both partners' personal qualities can influence relationship outcomes above and beyond the simple additive influence of each partner's qualities. Yet, empirical research leaves it unclear whether the interactive effects of own and partner attachment insecurity, one of the most notable individual difference predictors of relationship outcomes, predicts relationship dissolution, one of the most notable relationship outcomes. We combined data from five independent longitudinal studies of 539 newlywed couples to address this issue. Three of the four interactive combinations (all except own attachment avoidance \times partner attachment avoidance) predicted marital dissolution serially through (a) initial marital satisfaction and (b) changes in satisfaction. Findings provide evidence of interactive attachment effects and underscore the importance of both couple members' characteristics for maintaining satisfying romantic relationships.

Keywords

attachment security, marital satisfaction, marital dissolution, dyadic effects

High-quality, long-term partnerships are critical to mental and physical health (for reviews, see Proulx et al., 2007; Robles et al., 2014). Yet, maintaining high-quality relationships is notoriously difficult, with nearly 50% of marriages ending in divorce (Amato & James, 2010; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Accordingly, identifying the factors that shape relationship development may offer important insights into how to promote satisfying, stable partnerships and thus mental and physical health.

Existing perspectives on relationship development highlight the role of individual differences in predicting relationship outcomes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Murray et al., 2006), with attachment insecurity serving as one of the most notable predictors (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). According to attachment theory and its derivatives (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), people differ in their mental models of relationships; whereas people low in attachment insecurity feel confident that close others will be responsive, people high in attachment insecurity doubt others' responsiveness. How people cope with these doubts can be conceptualized along two orthogonal dimensions—attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Fraley et al., 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Whereas attachment anxiety involves responding to interpersonal doubts with a preoccupation with closeness and fear of partner abandonment that leads to excessive

reassurance and proximity seeking, attachment avoidance involves feeling uncomfortable depending on others and staunch independence.

Ample research indicates that both forms of attachment insecurity are associated with numerous negative relationship outcomes, including relationship dissatisfaction and eventual dissolution (Simpson, 1990; for a review, see Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015). Some of the negative implications of attachment insecurity are *intrapersonal*; that is, people high in attachment insecurity engage in various perceptual and behavioral processes that can undermine *their own* relationship satisfaction (see Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). In one study, for example, both attachment anxiety and avoidance were linked to lower satisfaction through perceiving more conflict in the relationship (Brassard et al., 2009). Other negative implications of attachment insecurity are *interpersonal*; that is, attachment insecurity can lead to psychological processes that undermine *the partner's* satisfaction. In one study, for example, attachment anxiety predicted lower partner satisfaction through more frequent

¹Florida State University, Tallahassee, USA

Corresponding Author:

Sierra D. Peters, Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 1107 W. Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306, USA.
Email: speters@psy.fsu.edu

costly mate-retention tactics whereas attachment avoidance predicted lower partner satisfaction through fewer beneficial mate-retention tactics (Altgelt & Meltzer, 2019). A recent meta-analysis confirms that both forms of own and partner attachment insecurity are linked to relationship dissatisfaction (Candel & Turliuc, 2019).

Yet, the inherently dyadic nature of relationships makes it critical to consider the unique *interactive effects* of both partners' attachment insecurity beyond the simple additive effects of each partner's attachment insecurity. Zayas et al. (2002) argued that two partners provide a situational context for one another that can alter (e.g., exacerbate, attenuate) the way each person expresses their individual differences. Empirical work on the synergistic combination of other individual differences is consistent with this idea (McNulty & Dugas, 2019; Simpson & Overall, 2014; van Scheppingen et al., 2019), though the pattern of these interactions varies. Specifically, some work suggests people's strengths can buffer their partners' vulnerabilities (e.g., Simpson & Overall, 2014), whereas other work posits that people's vulnerabilities can act as a "weak link" that undermine their partners' strengths (McNulty & Dugas, 2019). Given attachment insecurity involves couple members' cognitive and behavioral reactions to partners specifically, the attachment insecurity of one's partner may partially determine how one's own attachment insecurity affects the relationship.

Nevertheless, the extent to which own and partner attachment insecurity interact to predict relationship quality and eventual stability, independent of each partner's additive effects, remains unclear. To be sure, several cross-sectional studies have examined interactive associations between couple members' attachment insecurity and relationship quality. Although some of these studies have revealed interactive effects of both partners' attachment insecurity for their satisfaction (e.g., Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005; Senchak & Leonard, 1992; Volling et al., 1998), others have questioned the robustness of such effects (Jones & Cunningham, 1996; Lozano et al., 2021). These mixed findings may be due, in part, to relatively small samples (e.g., Schmitt, 2002; Volling et al., 1998) or undergraduate participants (a) in dating relationships or (b) reporting on hypothetical partners (e.g., Jones & Cunningham, 1996; Klohnen & Luo, 2003). Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the supportive studies makes it impossible to know whether any effects emerged because the interaction of own and partner attachment insecurity predicts relationship satisfaction or because the quality of any particular relationship predicts the combination of both partners' attachment insecurity.

