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Behavior and Relational
Outcomes: Delineating the Links**

Judith A. Feeney

Associate Professor of Psychology

School of Psychology, University of Queensland

Australia

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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Adult Attachment, Conflict Behavior and Relational Outcomes: Delineating the Links

Judith A. Feeney
Associate Professor of Psychology
School of Psychology, University of Queensland
Australia

Abstract

Recent developments in attachment theory offer important insights into factors that shape relationship processes and outcomes in adulthood. In couple relationships, severe or unresolved conflict can activate the attachment system, raising concerns about the partner's availability and the future of the relationship. Hence, adults with different attachment orientations are expected to respond differently to couple conflict. This paper summarises a program of research into adult attachment and conflict processes, based on several research methods: content analysis of relationship accounts, standardised questionnaires, interaction diaries, and observation of couple interactions. The studies focus on conflicts regarding closeness and distance in dating couples, patterns of marital conflict, reactions to anger-evoking and hurtful events, and the role of attachment and conflict patterns in the intergenerational transmission of insecurity. The results point to complex links between attachment and conflict variables. Insecurity - particularly attachment anxiety – is associated with high levels of conflict, with negative emotions including hurt and fear, and with maladaptive responses such as coercion and conflict avoidance. These responses are likely to fuel disagreement and exacerbate insecurity. Supporting this argument, there is evidence that insecurity and maladaptive conflict behaviors create relational dissatisfaction, and that conflict behaviors partially mediate the link between insecurity and dissatisfaction. Further, parents' insecurity and destructive conflict behaviors have negative consequences for adolescent offspring, in terms of attachment difficulties and loneliness. These findings highlight the importance of interventions designed to ameliorate insecurities and communication difficulties, thus breaking negative relational patterns.

Keywords: adult attachment, conflict behaviours, intergenerational transmission

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

According to Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), attachment bonds are a vital part of human experience across the lifespan, meeting basic needs for comfort and security. A large body of evidence shows that individual differences in attachment security shape personal and relational adjustment, in both childhood and adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In recent research, individual differences in adult attachment are usually conceptualised in terms of the two major dimensions underlying self-report measures of attachment: Attachment avoidance refers to discomfort with intimacy and interdependence, whereas attachment anxiety refers to the need for extreme closeness, and to fears of rejection and abandonment.

Attachment-style differences in behavior are most pronounced in stressful situations, which are of three types: conditions of the individual (e.g., illness, pain), conditions of the environment (e.g., frightening or unfamiliar events), and conditions of the attachment relationship (e.g., separation from caregivers). Responses to these situations reflect learned rules and strategies for affect regulation, which are shaped by experiences with caregivers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Specifically, attachment avoidance is associated with restricted expression of distress and support seeking, and with compulsive self-reliance (known as deactivating strategies); these strategies are designed to maintain a sense of control and avoid alienating attachment figures. In contrast, attachment anxiety is associated with heightened awareness and expression of distress (hyperactivating strategies), designed to force attachment figures to pay more attention and provide more support.

This paper briefly outlines five studies of attachment and conflict from my research group, together with supporting findings from other researchers. It then summarises what these studies have taught us about the implications of attachment avoidance and anxiety for conflict processes and outcomes. The studies examine four broad issues: conflicts regarding closeness and distance in dating couples, patterns of marital conflict, reactions to hurtful events, and the role of attachment and conflict patterns in the intergenerational transmission of relationship difficulties.

Study 1: Distance regulation

Study 1 (Feeney, 1998; 1999) focused on distance regulation in long-term dating couples. Distance regulation refers to individuals' needs for closeness and distance and the strategies used to meet these needs, and is fundamental to the negotiation of couple bonds. Because proximity-seeking is a central feature of the attachment system, individual differences in attachment security are likely to shape patterns of distance regulation. The study had two parts. First, relationship narratives were obtained (separately from each partner), and content analysis was used to examine aspects of distance regulation. Second, couples took part in three conflict interactions. Immediately before one scene (the 'leisure scene'), each member of the couple was separately primed to argue for a different leisure activity, to be undertaken in a time set aside for shared couple activity. In the other scenes, one partner was primed to behave in a cold and distant manner toward the other, who was primed to try to establish closeness. The roles of the man and woman were reversed in the two (counterbalanced) interactions. The major focus was on responses to partner's distancing; this type of conflict has the potential to threaten the future of the relationship, and hence, to activate attachment behavior. The leisure scene enabled a

comparison of relational conflict (closeness-distance) with more concrete (issue-based) conflict.

