

**Dyadic Support Perceptions
Partially Mediate the Associations between
Attachment Security and Marital Satisfaction**

by

Colleen J. Allison

M.A., Simon Fraser University, 2004
B.A. (Hons.), Simon Fraser University, 2001

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the

Department of Psychology
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2012

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APPROVAL

Name: Colleen J. Allison
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy (Psychology)
Title of Thesis: *Dyadic support perceptions partially mediate the associations between attachment security and marital satisfaction*

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. Grace Iarocci
Associate Professor

Dr. Rebecca Cobb
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

Dr. Kim Bartholomew
Supervisor
Professor

Dr. Marlene Moretti
Supervisor
Professor

Dr. Anita DeLongis
External Examiner

Dr. Natalee Popadiuk
External Examiner
Position, Department
Institution

Date Defended/Approved: April 11, 2012

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ABSTRACT

Associations between attachment security and relationship satisfaction are well documented (e.g., Feeney, 1994), but the mechanisms of this link are poorly understood. In 162 heterosexual newlywed couples, I examined whether perceived partner support mediated the associations between attachment security (i.e., low anxiety and avoidance) and marital satisfaction. Path analyses indicated significant positive within spouse, but not cross-partner, associations between attachment security and support perceptions. Although attachment security and marital satisfaction were associated, spouses' attachment security only marginally predicted marital satisfaction in the mediation model. However, spouses' support perceptions partially mediated the associations between spouses' attachment anxiety and avoidance and their own and their partners' marital satisfaction. The results underline the value of examining actor and partner effects and the central role of support processes in marital relationships.

Keywords: attachment security; marital satisfaction; social support; support perceptions; relationship processes

DEDICATION

For my dad, Bill, my first secure base and safe haven, who has loved me unconditionally and who has shown great faith and courage in the face of unimaginable adversity. I hope you still know that “God is always with you” and find comfort in that knowledge. For my mom, Lorraine, my model of a successful woman, who had the ability and desire to pursue higher education but was unable to do so. Some things have changed! Last, but not least, for my husband, Mark, who encouraged me to follow my dream and supported me every step of the way. With deep love and gratitude to each of you for all you have given me!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Rebecca Cobb has provided me with practical as well as emotional support in completing my dissertation. Dr. Kim Bartholomew, who was my first mentor, continued to provide the right balance of encouragement and challenge. I have shared long, stimulating conversations with both Becky and Kim about attachment - its associated behaviours, cognitions, and emotions - and close relationships. To both, with great affection, my profound thanks! Thanks also to Dr. Marlene Moretti for her invaluable input and to Joan Wolfe for generously sharing her knowledge and skills over the years.

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Dyadic Support Perceptions Partially Mediate the Associations Between Attachment Security and Marital Satisfaction

Introduction

People who feel valued by others, worthy of affection, optimistic about social interactions, and comfortable with intimacy and relationship commitment tend to have happier marriages (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). Nevertheless, relatively little is known about how feelings of attachment security in relationships translate into better functioning marriages. One possible relationship process through which attachment security may affect relationship quality is spousal support. According to attachment theory, people who are more secure ask for support effectively, anticipate positive responses to requests for support, and derive benefit from their partners' support thereby regulating distressing emotions (see Collins, Ford, & Feeney, 2011, for a review). Empirical evidence supports these theoretical notions: Attachment security predicts positive support perceptions (e.g., Feeney, 1996), more direct support-seeking and positive support provision (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000), and satisfaction with support (e.g., Davila & Kashy, 2009). Furthermore, spouses who receive the support desired from partners tend to have happier marriages (e.g., Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001) and smaller declines in marital satisfaction over the first five years of marriage (e.g., Brock & Lawrence, 2009). Thus, in this study, I examined whether spouses' support perceptions mediated the associations between attachment security and marital satisfaction in newlywed couples.

Attachment Security and Marital Satisfaction

Current conceptualizations of individual differences in attachment security include two dimensions: Attachment anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Attachment anxiety is the extent to which individuals, especially when faced with interpersonal threat, anxiously anticipate rejection or abandonment by their partners, and attachment avoidance is the extent to which individuals prefer emotional distance from their partners (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Low anxiety and low avoidance characterize greater attachment security in close relationships, whereas high anxiety or high avoidance characterizes greater attachment insecurity in close relationships.

Attachment security is robustly linked to relationship satisfaction (see Feeney, 1999 for a review). Theoretically, attachment security should buffer individuals from relationship worries and insecurities that might result in difficult marital interactions and lower relationship satisfaction. Attachment security should also lead individuals to behave in ways that foster well-functioning relationships and thus relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, research on cross-partner effects indicates that spouses' attachment security affects their partners' relationship satisfaction such that attachment anxiety and avoidance are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007 for a review). The cross-partner effects of attachment security on relationship satisfaction are most likely mediated by relationship behaviours associated with anxiety and avoidance such as conflict resolution (e.g., Marchand, 2004), communication patterns (e.g., Feeney, 1994), and support (e.g., Kane et al, 2007). Thus, insecurity may lead spouses and partners to behave in less positive and more negative ways than secure spouses, and to interpret each other's behaviour less positively, leaving both members of the couple feeling unhappy and disappointed in the relationship. This chain of events suggests that relationship processes, including partners' interpretation of those processes, mediate the effect of attachment security on both partners' relationship satisfaction.

