

CHAPTER **6**
**Attachment, Commitment, and
Relationship Maintenance**
When Partners Really Matter

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Imagine two people, Tom and Sarah, who are involved in a romantic relationship. While growing up, Tom had a tumultuous and rocky relationship with his parents, both of whom paid little attention to him and neither of whom Tom felt he could ever fully please. His romantic partner, Sarah, on the other hand, had a good relationship with both of her parents. Sarah felt especially close to her parents and often sought them out for support when she needed it.

When Tom and Sarah started dating, Tom did not want to replicate the difficult relationships he had with his parents, but he worried that he might not live up to Sarah's expectations of him or their relationship. Very early in their relationship, Sarah began to sense Tom's insecurity. She noted that he got anxious whenever she talked with other guys she knew or said anything but positive things about Tom and their relationship. When these situations occurred Tom would immediately get upset and start arguments that often resulted in hurt feelings on both sides. Recognizing this pattern and the likely sources of Tom's insecurity, Sarah began changing how she

interacted with Tom. For example, she started to steer Tom away from situations or events that might trigger his concerns and worries. When such events could not be avoided, Sarah did everything she could to accept Tom unconditionally, quickly deescalate conflicts, and reassure him that she loved him and was strongly committed to their relationship. Gradually, Tom's worries abated, and he became less insecure about both himself and the relationship. He worried much less about whether he would "measure up," and when occasional arguments arose he reacted in a more deliberate and constructive manner toward Sarah. Two years later, they were married.

This scenario portrays a set of interpersonal dynamics that occurs fairly often in relationships but has rarely been examined systematically by relationships researchers. In many romantic relationships, at least one partner is likely to have an insecure attachment history. Although insecure histories make people vulnerable to experiencing negative relationship outcomes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), insecure people and their partners are by no means destined to this fate. As the Tom and Sarah scenario illustrates, individuals may find ways to help their insecure partners function better and experience greater satisfaction in relationships. They most likely do so by persistently quelling or disconfirming the chronic worries harbored by their insecurely attached partners, especially when their partners are distressed or feel threatened. Certain individuals, in other words, may buffer or shield their insecure partners from encountering poor relationship outcomes, helping them to think, feel, and behave in more constructive and adaptive ways. One route through which they might do so is by helping insecure partners identify, regulate, and cope more effectively with negative affect, especially in situations that could threaten the relationship itself.

Relationship researchers yearn to understand interpersonal dynamics and outcomes such as these. Most relationship research to date, however, has examined individuals in relationships rather than dyads per se and has treated the individual as the primary unit of analysis. For example, research questions have typically been aimed at examining how Tom's insecure attachment history makes him vulnerable to fears of abandonment or feelings of inadequacy or how Sarah's commitment to the relationship provides the impetus for stronger pro-relationship behaviors. Surprisingly little research has focused on dynamic interaction *between partners*. This chapter focuses on these underexplored interpersonal dynamics. We begin by discussing the important role that constructive emotion regulation has for personal well-being and, in all likelihood, for relationship well-being as well. We then discuss how core principles from two major relationship theories—attachment theory and interdependence theory—can be integrated to explain how and why insecurely attached partners—especially highly anxious ones—should benefit from having romantic partners who

are strongly committed to them and the relationship. Following this, we review the results of a recent social interaction study of long-term romantic couples (Tran & Simpson, 2009). This study highlights some of the conditions under which people who are anxiously attached are buffered by partners who are highly committed when couples discuss important accommodative dilemmas—potentially contentious points of disagreement—in their relationship. We conclude the chapter by discussing how these findings advance our understanding of the way “partner buffering” may operate in romantic relationships.

Emotion Regulation and Well-Being

One of the best predictors of personal well-being is the ability to regulate emotions constructively, particularly during difficult or stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals who habitually use constructive, problem-focused modes of coping when troubles arise are generally better at regulating and dampening negative emotions than those who do not. This ability, in turn, is associated with a wide range of positive personal outcomes including better health and greater subjective well-being (see Vohs & Finkel, 2006). Unfortunately, little is known about how constructive emotion regulation translates into adaptive relationship functioning.