Based on the relationship narratives, regression analyses were conducted in which avoidance and anxiety were used to predict the proportion of the transcript dealing with closeness-distance, separately for each gender. This proportion was related positively to males' avoidance and females' anxiety, pointing to the *particular* salience of closeness-distance issues to those who are insecurely attached. More detailed analyses focused on participants who reported cyclical patterns of closeness and distance over time, involving interpersonal struggles over distancing and pursuing. All couples who reported these recurring 'push-pull' struggles included at least one insecure partner. Their reports of the relational dynamics involved in these struggles were lengthy and highly emotional, especially when partners had very different relational styles: An anxious person's needs and demands (e.g., 'wanting to be showered with attention') frustrate an avoidant partner's preference for distance, and conversely, an avoidant person's preference for distance (not wanting to be 'smothered') frustrates an anxious partner's desire for intense closeness, exacerbating their tendency to cling and control (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006).

With regard to the conflict interactions, trained observers rated participants' verbal behavior (reason, affiliation, and coercion), nonverbal involvement (touch and avoidance) and affect (hostility and worry). In the leisure scene, the number of significant relations between attachment and conflict measures did not exceed that expected by chance. In contrast, responses to partner distancing showed many significant effects. For example, attachment avoidance was linked to hostility and worry, attachment anxiety was linked to coercion, and both attachment dimensions were linked to low nonverbal involvement.

The finding that attachment-related effects were restricted to the partner-distant scene supports the proposition that attachment behavior is activated particularly by conflict pertaining to proximity-seeking, which can threaten the viability of the relationship. Similarly, Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips (1996), in another laboratory study of conflict in dating couples, found that the detrimental effects of insecurity on couples' interaction patterns and levels of distress were more pronounced for couples who were asked to discuss major, rather than minor, conflicts.

Study 2: Conflict across the marital lifecycle

Study 2 examined attachment and conflict across the lifecycle of marriage. In this study (Feeney, 1994), couples were sampled to represent different durations of marriage: 1 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, and more than 20 years. The study focused on questionnaire reports of communication patterns (mutuality, coercion, destructive process such as demand-withdraw, and post-conflict distress), including the possible role of conflict in mediating the association between attachment and marital satisfaction.

The findings pointed to associations between attachment dimensions and conflict behavior that were robust across length of marriage. For both husbands and wives, avoidance and anxiety were related negatively to mutuality, and positively to all measures of destructive responses to conflict (coercion, destructive process, and

post-conflict distress); generally, the correlations were slightly stronger for the anxiety dimension of attachment.

There were also associations (robust across length of marriage) between attachment and marital satisfaction: Husbands' satisfaction was negatively related to their anxiety, and wives' satisfaction was negatively related to their avoidance and anxiety. Mediation analyses showed that, regardless of length of marriage, the negative association between husbands' anxiety and satisfaction was *partially* mediated by their conflict behaviors, and the negative association between wives' insecurity and satisfaction was *fully* mediated by their conflict behaviors. Other studies have confirmed the role of conflict variables as mediators of the association between insecure attachment and relationship distress (see Feeney, 2008, and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for reviews of this work). Examples of relevant conflict variables include problems in negotiation, negative attributions for partner behavior, and reluctance to forgive transgressions.

Study 3: Attachment and conflict in early marriage

Study 3 provided a detailed investigation of conflict in early marriage (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994). This study employed multiple methods and a longitudinal design to address the relations among attachment, conflict behavior, and marital satisfaction. Interaction diaries were used to assess the quality of day-to-day interactions, in terms of recognition, disclosure, involvement, satisfaction, conflict, and domination. The two remaining conflict measures (as well as attachment measures) were completed twice: after 12 months and 21 months of marriage. At these sessions, couples completed the same questionnaire used in Study 2 (assessing mutuality, coercion, destructive process, and post-conflict distress). They also discussed two issues causing conflict in their relationship and provided reports of their own influence strategies, which were coded to yield scores on positivity, negativity, and conflict avoidance.

Across all research methods, avoidance was related to less involvement and mutuality (mutual negotiation). Links between anxiety and conflict behavior were even more widespread, especially in relation to measures of coercion (coercion, domination and negativity) and post-conflict distress. Longitudinal effects were also identified: for example, wives' anxiety predicted their *later* reports of destructive process and post-conflict distress, even when earlier conflict scores were controlled. These concurrent and predictive links suggest that anxiety about attachment issues drives a range of destructive conflict behaviors, which may contribute to relationship breakdown and exacerbate insecurity. Similarly, other researchers have linked attachment anxiety with higher levels of conflict and with conflict escalation, in both long-term dating (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005) and married couples (Gallo & Smith, 2001).

