

Published in final edited form as:

Curr Opin Psychol. 2015 February 1; 1: 61–666. doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2014.11.008.

Attachment and Dyadic Regulation Processes

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Abstract

Insecurely attached people have relatively unhappy and unstable romantic relationships, but the quality of their relationships depends on how their partners regulate them. Some partners find ways to regulate the emotional and behavioral reactions of insecurely attached individuals, which promotes greater relationship satisfaction and security. We discuss attachment theory and interdependence dilemmas, and then explain how and why certain responses by partners assuage the cardinal concerns of insecure individuals in key interdependent situations. We then review recent studies illustrating how partners can successfully regulate the reactions of anxiously and avoidantly attached individuals, yielding more constructive interactions. We finish by considering how these regulation processes can create a more secure dyadic environment, which helps to improve relationships and attachment security across time.

Keywords

Attachment insecurity; interdependence dilemmas; dyadic regulation; conflict; support

Interdependence is a defining feature of close relationships in that people's goals, desires, and well-being are often dependent on the actions and continued investment of their romantic partners [1]. Situations that involve compromise, providing support, or making sacrifices for the partner or relationship make interdependence salient [2]. When partners' goals and desires are at odds, they often need to change or set aside their own personal interests for what is best for their partner and/or relationship [3]. Doing so, however, makes individuals vulnerable to exploitation, rejection, or loss, especially if their partner is not sufficiently invested or responsive [3,4].

The way in which people respond to such "interdependence dilemmas" is partly governed by the outcomes they have experienced when dependent on others in past relationships [5,6,7].

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Avoidantly attached individuals, for example, have experienced rejection and have learned that caregivers are not reliable, so they protect themselves by avoiding situations that might increase reliance on their partners [8]. In contrast, anxiously attached individuals desire greater closeness, but also fear abandonment and are hypersensitive to threats to their relationships, which interfere with the intimacy they crave [9].

A large body of research has examined the destructive ways in which avoidant and anxious (insecurely attached) individuals react to different types of interdependence dilemmas, particularly conflict and support situations [10,11]. However, relationship thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced not only by the types and degree of attachment insecurity of each partner, but also by the actual responses of each partner within the broader interdependence context of their relationship. These *dyadic regulation processes* have been the focus of a program of research indicating that attachment insecurity does not spell doom for insecure people or their relationships [12,13,14]. Instead, partners' responses in certain interdependence dilemmas—and the secure dyadic environment they can create—can protect relationships from the damaging effects of insecurity and thus foster greater satisfaction and security.

Attachment Insecurity and Reactions to Interdependence Dilemmas

The attachment system evolved to keep individuals in close proximity to their primary caregivers, especially when individuals feel threatened, distressed, or challenged [5,15]. The attachment system is activated (turned on) when these events occur, such as when coping with interdependence dilemmas. This, in turn, triggers specific behavioral reactions designed to restore felt security [16]. How individuals have been treated (or perceive they have been treated) by prior caregivers determines how they view and react to the challenges of interdependence in adulthood [5,6]. A history of being able to rely on caregivers for responsive care and support fosters attachment security. Secure individuals trust that their partners will respond with love and concern, so they confidently approach interdependence dilemmas with positive expectations and pro-relationship motivations [17,18]. Secure individuals, for instance, actively seek intimacy and support from their partners when they feel vulnerable [19,20] and respond to conflicts in a constructive, relationship-promotive manner [21].

Avoidantly attached people have encountered rejection from past caregivers and believe they cannot depend on others [9]. To avoid further rebuffs, avoidant individuals defensively suppress their need for intimacy and become self-reliant [22]. Indeed, they escape the vulnerability of being dependent by not seeking support when they could benefit from it [19, 20, 23]. The interdependent reality of close relationships, however, requires avoidant individuals to address their partner's needs and preferences in some way, which can encroach on the autonomy they strive to maintain. Accordingly, avoidant individuals react with anger and withdrawal when their partners need support or try to influence them [11,24-28].