Attachment Security and Support Perceptions

Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed attachment theory to explain the human drive to form close bonds with others and hypothesized that when threatened, people would engage in characteristic responses (attachment strategies) to regulate emotions and to restore a sense of safety. One emotional regulation strategy is to seek support from a romantic partner when faced with stressors inside and outside of the relationship to restore a sense of security and intimacy. Spouses' attachment security may influence their perceptions of support because attachment security is associated with more effectively seeking support, which presumably elicits more effective support from the partner, and because spouses' attachment security colours their interpretations of partners' responses. Empirical data confirms that attachment security is related to more positive and less negative perceptions of emotional support (e.g., Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; Kane et al., 2007). For example, in an experimental study of dating

couples, individuals received genuine support messages from their partners about an upcoming stressful laboratory task (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Regardless of how objectively supportive the messages were, attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with more negative perceptions of the messages, and these associations may be independent of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Collins et al., 2006).

Individuals' attachment security is associated with support perceptions, but the support process is dyadic. In other words, ultimately, successful support may be most likely when spouses' seek support flexibly and directly, and partners meet spouses' bids for support with understanding, sensitivity, and respect. More secure partners may be better able to respond with helpful support than less secure partners (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000), and spouses who receive the support they desire and need may in turn have more positive views of their partners' support. Thus, I expected that partners' attachment security would also be related to spouses' support perceptions. To date, only one study of which I am aware has explored cross-partner effects of attachment security and support perceptions. In a study of dating couples, Kane and colleagues (2007) found that women's attachment anxiety and avoidance were significantly negatively associated with male partner's support perceptions, and men's attachment avoidance (but not anxiety) was negatively associated with female partner's support perceptions. Thus, I predicted that spouses' and partners' attachment security would be related to perceptions of partners' support.

Support Perceptions and Marital Satisfaction

A growing body of research supports the idea that constructive support processes are associated with and may lead to better functioning and more satisfying relationships, particularly in married and dating samples (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, 1996; Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008). This consistent association emerges not only in diverse samples, but also regardless of whether support was assessed as observer ratings of support seeking and provision, or as self-reported availability, adequacy, or satisfaction with support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Lawrence et al., 2008; Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). Although support, assessed in varied ways, is important for marital functioning, perceptions that spouses have of their partner's efforts at support may be of particular importance in predicting marital satisfaction.

Generally, and consistent with the larger literature on support processes, individuals' perceptions that their partners have responded positively and responsively in times of distress are linked to individuals' and partners' relationship satisfaction in dating and married samples (e.g., Kane et al., 2007; Gleason et al., 2008). In other words, an outside observer might view a partner as providing adequate or constructive support, but the spouse may have a different interpretation and may fail to feel understood or supported. However, if spouses feel that their partners are helpful, warm, and comforting when providing support, then these positive feelings may directly enhance or maintain relationship satisfaction. Because people seek support when they are most vulnerable, their partners' responsiveness, commitment, and care may serve as litmus tests for their relationship satisfaction. There may also be an indirect effect on their own and their partners' relationship satisfaction because positive perceptions of support may serve as the foundation for future problem solving and constructive communication, benefitting both members of the couple (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2010).

Support Perceptions as a Mediator of the Link between Attachment Security and Marital Satisfaction

Research provides evidence for robust associations among attachment security, spousal support, and marital satisfaction, and I proposed a mediating process to explain these associations. I expected that the cognitions, emotions, and behaviours that characterize spouses' attachment security would predict support behaviours and perceptions that would, in turn, predict relationship satisfaction. Secure individuals have flexible coping strategies; they comfortably seek support from partners when needed (e.g., Ognibene & Collins, 1998), and anticipate and derive more comfort from their partners' support (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These generally positive support interactions and perceptions likely lead to emotional balance, positive feelings about the partner and the relationship, perceptions that the partner is available and committed, and a sense of relationship well-being. In contrast to secure individuals, insecure individuals engage in less flexible coping strategies, for example, hyperactivation of the attachment system by compulsively seeking support from a partner, or deactivation of the attachment system by compulsively inhibiting support-seeking behaviours (i.e., compulsive self-reliance), leaving few options if their initial

strategy is not successful (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009). In addition, insecure individuals are less effective seeking or providing support (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), more likely than secure individuals to anticipate rejection of their support bids and to interpret provided support negatively (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2004). These negative support experiences and perceptions likely contribute to emotional disequilibrium and negative feelings about the partner and the relationship. Thus, I predicted that support perceptions would be one mechanism through which attachment security would be related to marital satisfaction.

In the earliest research to explore the associations among attachment security, support perceptions, and relationship satisfaction, one partner was usually designated as the support seeker and the other partner as the support provider (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000). Thus, cross-partner effects were only examined for one of the spouses—the support-seeker. However, in adult relationships, support processes are dyadic, and consideration of both members of the couple and their mutual influence on the relationship and on each other is essential. Kane et al. (2007) were among the first to examine actor and partner effects of attachment security and support. In two samples of undergraduate psychology students that consisted primarily of dating couples, Kane and colleagues tested a model in which individuals' perceptions of support (a latent variable derived from perceived available support, perceived partner responsiveness, and negative support) mediated the associations between individuals' attachment security and their own and partners' relationship satisfaction. Support perceptions fully or partially mediated within and cross-partner links between attachment security and relationship satisfaction, and examination of both members of the couples as actors and partners provided a better picture of the role of support in relationship satisfaction. However, Kane et al. only tested whether there were actor and partner effects of attachment security on support perceptions and actor effects of support perceptions on relationship satisfaction; they did not examine whether there were partner effects of support perceptions on relationship satisfaction.