Our study of early marriage also highlighted the importance of dyadic (couple-based) attachment processes. The most consistent effects of *partner's* attachment involved husbands' avoidance and wives' anxiety. When husbands were high in avoidance, their wives reported less involvement, recognition, and satisfaction in their day-to-day interactions. Conversely, when wives were high in anxiety, their husbands reported more domination and less involvement in day-to-day interactions, and more

coercion and destructive process in response to conflict. We also examined possible interactive effects of partners' attachment characteristics. The most consistent effect involved husbands' and wives' levels of attachment anxiety, which had interactive effects on wives' reports of conflict behaviors. Further, because this study was longitudinal, we were able to show that these effects emerged both concurrently and over time. For example, wives reported the most conflict avoidance when *both* spouses were anxious about the relationship, suggesting that the avoidance behavior was driven by the insecurities of both partners. This finding highlights the problematic combination of two anxious spouses: Both partners are excessively focused on their own insecurities and tend to feel misunderstood, and neither seems able to recognize or meet the other's needs.

Study 4: Hurt feelings

In intimate relationships, conflict and negative emotion are closely linked (Sillars, 1998); conflicts have greater potential to become emotional in intimate relationships, because they are more involving and threatening. Hence 'hurt feelings' are common in close relationships, and have the potential to undermine relationship satisfaction. Recently, attachment researchers have proposed that the key feature of hurtful events is their capacity to erode an individual's sense of safety and security (Feeney, 2005; Shaver, Mikulincer, Lavy, & Cassidy, 2009).

Given theoretical links among attachment insecurity, psychological hurt and difficulties with affect regulation, we would expect individual differences in attachment security to constitute an important source of differences in perceptions of, and responses to, hurtful events. In a study of this topic (Feeney, 2004), Structural Equations Modeling was used to develop integrative models of the longer-term effects of these events on the couple relationship (continued distrust and distancing) and on the victim (continued worry and lack of confidence).

When predicting effects on the relationship, avoidance was the more important attachment dimension. Avoidant individuals tended to perceive partners as lacking remorse for hurtful behavior, and this perception served to fuel conflict and impede relationship repair. There was also a direct path from avoidance to ongoing relationship problems; this path may reflect an overlearned tendency to deny attachment needs, especially in stressful situations (Fraley & Shaver, 1997). Interestingly, although avoidance had the overall effect of *increasing* relationship problems, it also had a path to less destructive victim behavior; that is, avoidant individuals were less likely to resort to sarcasm, anger and tears, and this effect served to *decrease* relationship problems. This finding suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that the controlled interpersonal style associated with avoidance may sometimes prevent conflicts from escalating.

In predicting effects on the victim, the relevant dimension of insecurity was attachment anxiety. In the short term, individuals who were anxious about their relationships responded to hurtful partner behavior with high levels of distress and self-blame. Further, attachment anxiety had a direct effect on victims' adjustment problems in the longer-term, together with indirect effects via the immediate increases in distress and negative self-perceptions.

Study 5: Attachment, conflict and intergenerational transmission of relationship difficulties

The final study (Feeney, 2006) examined parent-child conflict, and the implications of parental attachment and conflict behavior for offspring's adjustment (attachment security and loneliness). This was a cross-sectional study; in each family, mothers, fathers and adolescents rated their own avoidance and anxiety. In addition, mothers and fathers rated their own conflict behavior toward their offspring (problem-solving, attacking and avoiding), and offspring rated each parent's conflict behavior toward them. Finally, offspring also completed a measure of loneliness. The study examined three issues: a) perceptions of parent-child conflict (including 'agreement'), b) parental attachment and conflict behavior, and c) effects of parental variables on offspring's adjustment.

In terms of perceptions of parent-child conflict, parents were generally more positive than their offspring in their reports of parental conflict behavior (i.e., they reported more problem-solving and less attack and avoidance). Beyond this overall generational bias, attachment anxiety was linked to *greater* differences between the generations than usual: That is, anxious parents tended to be overly positive, and anxious offspring overly negative, in rating parents' conflict behavior. This finding suggests that the fears and defences associated with attachment anxiety may impede understanding within the family.