Anxiously attached people have received inconsistent care, so they crave greater acceptance and closeness while worrying that their partners might leave them [9]. This leads anxious

people to become preoccupied with obtaining their partner's love and acceptance and hypervigilant to even small signs of possible rejection. Anxious individuals, therefore, become highly distressed when encountering relationship threats, such as during major conflicts with their partner [11,21,29-32] or when feeling poorly supported by their partner [19,28,33].

Attachment Insecurity and Dyadic Regulation Processes

Both types of insecurity destabilize relationships [10,11,34]. However, the way in which people react to these attachment-relevant interdependence dilemmas is determined not only by the specific motives, goals, and concerns of each partner, but also by the emotional and behavioral responses of each partner during these dilemmas. Thus, the *partners* of insecure people can down-regulate the damaging reactions of insecure individuals if partners can assuage the worries and concerns of anxious and avoidant individuals. By improving how interdependence dilemmas are “managed”, this form of dyadic regulation—in which one partner regulates the other's responses—can yield greater security and enhance relationship well-being. Over time, the broader relationship environment can then provide a more secure dyadic context in which the down-regulation of attachment insecurity can continue (see Figure 1).

The Partner's Responses in Threatening Contexts Down-Regulate Insecure Reactions

The first dyadic regulation process involves when and how the responses of *partners* of insecure individuals alter (moderate) their typically destructive reactions in threatening interdependence dilemmas (see Figure 1). When partners' behaviors reaffirm the core concerns and fears of anxious or avoidant individuals, attachment-related emotional and behavioral tendencies should occur unabated and typically damage relationships. These destructive reactions, however, should be curtailed when partners address the specific concerns and needs of insecure individuals, enabling couples to traverse interdependence dilemmas more constructively and successfully.

Our program of research has identified some of the key partner responses that down-regulate insecure reactions in different interdependence dilemmas that avoidant and anxious individuals usually find threatening [see 13,14]. One situation that imposes on autonomy, which is important to avoidant people, is being the target of a partner's influence attempts [26]. Overall and colleagues [27] videotaped couples discussing relationship problems in which one partner (the agent) wanted changes in the other partner (the target). As predicted, avoidant targets reported more anger and displayed more observer-rated withdrawal when they were the target of their partner's change attempts, which hindered problem resolution. These defensive reactions, however, were ameliorated when partners behaved more sensitively to avoidant targets' autonomy needs. Specifically, avoidant targets displayed less anger and withdrawal, and their discussions were more successful, when their partners “softened” their influence attempts by using indirect tactics that acknowledged targets' constructive efforts and positive attributes.

Another interdependence dilemma that triggers avoidant defenses is receiving support. Avoidant individuals strive to be self-reliant, so the dependence inherent in most support exchanges triggers anger and withdrawal in them [19,20,28,35]. These defensive responses, however, are mitigated when partners provide practical forms of support that deemphasize the dependence, emotional vulnerability, and intimacy that avoidant individuals dislike. Simpson and colleagues [36] assessed how emotional and instrumental caregiving behaviors enacted by partners calmed support recipients while couples were videotaped discussing relationship problems. As predicted, more emotional caregiving (e.g., encouraging discussion of emotional experiences) predicted greater observer-rated distress in avoidant recipients. In contrast, avoidant individuals were rated as more calmed when their partners gave them more instrumental caregiving, such as concrete advice and suggestions (see also [37]).

Dilemmas that elicit relationship loss or abandonment concerns, which are salient to anxious people, frequently center on major relationship conflicts. Tran and Simpson [38] videotaped married couples discussing important aspects of one another that generated conflicts. Anxious individuals felt more negative emotions and displayed less positive observer-rated behaviors during these discussions. However, partners who were more committed to the relationship inhibited the urge to retaliate and maintained the relationship by working harder to solve the problem. These behavioral manifestations of commitment convey exactly what anxious individuals want—reassurance of their partner's love and future investment. Accordingly, when their partners were more committed, anxious individuals felt greater acceptance and behaved as positively as secure individuals did (see also [39]).