Current Study and Hypotheses

The major goal of this study was to examine whether and how support perceptions mediated the associations between newlywed spouses' attachment security

and their own and partners' marital satisfaction. The proposed mediation model is presented in Figure 1. Paths a through h represent within and cross-partner associations between attachment security (i.e., attachment anxiety and avoidance) and support perceptions. Given that attachment security colours relationship perceptions, I predicted actor effects such that spouses' security would predict positive perceptions of partner support (paths a – d). Given that attachment security might lead partners to provide relatively more effective support, I also predicted partner effects such that spouses' attachment security would positively predict partners' support perceptions (paths e – h).

Paths i through l represent within and cross-partner associations between support perceptions and marital satisfaction. Spouses who feel understood and comforted by the partner are likely to also feel happier with their partner and with the marriage (actor effects; paths i – j), and to be more responsive to partners thereby fostering partners' satisfaction (partner effects; paths k – l). Paths m through p represent the direct within-partner associations between attachment security and marital satisfaction (actor effects), which I included because I did not expect full mediation of the link between attachment security and marital satisfaction given there are other processes (e.g., conflict, sexual behaviours) through which attachment security may affect marital satisfaction. Paths q through t represent the direct cross-partner paths between attachment security and marital satisfaction in the model (partner effects), which were included to allow for tests of cross-partner mediation. Although not depicted in Figure 1, correlations between predictor variables (i.e., husband and wife attachment security) were also included, as were correlations between the error terms of spouses' support perceptions and marital satisfaction.

This study builds on the work by Kane et al. (2007) in three ways. First, I examined the mediation hypothesis in a sample of married couples who were in relationships of longer duration (4 years vs. 17 months) and, presumably, more established than dating couples. This is important because the processes operating in established married couples may differ in some way from those in unmarried couples. Second, I included cross-partner paths from support perceptions to marital satisfaction, omitted in the model tested by Kane and colleagues. Third, I assessed perceptions of the quality of support provided and spouses' perceptions reflected the extent to which they

viewed their partners' support as, for example, supportive, sensitive, and reassuring. In contrast, Kane et al. in part assessed the degree to which partners were seen as available and responsive, and views of the self as worthy or unworthy of support. Operationalizing support as feelings of self-worth and the sense that partners are available may have introduced conceptual overlap between attachment security and support in the study by Kane and colleagues.

Methods

Participants

Participants were a subset ($N = 162$) of newlywed couples who participated in the Transition to Marriage (TTM) project. Husbands averaged 29.6 years of age ($SD = 4.3$), 16.5 years of education, and an average annual income between \$30,000 and \$39,000. Wives averaged 27.9 years of age ($SD = 4.8$), 16.7 years of education, and an average annual income between \$20,000 and \$29,000. Of the husbands, 78% were Caucasian, 13.7% were Asian, 4.9% were South Asian, 1.5% were Black, 0.5% were Middle Eastern, and 1.5% indicated other ethnicities. Of the wives, 72.7% were Caucasian, 19% were Asian, 7.3% were South Asian, 0.5% were Black, and 0.5% indicated other ethnicities.

Procedure

The Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board approved all study procedures. Couples were recruited through a) advertisements in local newspapers, electronic bulletin boards, community notice boards, and television advertisements, b) bridal shows, c) announcements mailed to local religious organizations and organizations offering premarital education, and d) word of mouth. Interested individuals ($N = 617$) contacted the lab and one member of the couple ($n = 493$) completed a 15-minute interview by telephone or email to determine eligibility. Eligible spouses were (a) in a heterosexual relationship, (b) engaged to be married, (c) not previously married, (d) without children, (e) fluent in English, (f) between the ages of 18 to 45, and (g) living in the area to allow for attendance at the laboratory session. Of the couples who were screened, 256 couples were ineligible and 237 were eligible. Of the remaining couples who contacted the lab but who were not screened, 94 were not screened despite repeated attempts to contact and 30 contacted us after we had completed recruitment for the study

and therefore did not complete the screening interview. Eligible couples who agreed to participate ($n = 237$) were sent an information email and an electronic copy of the consent form following the screening interview; 16 couples subsequently decided they were no longer interested. Approximately three months prior to their wedding date ($M = 3.03$ months prior to the wedding; $SD = 1.08$), participants ($n = 221$) were sent an email with information about the first phase of the project, a link to the online questionnaires hosted on a secure website, a unique ID number, a password, and an electronic copy of the consent form. The information email included instructions to complete the questionnaires in a private setting and to refrain from discussing questions or responses with partners. Once participants logged onto the website, we invited them to reread the consent form and to indicate their willingness to participate by clicking on a radio button that gave them access to the questionnaires.

Participants received follow-up questionnaires eight times every three months following initial participation and visited the lab twice, once six months into the study and again at the final wave of data collection (24 months into the study). For the purposes of this study, only demographic information collected at the first wave of data collection prior to the wedding, and support perceptions, attachment security, and marital satisfaction collected at the 6-month follow up, which occurred at approximately three months of marriage, were included in the analyses. Couples received \$425 for complete participation in the Transition to Marriage Project: \$75 for the initial questionnaires completed prior to marriage, \$100 for the lab session and questionnaire at six month follow-up, \$50 for questionnaires completed at 12 and 18 month follow-up, and \$150 for the 24-month questionnaire follow-up and lab session.

Of the 221 eligible couples who received initial questionnaires, 202 wives and 198 husbands ultimately completed at least part of the initial pre-wedding questionnaires. Of these 198 couples, 189 wives and 190 husbands completed some part of the questionnaires administered approximately three months into the marriage, which are the focus of this study. Of these couples, 162 husband and wife pairs completed the questionnaires that are the focus of this study and thus comprised the final sample for this study. Included couples ($n = 162$) did not differ from excluded couples ($n = 36$) on demographic factors (i.e., age, length of relationship, education, and income) with one

exception; included wives reported fewer years of education ($M = 14.48$, $SD = 3.17$) than excluded wives ($M = 15.69$, $SD = 3.16$, $t(188) = 1.98$, $p = .05$, $d = .38$).