We are aware of just one longitudinal study addressing this issue, and it offers no evidence that the synergistic effect of both partners' attachment insecurity predicts subsequent satisfaction or dissolution beyond the simple additive effects (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). It is unknown, of course, whether this lone longitudinal study failed to observe such interactive effects because

theoretical perspectives are wrong or because the study lacked the rigor and power necessary to detect such effects. Supporting the latter possibility, the study relied on a now-outdated categorical measure of attachment insecurity, leading the authors to note it lacked variability on the different combinations of attachment insecurity. Nevertheless, other recent high-powered studies have failed to offer evidence of similar interactive effects on relationship outcomes (Eastwick et al., 2023; Joel et al., 2020; Zuo et al., 2020), leaving it unclear whether the interactive effects of own and partner attachment insecurity indeed predict relationship outcomes.

Overview of the Current Study

We pooled five longitudinal studies of newlywed couples to examine the associations between both partners' interactive attachment insecurity, relationship satisfaction, and dissolution. Newlyweds may be the ideal population in which to examine these associations given that studies of newlyweds can capture relationship development for couples who will dissolve early in the marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1997), and marital duration is constant across all couples. Moreover, the large sample size of our pooled studies increased our statistical power to examine all dyadic attachment interactions.

We drew from theoretical perspectives of individual differences in relationships generally (e.g., Zayas et al., 2002) and attachment perspectives in particular (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Howland, 2012) to predict that the interaction between people's own and their partners' attachment insecurity would be associated with their relationship outcomes. In terms of the overall pattern of such synergistic effects, we developed and preregistered three broad hypotheses that considered relative differences among the specific interactive combinations examined. First, we hypothesized that people high in either form of attachment insecurity with partners also high in either form of attachment insecurity would report the lowest marital satisfaction (H1a) and be at the highest risk for dissolution (H1b). Second, we hypothesized that people low in either form of attachment insecurity with partners also low in either form of attachment insecurity would report the highest satisfaction (H2a) and be at the lowest risk for dissolution (H2b). Third, we hypothesized that those in relationships in which only one couple member was high in a form of attachment insecurity would report comparably moderate levels of satisfaction (H3a) and be at comparably moderate risk for dissolution (H3b). We did not make strong a priori predictions regarding the pattern of actor and partner effects among these latter couples because theory suggests two competing possibilities. Whereas the dyadic regulation model of insecurity buffering (Simpson & Overall, 2014) posits that partners low in insecurity can *buffer* the concerns of their relatively more insecurely

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Study	Age		Years of education		Full-time employed	Full-time student	Income group		Caucasian
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Study 1 (<i>N</i> = 72 couples)									
Husband	24.92	6.10	14.01	2.30	74	11	15K–20K	10K–15K	65
Wife	24.40	4.39	14.64	2.18	49	26	10K–15K	10K–15K	72
Study 2 (<i>N</i> = 134 couples)									
Husband	25.91	4.59	15.78	2.32	69	26	20K–25K	10K–15K	90
Wife	24.22	3.61	17.14	1.74	56	28	15K–20K	10K–15K	93
Study 3 (<i>N</i> = 110 couples)									
Husband	28.14	5.59	15.24	2.79	71	13	44K	47K	47
Wife	26.81	4.78	15.87	2.88	54	13	32K	31K	48
Study 4 (<i>N</i> = 120 couples)									
Husband	32.12	9.84	16.54	2.30	71	20	30K	25K	77
Wife	30.15	8.09	16.86	2.21	61	21	30K	50K	77
Study 5 (<i>N</i> = 103 couples)									
Husband	32.03	10.80	15.87	2.90	65	15	35K	23K	79
Wife	29.94	9.52	15.98	2.55	58	20	32K	44K	73

attached partner, leading to greater satisfaction and stability for both couple members, evidence in support of the “weak link” hypothesis (Attridge et al., 1995; McNulty & Dugas, 2019) suggests an insecure partner may act as a “weak link” that leads to lower satisfaction and stability for both couple members. Finally, although there is some reason to expect particular combinations (e.g., own attachment avoidance with partner attachment anxiety) to be particularly detrimental to relationship outcomes (e.g., Feeney, 1994; Shallcross et al., 2011), we did not make strong a priori predictions regarding the specific, nuanced combinations given the aforementioned mixed findings in the literature.

