Emotional Congruence within Couple Interaction: The Role of Attachment Avoidance

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Core Study Constructs

- Emotion Regulation
- Attachment Avoidance
- Emotional Congruence
- Repressive Coping
- Psychophysiological Arousal
Study Purpose & Hypotheses

- Explore the link between attachment avoidance and repressive coping
  - Diamond et al., 2006
  - Psychophysiological Arousal
  - First study to investigate relationships in the context of a couple and therapy-like interaction.

- H1: Higher levels of attachment avoidance will be associated with elevated skin conductance during each of the interactional conditions.

- H2: Attachment avoidance will be negatively associated with congruence between skin conductance and in-the-moment feelings towards partners.
Variables and Measures

Client Characteristic:
- Self-Report Attachment

Therapeutic Process:
- Interactional Structuring

Client Emotional Experience

1. Anxiety
2. Avoidance

- Semi-Natural (low)
- Therapy-Like (high)

- Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)

1. Physiological Arousal
   - Skin Conductance - Biopac
2. Interpersonal Distress
   - Moment-to-moment feelings towards partner – Perception Analyzer

*Other variables: Couple Conflict, Relationship Satisfaction, and Individual Symptom Distress
63 couples – 53.3% participation rate

Age: 18 – 69, $M = 32.5$, $Mdn = 30.0$, $SD = 9.95$

Race/ethnicity: 58.7% Euro-American; 42.3% under-represented minority

All were engaged, living together, or married

They had been together between .75 and 41 years ($M = 7.24$, $SD = 7.21$)

Screened for extreme responses, especially violence

60.3% of couples – At least one partner was working full-time.
### Other Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Distress (OQ 45.2)</td>
<td>15 – 134</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS – Frequency / Severity</td>
<td>3 – 18</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPS – Disruptive Conflict</td>
<td>-3 – 116</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS – Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>20 – 50</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale</td>
<td>20 – 63</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>8.52</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Informed consent, paperwork</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Meeting with coach = issue and rapport-building</td>
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<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>Communication segments – semi-natural and therapy-like</td>
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<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>Continuous self-report of experience – perception analyzer</td>
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<td>Phase 5</td>
<td>Adult Attachment Interview</td>
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**2nd Sequence:** Adult Attachment Interview during phase 2  
5 trained coaches – All Ph.D. level MFT students  
6 trained interviewers – All M.S. or Ph.D. level MFTs
Semi-Natural Interaction

- One issue per partner: Think of a fairly recent time when you felt hurt, angry, or offended, and about which you still have some feelings.

- 7-8 minutes per issue

- Couples were encouraged to work to make steps towards a resolution of the issue.
Therapy-like Interaction

- Discussed the same two issues with a therapist-coach that they did with each other.

- 4 segments

- Goals:
  - Validate, explore, and deepen while helping speaking partner express his/her experience in a softened, non-threatening way.
  - During interaction with listening partner, check for understanding of both content and emotions while helping him/her offer comfort to the speaking partner.
  - Enactment as the final heightening of the softening experience.
Data Analysis

- Dyadic data analysis using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006)
- Multi-level modeling
- SPSS
- Non-independence of data
- Actor & Partner effects
Hypothesis 1

- No significant interactions or main effects involving actor attachment avoidance
  - Semi-natural: $b = -0.02$, $t(103.1) = -0.14$, $p = .89$
  - Therapy-like: $b = -0.001$, $t(104.2) = -0.003$, $p = .998$

- No significant interactions or main effects involving partner attachment avoidance
  - Semi-natural: $b = 0.03$, $t(90.8) = 0.19$, $p = .85$
  - Therapy-like: $b = -0.08$, $t(92.2) = -0.40$, $p = .69$

- No evidence that attachment avoidance was related to greater psychophysiological arousal
Hypothesis 2: Semi-Natural Interaction

High attachment avoidance: Those who demonstrated greater psychophysiological arousal reported more positive feelings towards their partner.

Low attachment avoidance: Those who reported greater psychophysiological arousal reported more negative feelings towards their partner.
Hypothesis 2: Therapy-Like Interaction

Similar findings as with the semi-natural interaction.
Implications

- **Attachment avoidance and stressful experiencing**
  - Not related in the context of conflict

- **Attachment avoidance, congruence, and repressive coping**
  - Avoidance and repressive coping appear to be related
  - Health-related implications

- **Attachment avoidance and clinical process**
  - Fostering awareness and congruence
Limitations & Future Research

- Generalizability
- Participation Rate
- Formation of attachment bonds

- Future research needs to replicate these findings in diverse samples (e.g., same-sex couples, remarried couples, later-life couples, etc.)
- Future research also needs to continue looking at the clinical implications of attachment theory.