Comparisons between included and excluded couples on variables assessed at the pre-wedding questionnaire phase indicated that included husbands ($M = 41.61$, $SD = 4.37$) and wives ($M = 42.05$, $SD = 4.01$) reported greater marital satisfaction than excluded husbands ($M = 38.82$, $SD = 7.32$, $t(193) = -2.90$, $p = .004$, $d = .56$) and wives ($M = 39.95$, $SD = 4.23$, $t(193) = -2.64$, $p = .009$, $d = .52$). Furthermore, included wives ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 0.61$) reported more positive support perceptions than excluded wives ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 0.66$, $t(187) = -2.13$, $p = .034$, $d = .43$). This suggests that attrition following the post-wedding phase may have been at least in part because less maritally satisfied couples chose not to participate.

Measures

Attachment security. The Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) is a 36-item self-report measure derived from an item-response theory analysis of a number of self-report measures of adult romantic attachment. Participants rate the extent to which they think each statement corresponds to the way they typically think, feel, and behave in romantic relationships. The ECR-R yields scores on two subscales: Attachment anxiety and avoidance. Sample anxiety items are “I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me” and “I often wish that my partner’s feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.” Sample avoidance items are “It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need” and “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.” Each item is rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) and scores are derived by averaging the relevant items for each subscale. Cronbach’s alphas were .89 for husbands and .91 for wives on attachment anxiety, and .87 for husbands and wives on attachment avoidance.

Support perceptions. The Goldsmith Support Measure (GS; Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000) reflects participants’ feelings about the support received from their partner over the previous six months. The scale includes 12 semantic differential items rated on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by antonyms (e.g., *Helpful vs. harmful*, *Supportive vs. unsupportive*, *Sensitive vs. insensitive*). Total scores are derived

as a mean of the items and higher scores reflect greater satisfaction with support. Cronbach's alphas were .82 for husbands and .94 for wives.

Marital satisfaction. The Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983) is a widely used six-item measure of global marital satisfaction with good psychometric properties (e.g., Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994). Participants indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Very strong disagreement*) to 7 (*Very strong agreement*) for five items describing their relationship (e.g., “We have a good relationship” and “My relationship with my partner makes me happy”). On the sixth item, participants rate their relationship happiness “all things considered” on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Very unhappy*) to 10 (*Perfectly happy*). Total scores are derived by summing responses and higher values represent greater marital satisfaction. Cronbach's alphas were .94 for husbands and .93 for wives.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1. Husbands and wives did not differ on years of education but husbands were older ($M = 29.58$, $SD = 4.79$) than wives ($M = 27.89$, $SD = 4.34$, $t(161) = 6.75$, $p = .000$, $d = .54$). Husbands and wives did not differ on attachment avoidance, support perceptions, or marital satisfaction. Wives reported higher attachment anxiety ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.10$) than husbands ($M = 2.14$, $SD = .88$, $t(161) = 2.95$, $p = .004$, $d = .24$). For husbands and wives, mean attachment anxiety and avoidance scores were below the mid-point of the scales, mean support perceptions were near the top of the scale, and marital satisfaction was high (means well above the distress cut-off of 24.5; Funk & Rogge, 2007). As shown in Table 1, spouses' attachment anxiety and avoidance were negatively associated with their own and partners' support perceptions and marital satisfaction, and spouses' support perceptions were positively associated with their own and partners' marital satisfaction. Spouses' and partners' scores on the same variable were positively associated.

Support Perceptions as a Mediator of the Associations between Attachment Security and Marital Satisfaction

I tested the proposed mediation models with path analysis and the LISREL 8.8 computer program (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2001) using maximum-likelihood estimation. Path analysis allows simultaneous modelling of measured variables and includes husbands and wives to control for the dependence of their data. Following the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), I presented two indices of model fit: Comparative Fit Indices (CFI) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Values of .95 or better on the CFI and values below 0.09 on the SRMR indicate that the model is a good fit to the data.

Initially, I tested the full mediation model specified in Figure 1 (including the cross-partner paths from attachment variables to marital satisfaction and all cross-partner associations or associated error terms between attachment variables, support perceptions, and marital satisfaction) in which support perceptions mediated the associations between attachment variables and marital satisfaction.¹ Despite significant zero order correlations, the cross-partner paths between attachment anxiety and avoidance and support perceptions and the cross-partner paths between attachment anxiety and avoidance and marital satisfaction were non-significant. I retained the cross-partner paths between attachment anxiety and avoidance and marital satisfaction to allow for tests of mediated paths, but I excluded the non-significant cross-partner paths between attachment security and support perceptions and reran the model. This had no effect on model fit or the observed pattern of associations among the other variables and results from this simplified model are in Figure 2.