Method

Transparency and Openness

In each study, we recruited as many couples as possible given funding, time, and recruitment constraints. We preregistered our hypotheses, data exclusions, and data-analytic approach (https://osf.io/cyk52/?view_only=5882b9f3e9b34899bb5499f5d8015a03). Data and data analytic code are available at: https://osf.io/djczy/?view_only=4d57389e184449aba1a54ef0e0520c. Data exclusions and other issues involving transparency were made based on Journal Article Reporting Standards (JARS; Kazak, 2018). Data were analyzed using Mplus 8.4.

Participants

We drew upon data from five independent, multi-wave longitudinal studies of newlywed couples. Participants in Study 1 were 72 different-sex couples recruited from Northern Ohio; participants in Study 2 were 135 different-sex couples recruited from Eastern Tennessee; participants in Study 3 were 113 different-sex couples recruited from

Northern Texas; participants in Studies 4 and 5 were 120 couples (119 different-sex couples, one same-sex female couple) and 104 couples (99 different-sex couples, five same-sex female couples), respectively, both recruited from Northern Florida. One wife from one couple in Study 2, three wives from three couples in Study 3, and both couple members from one couple in Study 5 failed to complete the attachment insecurity measure, we thus excluded these five couples from the current analyses, resulting in a final sample of 1,078 individuals (539 couples). A sensitivity analysis determined that we were equipped with .80 power to detect very small effects (e.g., $r = .07$).

We recruited participants by posting advertisements in community newspapers and bridal shops (and, in Studies 4 and 5, on Facebook). For Studies 1–4, we also sent invitation letters to couples who had recently applied for marriage licenses in the county of each study location. As part of each study’s broader goals, eligibility required both couple members (a) were at least 18 years of age, (b) spoke English (to ensure questionnaire comprehension), and (c) were married less than three months in Study 4, four months in Studies 3 and 5, and six months in Studies 1 to 2.

Each sample’s demographics appear in Table 1. On average, couples were in their mid-twenties to early thirties, and wives reported more education than husbands. Most were employed full time, though there were notable percentages of full-time students, which is not surprising given most studies were conducted in college towns. Finally, although most participants in Studies 1, 2, 4, and 5 self-identified as Caucasian, Study 3 was racially diverse.

Procedure

All studies’ procedures were nearly identical; minor differences were due to each study’s broader aims and

constraints on each primary investigator. Upon enrollment, participants completed questionnaires online via Qualtrics or through the mail that included a consent form approved by the local human-subjects review board; measures assessing each couple member's attachment insecurity, marital satisfaction, and neuroticism (to be used as a covariate in follow-up robustness analyses); additional measures beyond the scope of the current analyses; and a letter instructing couple members to complete their questionnaires independently. We compensated couples (Studies 1–2 = US\$80; Studies 3–5 = US\$100) for completing these baseline questionnaires and a corresponding laboratory session that is beyond the scope of the current analyses. At four-month intervals (Studies 4–5; spanning two years) and six-month intervals (Studies 1–3; spanning three-and-a-half years), couples again independently completed questionnaires that included measures of marital satisfaction and dissolution as well as additional measures beyond the scope of the current analyses. We compensated couples for completing each follow-up assessment (Studies 1–2 = US\$50; Study 3 = US\$30; Studies 4–5 = US\$25).

Measures

Attachment Insecurity. At baseline, we assessed attachment insecurity using the Revised Experiences in Close Relationships scale (Fraley et al., 2000), which is a 36-item measure assessing spouses' agreement with 18 statements reflecting attachment anxiety (e.g., "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love") and 18 statements reflecting attachment avoidance (e.g., "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners") on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). After reverse scoring the necessary items, we averaged the items comprising each subscale to create composite indexes for attachment (a) anxiety and (b) avoidance; higher scores indicate greater insecurity. Internal consistency was high (across all studies, husbands' and wives' $\alpha \geq .90$).

Marital Satisfaction. At all assessments, we used two measures to assess marital satisfaction. The first was the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983), which is a six-item scale assessing spouses' agreement with general statements about their marital quality (e.g., "we have a good marriage"). The first five items use a 7-point scale whereas the final item uses a 10-point scale. The second measure was a semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957) that required spouses to rate their perceptions of their marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1997) on 7-point scales anchored between 15 pairs of opposing adjectives (e.g., pleasant–unpleasant). These two measures were highly correlated ($r = .91$), and thus, to be most comprehensive and to minimize the likelihood that results are specific to one measure, we created an index of satisfaction for each spouse by standardizing their scores across all assessments and averaging those

standardized scores; higher scores reflect greater satisfaction. Internal consistency for each measure was high (across all assessments of all studies, husbands' and wives' $\alpha \geq .89$).

Marital Dissolution. We assessed marital dissolution using two methods. The first involved asking participants to indicate their marital status at each follow-up assessment; the second involved examining public divorce records upon each study's completion. We considered a couple divorced if (a) either spouse indicated they were "divorced," "in the process of a divorce," or "separated" or (b) public divorce records indicated the couple divorced during the study. We coded dissolution, such that, $-1 =$ remained intact and $1 =$ dissolved.