Other research also indicates that committed partners approach relationship-threatening situations in ways that ease anxious individuals' worries and redress their reactions to threat. Lemay and Dudley [40], for example, found that individuals who perceive their partners are higher in attachment anxiety regulate their partners' insecurities by concealing their discontent and accentuating how positively they feel about their partner. These regulation behaviors, in turn, help anxious individuals feel more valued and regarded on a daily basis.

In summary, when partners meet the specific needs and concerns of avoidant and anxious individuals, they can buffer relationships from their typical destructive reactions, sometimes turning precarious interdependence dilemmas into *opportunities* for relationship growth [14]. As shown in Figure 1, by constantly creating constructive interactions and outcomes in threatening situations, effective dyadic regulation can also improve relationships over time. Supporting this premise, Salvatore and colleagues [41] demonstrated that when adult romantic partners behave more positively during post-conflict discussions (showing they can “move on” and recover from conflict), individuals who were insecure in childhood felt better about their relationship, and their relationships were more likely to be intact two years later. Overall and colleagues [32] also illustrated that anxious individuals feel more secure and satisfied over time when their partners' emotional responses during conflict convey greater commitment.

“Secure” Dyadic Environments Bolster Satisfaction and Attachment Security

Partner responses that allay destructive reactions in threatening situations should have positive long-term effects to the extent they generate more secure dyadic environments that counteract insecure individuals' negative expectations (see Figure 1). The more insecure individuals receive evidence that their partners are reliable and sensitive to their specific needs, the more they should come to view their relationships as stable and their partners as “truly being there” for them. Moreover, the realization that their relationship is a “safe haven” in times of need and a “secure base” from which to navigate life ought to increase relationship satisfaction, improve relationship maintenance, and perhaps reduce attachment insecurity [42,43].

One demonstration of these effects is research on the transition to parenthood, a chronically stressful period of life when partners become more interdependent [44]. Perceptions of the partner and relationship are critical to understanding how well anxious and avoidant individuals weather this difficult life transition. If anxious women perceive their partners are less supportive during the transition, they report declines in relationship satisfaction [35,45] and become more anxious over time [46]. If, however, the dyadic context of the relationship suggests their partners are more committed and supportive, anxious women maintain their relationship satisfaction levels and become less anxious over time. Perceiving the partner as closer and more supportive also protects anxious women and men from higher depressive symptoms following childbirth [47,48]. Avoidant individuals also show better adjustment across the transition when they believe they can rely on their partners to help them in cooperative, non-intrusive ways [47].

Research examining other features of the relationship environment also reveals how the dyadic context can enhance relationship satisfaction in insecure individuals and build greater security. One important aspect of relationships that can promote bonding and convey a partner's emotional availability is sexual activity. When anxious people have satisfying sex, they anticipate their partners will be more affectionate and dependable in the future, which improves marital satisfaction [49]. More frequent sex also helps avoidant people maintain more positive evaluations of their marriages [49]. Finally, avoidant people report reductions in avoidance when they believe they can trust their partners to be available and reliable when needed, whereas anxious people report reductions in anxiety when they believe their partners value and support their personal goals [50]. Thus, when the dyadic environment contradicts the negative expectations of insecurely attached people, thereby conveying that the relationship is a safe haven and secure base, anxious and avoidant people tend to become more secure across time.

Conclusions

Interdependence dilemmas can pose difficulties, particularly for insecurely attached people who struggle with trusting that their partners have their best interests at heart. However, these dilemmas also allow partners to change the way insecure tendencies manifest in these situations, which helps insecure people develop more trusting and secure perceptions. This

is accomplished when partners effectively down-regulate the prototypical reactions of avoidant and anxious individuals in certain threatening contexts. These responses also provide diagnostic evidence that partners *can* be relied on—and can create the type of secure dyadic environment—that eventually fosters more relationship satisfaction and greater attachment security.

Acknowledgements

Some of the research cited in this article was supported by grants from the *Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund* (UOA0811) to Nickola C. Overall, and from the *National Institute of Mental Health* to Jeffrey A. Simpson (R01-MH49599).