The simplified model provided an acceptable fit to the data (CFI = 1.0; SRMR = .04). As expected, wives' attachment anxiety and avoidance negatively predicted wives' support perceptions, but only husbands' attachment anxiety negatively predicted husbands' support perceptions. Also as expected, husbands' and wives' support perceptions predicted their own and partners' marital satisfaction. Spouses' attachment anxiety and avoidance were negatively associated with their marital satisfaction, but not with their partners' marital satisfaction.²

To test whether support perceptions significantly mediated the associations between attachment variables and marital satisfaction, I conducted follow-up Sobel tests, which provided support for partial mediation. For husbands, support perceptions partially mediated the association between attachment anxiety and marital satisfaction (Sobel test: $z = -3.82, p = .000$), and for wives, support perceptions partially mediated the association between attachment anxiety and marital satisfaction (Sobel test: $z = -3.55, p = .000$) and between attachment avoidance and marital satisfaction (Sobel test: $z = -2.74, p = .006$). With regard to cross-partner effects, husbands' support perceptions partially mediated the association between their attachment anxiety and wives' marital satisfaction (Sobel test: $z = -3.33, p = .000$). Wives' support perceptions partially mediated the association between their attachment anxiety and husbands' marital satisfaction (Sobel test: $z = -2.51, p = .012$) and between their attachment avoidance and husbands' marital satisfaction (Sobel test: $z = -2.17, p = .030$).

Given the well-documented conceptual and empirical overlap between neuroticism and attachment anxiety (e.g., Crawford, Shaver, & Goldsmith, 2007), I also reran the path model including neuroticism (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire – Neurotic Scale; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978) as a predictor of support perceptions and marital satisfaction. Inclusion of neuroticism in the model did not alter the mediated effects or any of the significant paths between attachment, support perceptions, and marital satisfaction. Moreover, the model fit (CFI = 1.0: SRMR = .03) was not an improvement on the fit of the model in Figure 2 (CFI 1.0: SRMR = .04).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to extend the literature on mechanisms of the link between attachment security and marital outcomes by examining whether spousal support perceptions mediated the within and cross-partner associations between attachment security and relationship satisfaction. This study builds on previous research and is one of the few studies focusing on support in a sample of married couples who are presumably more committed and stable than dating or cohabiting couples. I also included tests of cross-partner paths to capture dyadic effects. The results demonstrated that spouses' support perceptions mediated the associations between their attachment security and their own and their partners' marital satisfaction.

Within-partner (Actor) Effects of Attachment Security on Support Perceptions and Marital Satisfaction

Consistent with hypotheses and previous research, path analyses revealed that attachment insecurity was negatively associated with marital satisfaction (e.g., Feeney, 1994), and that support perceptions partially mediated the link between attachment security and marital satisfaction (Kane et al., 2007). Specifically, husbands' and wives' attachment anxiety and wives' avoidance were associated with more negative support perceptions and lower marital satisfaction, and support perceptions partially mediated the negative associations between anxiety and marital satisfaction for husbands and wives. It is likely that the effects of attachment security on marital satisfaction were only partially mediated by support perceptions as there are several other processes that might act as mediators such as communication (e.g., Feeney, 1994), sexual satisfaction (e.g., Butzer & Campbell, 2008), or conflict behaviour (Marchand, 2004).

When seeking support from partners, spouses with high attachment anxiety may have cognitive biases that predispose them to closely monitor interactions while anxiously anticipating that they will be disappointed at best, or rejected by their partners at worst. In other words, the hypervigilance associated with attachment anxiety may lead insecure spouses to attend to the less supportive aspects of their interactions with their partners that secure spouses might overlook, and the anxious expectation that partners might reject them may lead spouses to interpret even relatively neutral partner behaviour negatively. The negativity of support perceptions that are associated with attachment anxiety may in part, result in decreased intimacy and marital satisfaction. In contrast, when spouses who are high in attachment avoidance are threatened, they may engage in behaviours that create physical or emotional distance from their partners, such as minimization of their need for support and the particular importance of their partners' support to them. Thus, attachment avoidance may lead insecure spouses to downplay their need for partner support and to appraise that support more negatively in the service of denying their need for support thereby buttressing their self-esteem and decreasing their psychological need for their partners. Further, spouses with avoidant tendencies may rebuff their partners' attempts to provide support thereby decreasing physical proximity to their partners. The negativity of support perceptions that are associated with

attachment avoidance may in part, result in decreased intimacy and marital satisfaction. Thus, although the mechanisms through which attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with negative support perceptions differ, both may contribute to less intimacy and lower satisfaction in marriages.

Cross-partner (Partner) Effects Attachment Security on Support Perceptions and Marital Satisfaction

Although I expected that partners' attachment security would predict spouses' perceptions of partner support behaviour, and three of the four zero-order correlations between partners' attachment anxiety and avoidance and spouses' support perceptions were significant, the mediation model yielded no significant partner effects. It may be that the stronger within-partner paths overshadowed the weaker cross-partner paths between attachment security and support perceptions in the mediation model. However, there were partner effects of support perceptions on marital satisfaction, and perceptions partially mediated associations between spouses' attachment and partners' marital satisfaction. Thus, to the extent that spouses were more secure, they saw their partners as more reassuring, comforting, generous, sensitive, and compassionate when providing support, and in turn, their partners reported that their relationships were stronger and happier.

One explanation for this cross-partner mediated link may be that spouses who have positive support perceptions behave more positively in various kinds of interactions with their partners. It is reasonable to speculate that feelings of goodwill and closeness created by positive perceptions of support spill over into other relationship processes. For instance, in support interactions, spouses with positive feelings about their partners' support make clearer requests for support (e.g., asking directly for emotional or instrumental support) which are associated with increased the likelihood that their support needs will be met (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Collins & Feeney, 2004). Spouses with generally positive perceptions of their partners' support may also be more willing to overlook small failures by partners to provide desired support, creating in effect, a buffer against their partners' occasional empathic failures. Just as positive global support perceptions may affect subsequent support interactions, they may also affect other processes in marriage. For example, spouses who see their partners as warm

and supportive in times of stress may work harder to see their partners' perspective when there is a difference of opinion, to be responsive when their partners need support, and to give their partners the benefit of the doubt. Together or separately, any of these processes could explain how spouses' perceptions of their partners' support efforts could lead to greater intimacy and satisfaction for their partners.