Covariate. Given that both attachment anxiety and avoidance are moderately correlated with neuroticism (Shaver & Brennan, 1992), we assessed neuroticism at baseline in all studies using the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg, 1999) and controlled for it in a follow-up robustness analysis. Studies 1, 2, and 5 used the 10-item measure, whereas Studies 3 and 4 used the 60-item measure; these differences were due to the broader aims of each study. For each item, participants indicated the accuracy with which different statements accurately described them using a 5-point scale (1 = *very inaccurate*; 5 = *very accurate*). We averaged participants' responses across items to form an index of neuroticism; higher scores indicate higher neuroticism. Internal consistency was high (across all studies, husbands' and wives' $\alpha \geq .87$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Correlations and descriptive statistics appear in Table 2. A few are worth highlighting. First, both couple members reported relatively high baseline marital satisfaction that did not differ, $t(542.52) = 0.43$, $p = .670$, and attachment insecurity that fell below each scale's midpoint; 3.5; for anxiety: 95% CI [2.14, 2.29]; for avoidance: 95% CI [2.07, 2.19]. Second, although husbands and wives did not differ in attachment anxiety, $t(544.64) = 0.85$, $p = .395$, husbands ($M = 2.18$, $SE = 0.04$) reported higher attachment avoidance than wives ($M = 2.08$, $SE = 0.04$), $t(545.79) = -2.16$, $p = .031$. Third, wives ($M = 2.82$, $SE = 0.03$) reported higher neuroticism than husbands ($M = 2.39$, $SE = 0.03$), $t(546.40) = 10.85$, $p < .001$. Fourth, both forms of attachment insecurity (a) were positively correlated, (b) were negatively associated with baseline marital satisfaction, and (c) trended toward being positively associated with dissolution. Finally, both forms of attachment insecurity were positively correlated with neuroticism,

Table 2. Zero-Order Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Attachment anxiety	—				
(2) Attachment avoidance	.53***	—			
(3) Baseline marital satisfaction	-.41***	-.45***	—		
(4) Divorce	.09**	.06 [†]	-.07 [†]	—	
(5) Neuroticism	.41***	.20***	-.23***	.05	—
M	2.22	2.13	0.30	—	2.61
SE	0.04	0.03	0.02	—	0.02
N	1,078	1,078	1,077	—	1,071

Note. All variables are reported at baseline, except for divorce, which represents whether the marriage dissolved at any point during the study. To determine significance levels of these bivariate correlations (given the nested nature of the data), we used Griffin and Gonzalez's (1995) recommendations for estimating the "effective sample size," adjusted for dependent observations, and the corresponding Z-test. For the descriptive statistics, SEs are reported because they were drawn from mixed modeling (given the nested nature of the data).

[†] $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

supporting our a priori decision to control for it in a follow-up robustness analysis.

Examining the Interactive Effects of Own and Partner Attachment Insecurity

We deviated from our preregistered primary analysis plan in two ways. First, although we originally proposed to test for *parallel* mediation, where initial satisfaction and changes in satisfaction simultaneously predict dissolution, we instead tested for *serial* mediation, where the mediated path from attachment to dissolution occurs first through initial satisfaction and second through changes in satisfaction. Parallel mediation models assume that the multiple mediators are not causally related (Loh & Ren, 2023); yet initial satisfaction occurs *before* and can thus predict changes in satisfaction (Lavner et al., 2012). Indeed, although the parallel mediation model yielded the same interactive effects of attachment on initial satisfaction as the serial mediation model, initial satisfaction was unexpectedly *positively* associated with dissolution in the parallel mediation model once changes in satisfaction were controlled, suggesting initial satisfaction had been over-residualized in that model. Detailed results of the parallel mediation model appear in the Supplemental Material. Second, although we originally planned to use a combination of SPSS 27 and HLM7, we ultimately used Mplus 8.4 because it allowed us to model all hypothesized direct and indirect pathways in one analysis. We also deviated from our preregistered secondary analysis plan in two ways. First, given that we switched to a single indirect model that modeled husbands' and wives' estimates separately but simultaneously, we could not subsequently control for gender; instead, we tested whether all key associations differed across gender. Because they did not (all $ps > .05$), we pooled across husbands' and wives' estimates. Second, although we originally planned to control for partner marital satisfaction in secondary analyses, that model would not converge.

