

Associations between Communication Behaviors and Attachment Styles: Testing

Gridlock as an Important Mediator

Josh R. Novak¹, Carlos Perez², and Ryan B. Seedall¹

¹ Utah State University ² Lubbock Christian University



ABSTRACT

Adult attachment has been thoroughly studied for the past few decades, and while some literature has attempted to target specific behaviors that lead to or can influence attachment styles, research is still lacking on specific mechanisms through which communication affects attachment style. Utilizing data from 226 men and 237 women in committed relationships, the current study focused on the associations between perceptions of partner's communication behaviors used during conflict and attachment styles through relationship gridlock.

SAMPLE

- Age: Men $M = 35.06$, $SD = 10.38$; Women $M = 35.71$ ($SD = 10.62$)
- 76% Caucasian, 9% Latino, 9% African American/Black, 7% Asian American or Pacific Islander
- Majority were college educated (63%), employed full time (84%), not religious, and had a median income between %60K-\$75K

MEASUREMENT

Perception of partner's communication behaviors. Perception of partner's communication behaviors was measured using The Managing Affect and Differences Scale (MADS; Arellano & Markman, 1995), we used six subscales (leveling, validation, emotional expressivity, editing, feedback, and withdrawal) which totaled 66 items. Responses ranged from 1 *never* to 5 *always*.

Gridlock. Gridlock in conflict was measured via 10-items coming from Gottman's Gridlock scale (Gottman, 1999). This scale measures a respondent's perception of whether gridlocked conflict (state of unresolved conflict with little or no movement toward resolving the conflict) exists in the relationship. Responses ranged on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 *not at all true* to 6 *completely true*.

Attachment strategies. The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale, is a 36-item Likert questionnaire that will be used to measure how comfortable individuals are with intimacy and closeness (attachment avoidance) and their fears related to their relationships and anxiety (attachment anxiety; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Responses ranged on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*.

- **Control Variables-** Relationship satisfaction, relationship length and age



TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Gridlock

- a situation, typically one involving opposing parties, in which no progress can be made.

Leveling

- telling one's partner what one is feeling by discussing one's thoughts or feelings clearly, constructively, and simply

Editing

- controlling one's reaction to a partner's message

Validation

- Expressing value in a partner's perspective or point of view

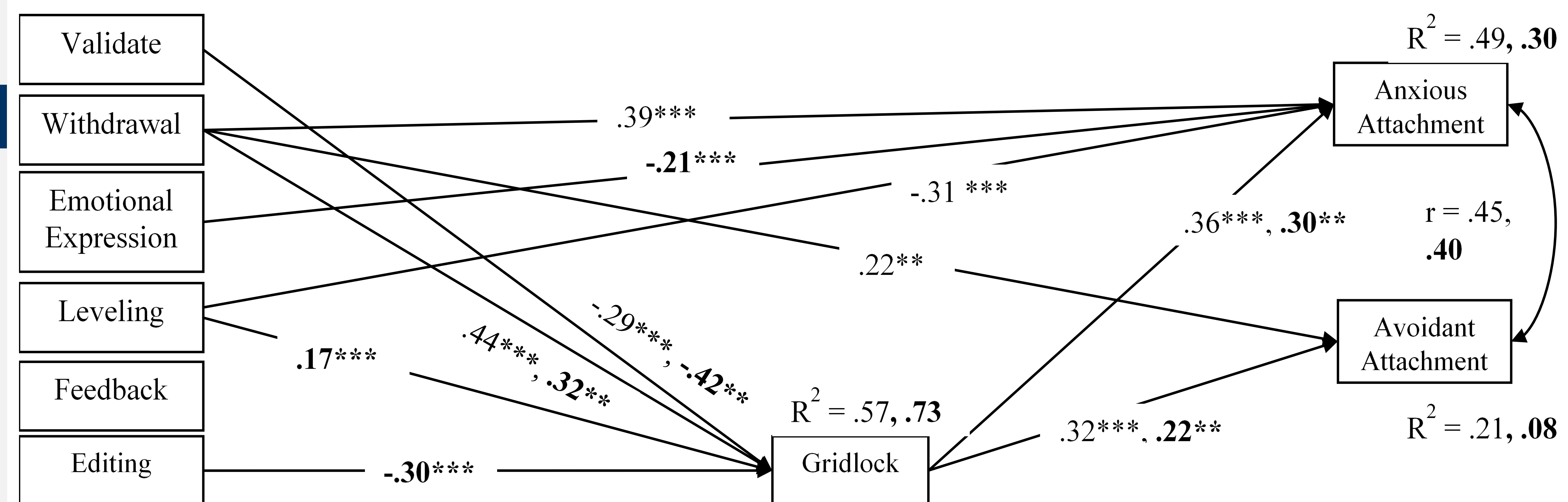
Withdrawal

- Physically or emotionally withdrawing from discussions

Feedback

- paraphrasing or asking for clarifications of partner's message to make certain that it is interpreted accurately.

FINAL MODEL



NOTE: Standardized estimates shown. Exogenous variables are autocorrelated. (Women Bold) Model fit indices: $\chi^2=1.905(2)$, $p=.3859$; CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.003, RMSEA = .000, [C.I. =.000- .12 8], SRMR = .005. † $p < .1$, * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- Withdrawal (men only), Emotional Expressivity (women only), Leveling (men only) behaviors during conflict were directly associated with attachment strategies
- Validation, Withdrawal, and Editing behaviors during conflict were indirectly related with both anxious and avoidant attachment through perception of relationship gridlock.
- The findings from the present study offers important implications for therapists. First, therapist should asses for how communication behaviors during conflict, specifically validation, withdrawal, and editing, are perceived by each member in the couple relationship—do they feel stuck or locked in gridlock? Second, therapists should assess whether this gridlock (or perception of being stuck in conflict) influences a partner to feel anxious about the relationship, or conversely avoidant. Finally, couples therapists would do well to increase those communication behaviors that could lessen both anxious and avoidant attachment, through the use of psychoeducation, role playing, and enactments.