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Highlights

- Insecurely attached people have relatively unhappy and unstable romantic relationships
- But, partners can down-regulate the emotional and behavioral reactions of insecure people
- Partners' regulation produces more constructive relationship interactions
- Partners' regulatory responses also create a more secure relationship environment
- These dyadic regulation processes can enhance relationship well-being and attachment security

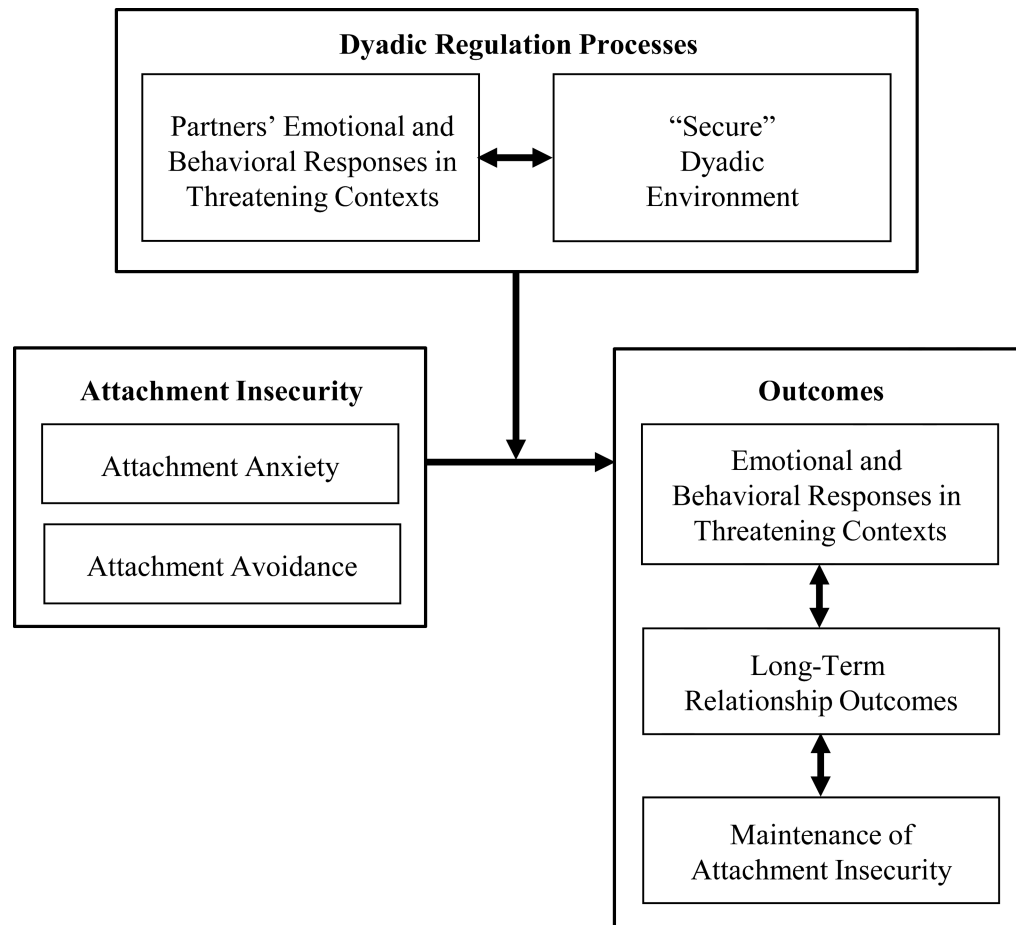


Figure 1. Dyadic Regulation of Attachment Insecurity

This figure describes two dyadic regulation processes that can alter links between attachment insecurity and negative relationship outcomes. Partners can respond in ways that down-regulate the destructive reactions of insecurely attached individuals in threatening interdependent contexts. This regulation of insecurity can also generate more secure dyadic environments that counteract insecure individuals' negative expectations. These two dyadic regulation processes tend to produce more constructive responses during threatening interactions, enhance relationship well-being, and foster greater attachment security.