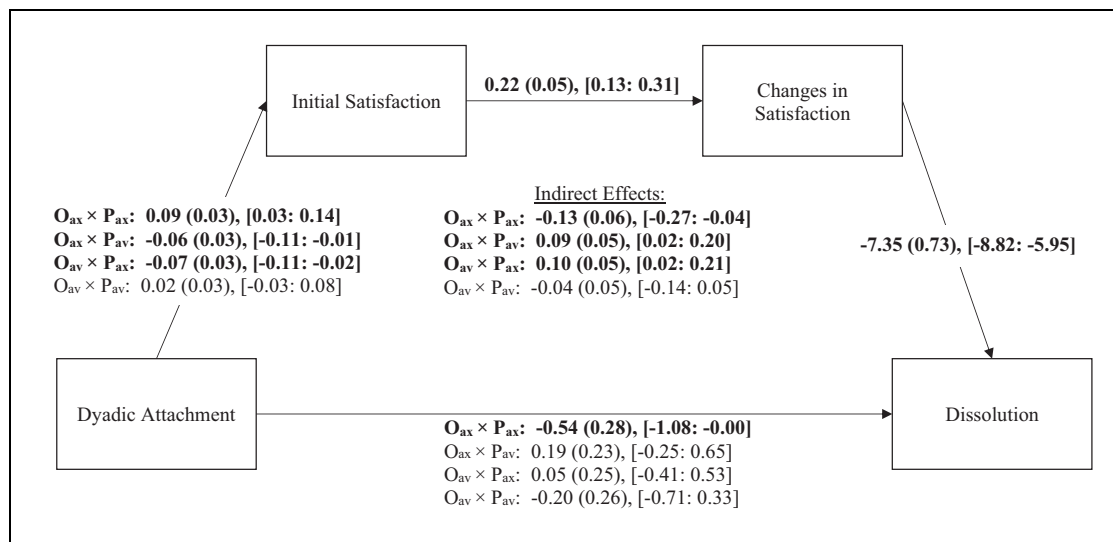
To examine the indirect associations between the interactions of couple members' attachment insecurity and marital dissolution through each couple member's marital satisfaction trajectory, we used a two-level random model that allowed us to model time in years, accounting for the different assessment intervals across studies. Given problems with convergence using Mplus' default maximum likelihood estimation, we followed the lead of others (see van de Schoot, 2017) to use a Bayes estimator and the default uninformative priors. Indeed, such Bayesian models are becoming more common in relationship science (e.g., Goldring & Bolger, 2022), and often produce estimates similar to those detected with frequentist models. Specifically, we simultaneously regressed (a) people's own marital satisfaction trajectories (i.e., initial satisfaction and linear changes in satisfaction) onto their own and their partners' attachment anxiety and avoidance (both standardized) as well as all possible dyadic two-way interactions, controlling for study (using four dummy-coded variables) and quadratic changes in marital satisfaction and (b) marital dissolution onto people's own marital satisfaction trajectories and the same dyadic attachment predictors. Finally, and critically, we then modeled the indirect associations between all dyadic attachment interactions and marital dissolution through people's own initial marital satisfaction and, serially, linear changes in marital satisfaction over time. Of note, we correlated error terms among couple members' attachment insecurities and all three marital-satisfaction-trajectory components (i.e., initial satisfaction, linear changes, and quadratic changes); to ensure stable parameter estimates, we specified 20,000 iterations and confirmed that posterior scale reduction (PSR) values were below 1.05 (Zyphur & Oswald, 2015).

Results of this serial mediation model appear in Table 3 and Figure 1. Consistent with predictions and prior work, own and partner attachment insecurity were negatively associated with people's initial marital satisfaction. Nevertheless, these main effects were qualified by three

Table 3. Associations Between All Dyadic Attachment Interactions and Marital Dissolution Through Initial Marital Satisfaction, and Serially, Through Changes in Marital Satisfaction

Predictors	Serial mediators						Outcome		
	Initial marital satisfaction			Linear changes in marital satisfaction			Marital dissolution		
	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI
Own anxiety	-0.11	0.02	[-0.16, -0.07]	0.00	0.02	[-0.04, 0.05]	0.48	0.22	[0.06, 0.92]
Partner anxiety	-0.05	0.02	[-0.10, -0.01]	-0.02	0.02	[-0.06, 0.02]	0.25	0.21	[-0.14, 0.68]
Own avoidance	-0.22	0.02	[-0.27, -0.18]	0.05	0.02	[0.00, 0.10]	0.45	0.24	[-0.02, 0.92]
Partner avoidance	-0.08	0.02	[-0.13, -0.04]	-0.00	0.02	[-0.05, 0.04]	-0.07	0.22	[-0.51, 0.37]
Own anxiety × partner anxiety	0.09	0.03	[0.03, 0.14]	-0.01	0.03	[-0.08, 0.05]	-0.54	0.28	[-1.08, -0.00]
Own anxiety × partner avoidance	-0.06	0.03	[-0.11, -0.01]	0.02	0.03	[-0.04, 0.07]	0.19	0.23	[-0.25, 0.65]
Own avoidance × partner anxiety	-0.07	0.03	[-0.11, -0.02]	0.00	0.03	[-0.05, 0.06]	0.05	0.25	[-0.41, 0.53]
Own avoidance × partner avoidance	0.02	0.03	[-0.03, 0.08]	-0.04	0.03	[-0.11, 0.02]	-0.20	0.26	[-0.71, 0.33]
Initial marital satisfaction	—	—	—	0.22	0.05	[0.13, 0.31]	2.29	0.46	[1.45, 3.24]
Linear changes in marital satisfaction	—	—	—	—	—	—	-7.35	0.73	[-8.82, -5.95]