Links also emerged between parental attachment security and parental conflict behavior. Overall, anxiety and avoidance were associated with reports of more attacking behavior and less problem-solving, regardless of whether parents or offspring were the reporters of parental conflict behavior.

Finally, parental insecurity predicted offspring's insecurity and loneliness, and in most cases, these associations were largely mediated by parental conflict behavior. Hence, it seems that parents who engage in verbal attack, rather than problem-solving, may discourage open discussion of emotion, send implicit messages that foster distrust of others, and model relationship behaviors that put offspring at risk of rejection by their peers (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

Summary and conclusions

What do these studies tell us about the association between attachment and conflict? First, let us consider attachment avoidance. Key features of avoidance include the desire for independence and a sense of control, and the perception that relationship partners are clingy, intrusive, and lack remorse for their negative behaviors (see Table 1). These features predispose avoidant individuals to difficulties in dealing with conflict, and are reflected in their everyday couple interactions (Locke, 2008); however, certain situational factors exacerbate these problems. These triggers include the presence of an anxious partner (whose relational goals, needs and attitudes conflict with those of the avoidant person), high levels of stress that threaten the avoidant individual's typical defences against attachment-related distress, and conflicts that are appraised as threatening the individual's independence. In these conditions, the avoidant person is *particularly* likely to show low levels of reason, involvement and mutual negotiation. In turn, these negative responses to conflict are generally linked to relationship dissatisfaction. It is worth noting, however, that the

constrained emotional style of the avoidant individual sometimes has protective effects on the couple relationship, at least in the short term, by reducing the risk of angry and sarcastic responses to conflict. Avoidance and its attendant conflict style have negative implications for offspring, predicting both attachment avoidance and loneliness.

Table 1. Key features and situational factors linking attachment avoidance to conflict behaviours

Key features of attachment avoidance	Situational triggers that exacerbate these tendencies	Resulting conflict behaviors and attitudes
Preference for independence, self-reliance and emotional distance Sensitivity to intrusion; focus on maintaining control Limited self-disclosure and emotional expression Perceptions of others as needy, clingy, and lacking remorse for misdeeds	Partner high in attachment anxiety Stress, particularly when severe or persistent Conflicts that are appraised as threatening independence	Low levels of reasoning Withdrawal and lack of involvement Defensiveness Lack of mutual expression and negotiation

Next, let us consider attachment anxiety. Evidence of the detrimental effects of anxiety in the face of conflict is even more compelling. The defining features of anxiety include demands for extreme levels of closeness and affection, increased sensitivity to hurt and rejection, and emotional volatility (see Table 2). Again, however, certain situational factors exacerbate these problems. These include the presence of an insecure partner (anxious or avoidant), and conflicts that are perceived as threatening intimacy or relational stability. In these conditions, the anxious person is *particularly* likely to engage in coercion and domination, and to perceive the partner negatively. These conflict behaviors again impact negatively on satisfaction with the couple bond. They are also associated with negative styles of parent-child conflict, and hence with offspring's anxiety and loneliness.

Table 2. Key features and situational factors linking attachment anxiety to conflict behaviours

Key features of attachment anxiety	Situational triggers that exacerbate these tendencies	Resulting conflict behaviors and attitudes
Preference for extreme levels of closeness and affection Hypersensitivity to anger, hurt, criticism, and rejection Jealousy and emotional extremes Perceptions of others as unwilling to meet one's needs	Partner high in attachment anxiety or avoidance Conflicts that are appraised as threatening intimacy or relational stability	Coercion and domination Low mutuality and satisfaction Post-conflict distress Attributions of negative partner behavior to global, stable, internal factors; increased dislike and distrust of partner

In conclusion, the effects of attachment on conflict processes are far-reaching, with implications for the individual, the couple, and their offspring. The effects are complex, however. Conflict behaviors and relational outcomes are shaped by the attachment characteristics of both partners, and the effects of one person's attachment characteristics can depend on the characteristics of the partner. Further, the effects of insecurity are sometimes 'paradoxical', such as when avoidant persons' emotional control inhibits outbursts of anger. The effects of attachment on couple satisfaction are often mediated by conflict behaviors, but direct effects also occur, suggesting that attachment anxiety and avoidance may also influence satisfaction via additional mechanisms (e.g., supportive behaviors). Finally, the associations of attachment security with conflict processes and relational outcomes are likely to be bi-directional, highlighting the importance of therapeutic interventions that address both attachment insecurities and communication problems.

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