In the mediation model, spouses' attachment anxiety and avoidance did not predict partners' support perceptions. This is consistent with the results of some previous research. For example in a lab interaction study (Collins & Feeney, 2000) and a daily diary study (Davila & Kashy, 2009), there were few partner effects of attachment security on support perceptions. In contrast, Kane and colleagues (2007) found a small negative effect of men's attachment avoidance on female partners' support perceptions, and small negative effects of women's anxiety and avoidance on male partners' support perceptions. There are several possible reasons for the lack of cross-partner findings in this study compared to that of Kane and colleagues. First, the sample size of this study was smaller ($N = 162$ vs. $N = 305$) and thus power to detect these small cross-partner effects may not have been sufficient. Second, in this study I assessed support perceptions as a measured variable, whereas Kane and her colleagues created a latent variable, "perceptions of partner care," based on three measured variables including perceived available support, responsiveness to need, and negative support. The advantage of latent variables is that they are more precise than measured variables, and random error does attenuate the results.

Finally, most of the items used by Kane and her colleagues (2007) to assess support were tied to perceptions and emotions that, from a theoretical perspective, may reflect attachment security. In contrast, the semantic differential items used in this study were broader in nature (e.g., "Supportive vs. unsupportive," "Sensitive vs. insensitive," "Reassuring vs. upsetting.") Thus, the associations between attachment security and support perceptions may have been stronger in the Kane et al. study because the item content of the support measures mapped closely onto the item content of the attachment measure.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This sample was composed of newlyweds who reported high levels of attachment security, positive support perceptions, and marital satisfaction. Therefore, I cannot generalize the results to other forms of relationship (e.g., same-sex, dating) or other stages of relationship development (e.g., long-term married or cohabiting couples). In future, researchers will need to examine whether the same patterns hold for couples who have been married longer who may have greater variability in their support perceptions and marital satisfaction. Although participants were recruited using a variety of strategies, the majority of couples were recruited through print media and bridal shows. Couples recruited through such means are generally less distressed than couples recruited through other methods such as radio and television coverage (Rogge et al., 2006), and this may have contributed to the relatively low variability of marital satisfaction in the sample.

The data in this study were also cross-sectional, so no definitive statements can be made about the direction of causality. Thus, it may be that positive support perceptions foster attachment security, which in turn contributes to greater marital satisfaction. I tested this alternate model, and although adequate, the model fit provided no advantage ($CFI = 1.0$; $SRMR = .06$) over the model tested in this study ($CFI = 1.0$; $SRMR = .04$). From an attachment theoretical perspective, the proposed direction of causality is defensible: Attachment security (including cognition, affect, and behaviour) develops in the context of our earliest supportive relationships and influenced by close relationships throughout the lifespan. Future research on the associations between attachment security and support perceptions and their contribution to relationship outcomes should track these processes and outcomes longitudinally to shed additional light on causal paths.

Given that the data were self-report, it is possible that at least some of the results are artefacts of shared method variance. However, the inclusion of neuroticism in the model resulted in no significant change in associations and no significant improvement in model fit. This provides some evidence that the results are not due to shared method variance. Nevertheless, future researchers should include multiple methods of assessment--including interviewer assessment of attachment security and observer ratings of support behaviours--to minimize this concern. Further, inclusion of items to tap

socially desirable patterns of responding when measuring perceptions could provide some assurance that participants are not overly susceptible to perception management.

Future research might also extend the current results by exploring the role of support expectations. It may be that perceiving more or less support than expected is more important than the perceived level of support in predicting marital satisfaction (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2008). In addition, the effect of perceived over or under-support may vary according to level of attachment anxiety and avoidance. For instance, spouses with high attachment avoidance may not wish for high levels of support, and their marital satisfaction may be negatively affected should they receive more support than desired. Moreover, the effects of some types of support perceptions (e.g., perceived over-provision of support) may be cumulative and become evident only in longitudinal studies (e.g., Brock & Lawrence, 2009).

Clinical Implications

The results of this study speak to the importance of addressing partner cognitions in any treatment for couples. Specifically, addressing the perceptions and beliefs held by spouses about themselves and their relationships may help clinicians and couples to understand support seeking and provision, and to identify and change the factors that contribute to the creation and maintenance of marital distress. Psychoeducation about normative attachment processes (i.e., proximity seeking, safe haven, and secure base) may provide couples with a useful model that affords them new ways to think about their relationship. For example, in this study, spouses' support perceptions predicted their partners' marital satisfaction. If spouses believe that others (including their partners) should deal with problems on their own, they may devalue their partners' support, leading to decreased marital satisfaction for themselves and their partners. If, however, spouses learn that it is normal and appropriate to seek support from their partners during times of stress, they may be more open to receiving that support and appraise support provided more positively.

Psychoeducation about individual differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance may also be useful to distressed couples. Although there are only weak associations between childhood and adult attachment anxiety and avoidance, discussion of how children's attachment security or insecurity develops might help couples reframe

current relationship challenges so that they may be approached with less heat. Improved understanding of how individual differences in attachment security develop may also help couples to increase their empathy for each other. With increased compassion, spouses' and partners' defensiveness, hurt, and anger may dissipate, thereby creating motivation to work on changing outdated patterns. Helping couples to increase awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours may help them to slow down automatic processes in thought and behaviour that contribute to the maintenance of unhealthy behavioural and negative emotional patterns. Armed with an attachment-related understanding of why couples interact as they do, clinicians practicing from a variety of empirically supportive treatment perspectives can work with clients to modify clients' cognitions and behaviours, and ultimately their emotions.