Note. For the sake of brevity, we excluded the Study covariates (all $ps > .05$). M = unstandardized posterior median. SD = posterior standard deviation; 95% CI = Bayesian credibility interval. Bolded values indicate parameter estimates for which the credibility intervals do not include zero. PSR = 1.01.

**Figure 1.** Key Components of the Serial Mediation Model Between Dyadic Attachment and Marital Dissolution

Note. Unstandardized posterior medians, posterior standard deviations, and 95% Bayesian credibility intervals are reported for each association. $O_{ax} \times P_{ax}$ = own anxiety × partner anxiety; $O_{ax} \times P_{av}$ = own anxiety × partner avoidance; $O_{av} \times P_{ax}$ = own avoidance × partner anxiety; $O_{av} \times P_{av}$ = own avoidance × partner avoidance. To ease interpretation, only key components are presented. Covariates and paths modeled but not presented include: (a) quadratic changes in marital satisfaction, (b) attachment predicting changes in satisfaction, (c) initial satisfaction predicting dissolution, and (d) study predicting initial satisfaction; see Table 3 for all model results.

significant interactions (all interactions except own attachment avoidance × partner attachment avoidance; see Panel D of Figure 2). In turn, initial satisfaction was positively associated with linear changes in satisfaction, and more negative changes in satisfaction were associated with an increased probability of dissolution. Critically, consistent with hypotheses, all three significant interactions were *indirectly* associated with marital dissolution through initial marital satisfaction and, subsequently, linear changes in satisfaction (see Figure 1). A follow-up robustness analysis

revealed that all indirect associations continued to emerge as significant when we controlled for both couple members' neuroticism (for own attachment anxiety × partner attachment anxiety: $M = -0.11$, $SD = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.02]; for own attachment anxiety × partner attachment avoidance: $M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.19]; for own attachment avoidance × partner attachment anxiety: $M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.2, 0.19]); all path estimates for this robustness analysis appear in the Supplemental Material.

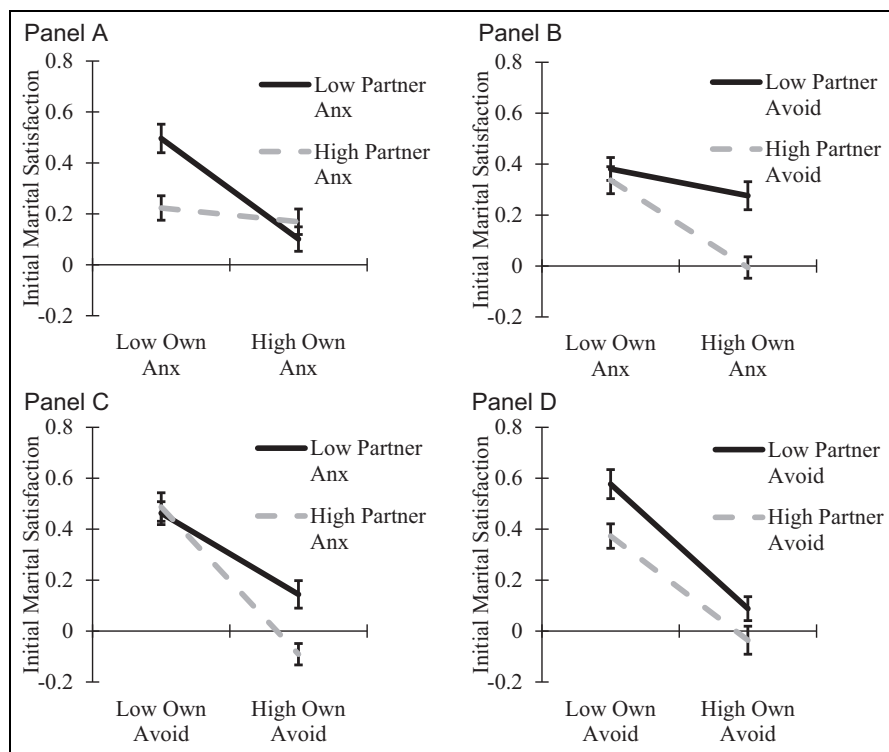


Figure 2. Associations Between Dyadic Attachment Interactions and Initial Marital Satisfaction

Note. Panel A depicts the significant association between own attachment anxiety \times partner attachment anxiety and own initial marital satisfaction. Panel B depicts the significant association between own attachment anxiety \times partner attachment avoidance and own initial marital satisfaction. Panel C depicts the significant association between own attachment avoidance \times partner attachment anxiety and own initial marital satisfaction. Panel D depicts the non-significant association between own attachment avoidance \times partner attachment avoidance and own initial marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is standardized and thus zero represents the average marital satisfaction across studies.

Own Attachment Anxiety \times Partner Attachment Anxiety. The association involving the own attachment anxiety \times partner attachment anxiety interaction and initial marital satisfaction is depicted in Panel A of Figure 2. As can be seen, own attachment anxiety was negatively associated with initial marital satisfaction among people whose partners reported low attachment anxiety (1 *SD* below the sample mean), $M = -0.20$, $SD = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.27, -0.12]$, but not significantly associated among people whose partners reported high attachment anxiety (1 *SD* above the sample mean), $M = -0.03$, $SD = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.09, 0.04]$. Breaking down the other set of simple effects revealed that partner attachment anxiety was negatively associated with initial marital satisfaction among people low in attachment anxiety, $M = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.21, -0.06]$, but not significantly associated among people high in attachment anxiety, $M = 0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.10]$. Furthermore, consistent with H2a and H2b, people low in attachment anxiety whose partners were similarly low in attachment anxiety had the highest levels of initial marital satisfaction and lowest probability of dissolution. Consistent with the weak link perspective but not with H3a and H3b, people in couples comprised

one or both partners high in attachment anxiety experienced similarly low levels of initial satisfaction and a higher probability of dissolution.

Own Attachment Anxiety \times Partner Attachment Avoidance. The association involving the own attachment anxiety \times partner attachment avoidance interaction and initial marital satisfaction is depicted in Panel B of Figure 2. As can be seen, own attachment anxiety was negatively associated with initial marital satisfaction among people whose partners reported high attachment avoidance, $M = -0.17$, $SD = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.24, -0.11]$, but not significantly associated among people whose partners reported low attachment avoidance, $M = -0.05$, $SD = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.12, 0.02]$. Breaking down the other set of simple effects revealed that partner attachment avoidance was negatively associated with initial marital satisfaction among people high in attachment anxiety, $M = -0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.21, -0.08]$, but not significantly associated among people low in attachment anxiety, $M = -0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.08, 0.05]$. Consistent with the buffering perspective (but not with H3a and H3b), people (a) low in

attachment anxiety regardless of their partners' avoidance and (b) people high in anxiety whose partners were low in avoidance had higher levels of initial satisfaction and thus a lower probability of dissolution than people who were high in attachment anxiety with partners similarly high in attachment avoidance (who, consistent with H1a and H1b, experienced the lowest levels of satisfaction and highest probability of dissolution).

Own Attachment Avoidance × Partner Attachment Anxiety. The association involving the own attachment avoidance × partner attachment anxiety interaction and initial marital satisfaction is depicted in Panel C of Figure 2. As can be seen, own attachment avoidance was more strongly negatively associated with initial marital satisfaction among people with whose partners reported high attachment anxiety, $M = -0.29$, $SD = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.35, -0.23]$, than among people whose partners reported low attachment anxiety, $M = -0.16$, $SD = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.23, -0.09]$. Breaking down the other set of simple effects revealed that partner attachment anxiety was negatively associated with initial marital satisfaction among people high in attachment avoidance, $M = -0.11$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.18, -0.04]$, but not significantly associated among people low in attachment avoidance, $M = 0.01$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.06, 0.07]$. Partially consistent with H2a and H2b, compared with those high in attachment avoidance, people low in attachment avoidance had higher levels of initial satisfaction and thus a lower probability of dissolution regardless of their partners' attachment anxiety. Nevertheless, also consistent with the buffering perspective as well as H3a and H3b, people high in avoidance with partners low in attachment anxiety had higher levels of initial satisfaction and thus a lower probability of dissolution than people high in attachment avoidance with partners high in attachment anxiety (who, consistent with H1a and H1b, experienced the lowest levels of satisfaction and highest probability of dissolution).

Own Attachment Avoidance × Partner Attachment Avoidance. The non-significant own attachment avoidance × partner attachment anxiety interaction is depicted in Panel D of Figure 2. Inconsistent with predictions, own and partner attachment avoidance did not demonstrate synergistic effects beyond each couple member's simple additive effects.