Conclusion

The findings from this study are consistent with a growing literature that illuminates support processes (e.g., Feeney, 1996; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Kane et al., 2007) from an attachment-theoretical perspective. There is now evidence from married, dating, and cohabiting couples that links attachment security to relationship satisfaction at least in part through support processes, but more research to clarify the cross-partner paths is needed. Our understanding of the mechanisms linking attachment security to relationship satisfaction will benefit from including support seeking and provision behaviours and support expectations in addition to support perceptions. To improve our understanding of relationship processes, researchers should continue to take a dyadic approach exploring mediated and moderated paths to marital satisfaction. The results of this study illustrate that support perceptions, one of many relationship processes involving cognitions, behaviours, and emotions, do—at least partially—mediate the associations between attachment security and marital satisfaction.

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Footnotes

¹ I also tested whether anxiety and avoidance interacted (i.e., Husband Anxiety x Avoidance, Wife Anxiety x Avoidance, Husband Anxiety x Wife Anxiety, Husband Anxiety x Wife Avoidance, Husband Avoidance x Wife Anxiety, and Husband Avoidance x Wife Avoidance) to predict support perceptions or marital satisfaction within and across spouse. There were no significant interactions in the full model and the pattern of results for other paths remained consistent. Thus, results including cross-partner attachment interactions are not presented.

² In addition, I examined interaction-specific support perceptions as a mediator of the associations between attachment security and marital satisfaction. During a laboratory session, spouses discussed a current worry with their partners and then completed a measure (based on existing support and caregiving measures) of their perceptions of partner's behaviour in the interaction. Sample items included: "Your partner asked questions to help you work things out," "Your partner showed understanding about your worry/concern or feelings," and "Your partner missed or misread your signals for help and understanding." However, conditions required to test mediation were not present and thus the full path model was not tested.

Table 1
Within and Cross-partner Correlations and Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

	Husbands				Wives			
<u>Husbands</u>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Anxiety								
2. Avoidance	.65**							
3. Support Perceptions	-.49**	-.39**						
4. Marital Satisfaction	-.56**	-.49**	.68**					
<u>Wives</u>								
5. Anxiety	.29**	.22**	-.13	-.21**				
6. Avoidance	.29**	.24**	-.16*	-.30**	.53**			
7. Support Perceptions	-.27**	-.23**	.24**	.40**	-.44**	-.41**		
8. Marital Satisfaction	-.25**	-.16*	.41**	.50**	-.43**	-.42**	.70**	
Means	2.14	2.27	6.60	41.81	2.42	2.13	6.60	42.11
Standard Deviations	0.88	0.77	0.58	4.34	1.10	0.78	0.66	4.42