Discussion

Attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) posits that attachment insecurity disrupts long-term romantic relationships. Given theoretical perspectives suggesting that how one partner affects the relationship may depend on qualities of the other partner (Zayas et al., 2002), we examined the interactive effects of

both partners' attachment insecurity by pooling five longitudinal studies of newlywed couples. Results largely supported predictions; above and beyond the simple additive effects of each partner's attachment insecurity, we observed three synergistic interactions for people's marital satisfaction and subsequent dissolution. Couples comprised two couple members low (vs. both high) in attachment insecurity reported higher initial satisfaction that led to less steep declines in marital satisfaction and thus a lower probability of divorce. For significant interactions involving couples comprised only one relatively insecure partner, whether the pattern of results was consistent with a weak-link (Attridge et al., 1995; McNulty & Dugas, 2019) or buffering (Simpson & Overall, 2014) perspective depended on the particular combination of attachment. The combination involving own and partner attachment anxiety was consistent with the weak-link perspective (Panel A in Figure 2); people in relationships that included at least one person high in anxiety (vs. both people low in anxiety) were (a) less satisfied at the start of their marriages, (b) experienced steeper declines in satisfaction over time, and (c) were more likely to divorce. Both combinations involving attachment anxiety in one partner and attachment avoidance in the other were consistent with the buffering perspective (Panels B and C in Figure 2); having at least one person low in avoidance (or anxiety) buffered people high in anxiety (or avoidance) from (a) relatively low initial marital satisfaction, (b) steeper declines in marital satisfaction over time, and (c) an increased likelihood of dissolution. Notably, these results did not differ by participant gender and emerged independent of both couple members' neuroticism—a correlate of attachment insecurity.

The present findings have at least two notable theoretical implications. First, they underscore the value of conducting dyadic research to disentangle additive and synergistic effects on people's relationship processes and outcomes. Although others have advocated for such a dyadic approach (e.g., Finkel et al., 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Howland, 2012; Zayas et al., 2002), recent work has questioned whether partner characteristics meaningfully influence relationship outcomes (e.g., Eastwick et al., 2023; Joel et al., 2020; Zuo et al., 2020). The present research—a well-powered test of synergistic attachment effects—joins other work demonstrating interactive effects of both couple members' individual differences (e.g., Hudson & Fraley, 2014; Peters & Meltzer, 2021).

Second, this work joins other research demonstrating that personal characteristics are neither inherently positive nor negative for relationship functioning, but rather depend on the context (e.g., Hudson & Fraley, 2014; McNulty et al., 2021; Peters & Meltzer, 2021; see McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Although both partners' attachment insecurity exert additive main effects with myriad negative relationship outcomes on average (Simpson, 1990; see Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015), the present research revealed

that the synergistic effect of both partners' attachment insecurity determined the extent to which such effects manifested in a particular relationship. Furthermore, these data offer important theoretical insights into how partners' characteristics interact. Whether the interactive effects were consistent with a weak-link or buffering perspective depended on the particular combination of partner characteristics, with combinations involving attachment anxiety in *both* partners following a weak-link pattern and combinations involving attachment avoidance in one partner and attachment avoidance in the other partner following a buffering pattern. Future work may benefit from examining broader conceptual factors that may determine which pattern emerges.

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, despite the longitudinal nature of these studies and our control of neuroticism, all data are correlational and thus cannot be used to infer causality. Second, although prior work has demonstrated that attachment is a relatively stable construct (Fraleley et al., 2011), we did not have multiple assessments of attachment insecurity nor did we assess relationship-specific attachment insecurity; thus, we could not examine (a) the extent to which changes in attachment insecurity are associated with relationship satisfaction or stability or (b) the extent to which attachment insecurity that is unique to people's current relationships (rather than their general attachment insecurity) accounted for the effects demonstrated here. Finally, consistent with other samples of newlyweds (Russell et al., 2013), these participants reported relatively low attachment insecurity and high marital satisfaction. Moreover, most participants were relatively young newlyweds in different-sex marriages who self-identified as Caucasian. It thus remains unclear whether our findings generalize to (a) more distressed and insecure couples, (b) older, more established marriages, (c) people involved in same-sex relationships, or (d) more ethnically and racially diverse populations.

Conclusion

Recent work has questioned the extent to which partner characteristics exert meaningful influence on people's relationships by uncovering only cross-sectional associations with satisfaction. Nevertheless, the present work demonstrated that even associations involving initial marital satisfaction can have meaningful downstream implications. Here, interactions between both partners' attachment insecurity indirectly predicted marital dissolution through their association with initial marital satisfaction and thus changes in satisfaction over time.


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ORCID iD

Sierra D. Peters  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9168-2008>

Supplemental Material

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Author Biographies

Sierra D. Peters is a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University. Her current research draws from social and evolutionary perspectives to examine how the individual differences both couple members bring into their relationships influence their relationship processes and outcomes.

Andrea L. Meltzer is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University. She received her PhD in social psychology at the University of Tennessee and integrates relationship science and evolutionary psychology to examine the implications of evolved processes for established relationships.

James K. McNulty is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University. He received his PhD in social psychology at the University of Florida and studies the cognitive and behavioral predictors of relationship development.

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