Note: $N = 162$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

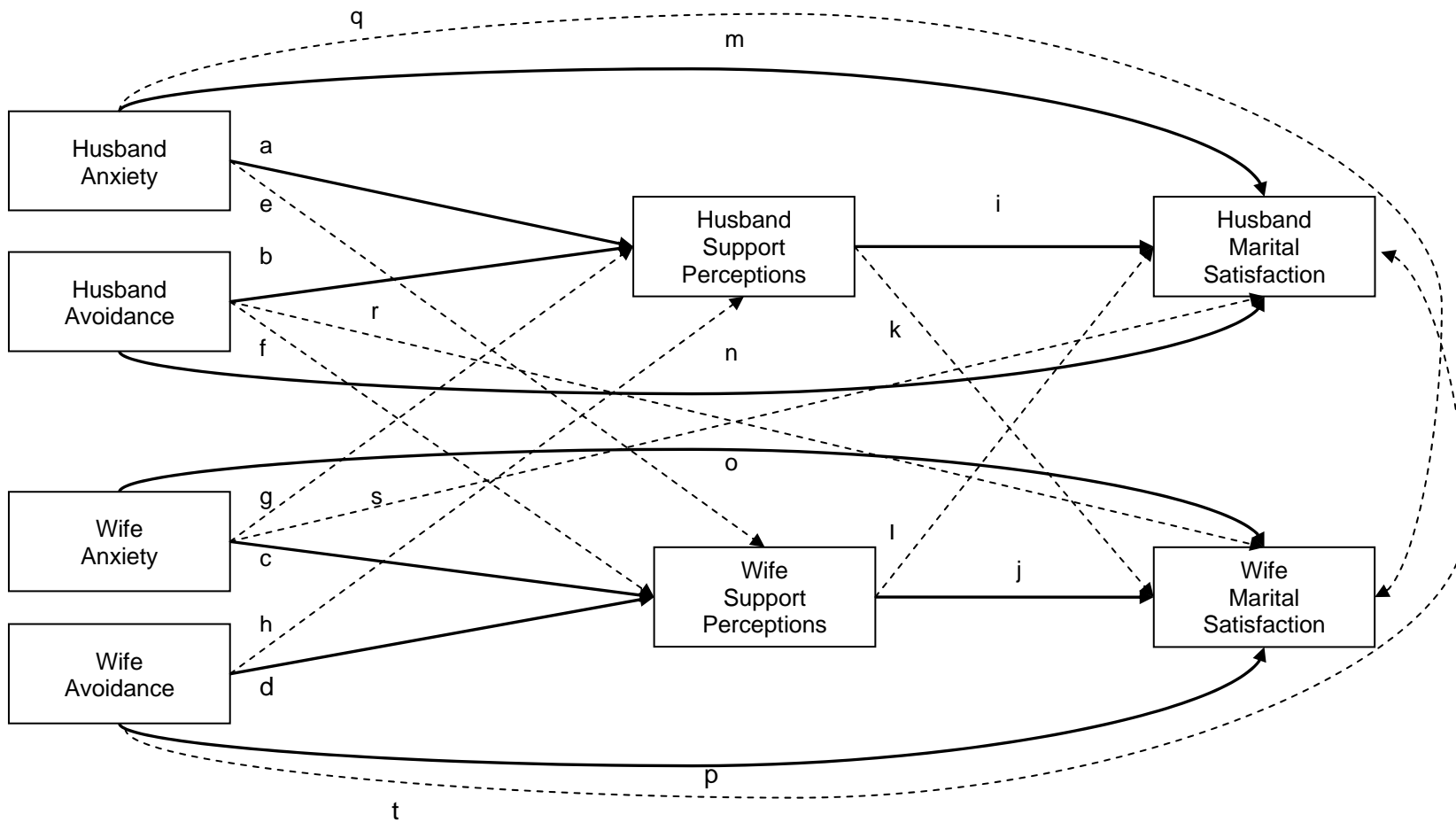


Figure 1. Proposed mediation model: Support perceptions mediating the within and cross-partner associations between attachment security and marital satisfaction. Within spouse effects are denoted by solid lines and cross-partner effects by dashed lines.

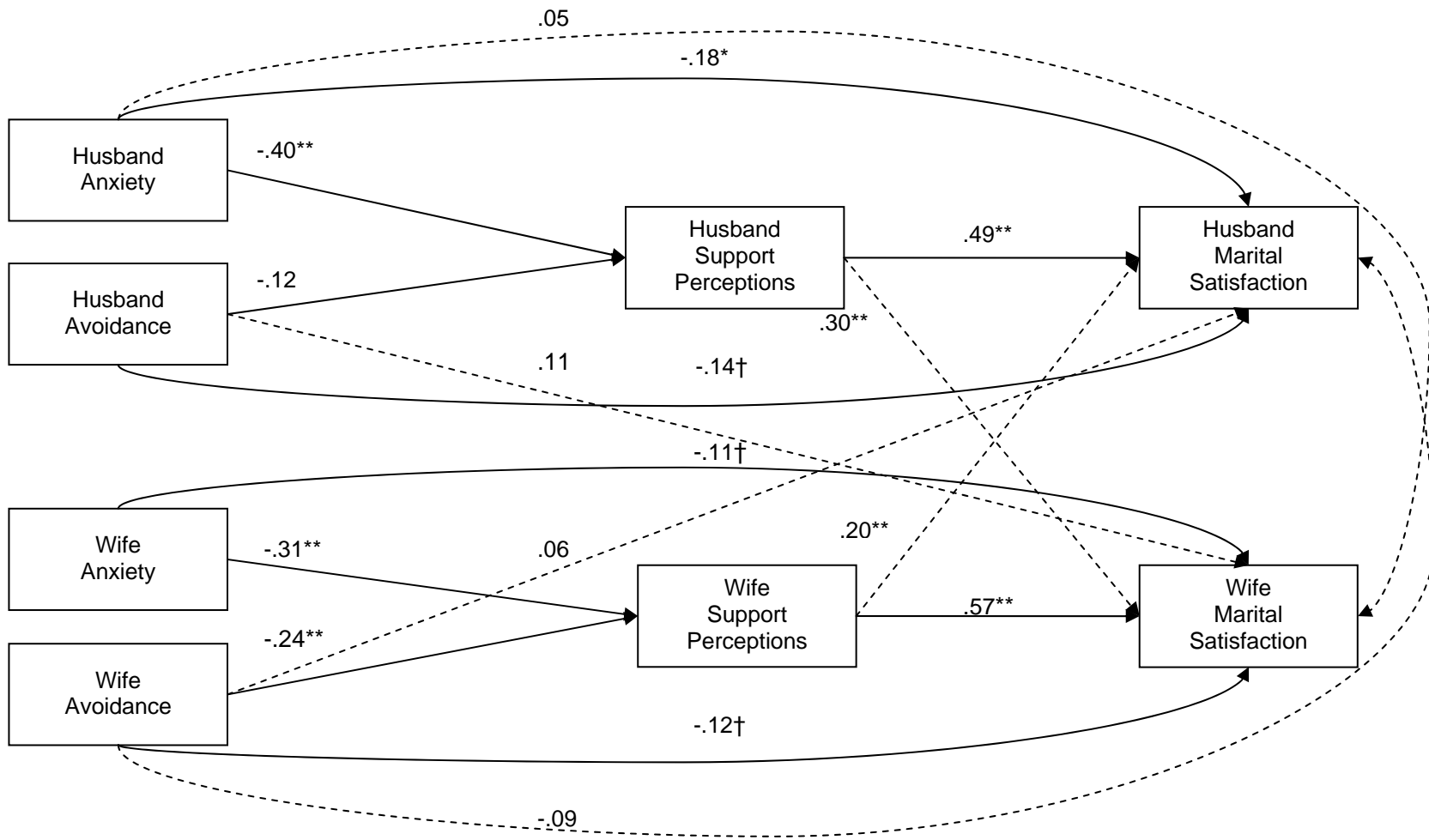


Figure 2. Support perceptions as a partial mediator of the associations between spouses' attachment security and spouses' and partners' marital satisfaction. All coefficients are standardized. Within spouse effects are denoted by solid lines and cross-partner effects by dashed lines. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$.