Two major lines of research, however, have indirectly addressed this issue. Research on the personality trait of neuroticism has shown that people who report being more emotionally unstable (i.e., highly neurotic) have much less satisfying relationships that are more likely to end in dissolution or divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Similarly, individuals with insecure attachment styles (i.e., who enact either emotion-focused coping strategies in the case of anxious attachment styles or avoidance coping strategies in the case of avoidant attachment styles) also experience poorer relationship outcomes (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). Emotion-focused coping entails the use of tactics such as vigilantly focusing on, ruminating about, and amplifying the source, severity, or chronicity of distress. Avoidance coping entails the use of tactics such as denying, ignoring, discounting, and failing to acknowledge the existence of stress along with the negative effects it has on the self. People who use one or both types of insecure coping strategies generally experience less interdependence, less trust, more emotional negativity, and less satisfying relationships relative than people who use more secure, problem-focused coping strategies (Simpson, 1990). Problem-focused coping consists of tactics that directly address and eventually “solve” the problem or issue that is causing distress, which allows securely attached people to resume other important activities without having to use vigilance tactics (in the case of highly anxious persons) or defensive tactics (in the case of highly avoidant persons).

At this point, very little is known about whether or how romantic partners “regulate” each other when stressful relationship events might be and are encountered. We propose that the ability to skillfully regulate the emotions of not only oneself but also one’s *partner* may be one of the most important assets that partners can bring to a relationship. In this way, individuals can serve as an important “resource” when their romantic partners experience negative emotions by providing needed emotional or instrumental support.

Attachment Theory

Within the relationships literature, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980) has become one of the most generative and influential metatheories. According to this theory, patterns of interaction with attachment figures (such as primary caregivers) that occur early in life shape an individual’s beliefs and expectations of later relationships (Bowlby 1969/1982, 1973, 1980). Once formed, these relationship expectations or “working models” gradually lead individuals to develop specific attachment orientations. Two orthogonal dimensions underlie adult attachment orientations (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). The first dimension, labeled *anxiety*, taps concerns that relationship partners might not be available and supportive when needed and that love may not be fully reciprocated. The second dimension, termed *avoidance*, indexes the desire to limit intimacy and dependence and to maintain comfortable psychological and emotional independence from relationship partners. Individuals who score low on both attachment dimensions are prototypically “secure” in that they feel comfortable with closeness and intimacy and are confident in the availability and benevolent intentions of their partners.

Anxious attachment develops from receiving inconsistent or unpredictable care from prior attachment figures (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). The anxious orientation is defined by concerns about one’s worthiness of love, which is manifested in chronic fear of rejection and doubts about the ultimate availability and supportiveness of attachment figures. Highly anxious individuals are hypervigilant with respect to the availability of support from their partners, and they ruminate over worst-case relationship outcomes (Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993). As a consequence, they use hyperactivation strategies, which include clinging, controlling, and coercive behaviors, to ensure that their attachment figures remain psychologically close and available (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Avoidant attachment, in contrast, emerges from a history of unsuccessful bids for proximity in which an individual’s efforts are consistently met with neglect or rejection from attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973; Crittenden

& Ainsworth, 1989). For highly avoidant individuals, the attachment system is triggered by reminders of their futile efforts to solicit care and support, making them vulnerable to reexperiencing emotional rejection (Bartholomew, 1990). As a result, highly avoidant people use defensive deactivation strategies that limit intimacy and deny or suppress their latent needs for greater closeness to attachment figures (Bowlby, 1980; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Crittenden & Ainsworth). Avoidant attachment is also characterized by strong preferences to create and maintain autonomy, control, and emotional distance in interpersonal contexts (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1996; Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer, 1998; Shaver & Hazan, 1993).

Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) represents a second major theoretical framework within the study of relationships. This theory suggests that most individuals undergo a “transformation of motivation” when deciding whether to do something that is good for themselves versus something that is good for their partners or relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). According to this theory, a distinction must be made between the given matrix and the effective matrix (Figure 6.1). The given matrix represents an individual’s primitive or “gut-level” self-centered preferences when a problem is encountered. People generally experience negative emotions when treated badly, and their immediate impulse often is to reciprocate negative behavior

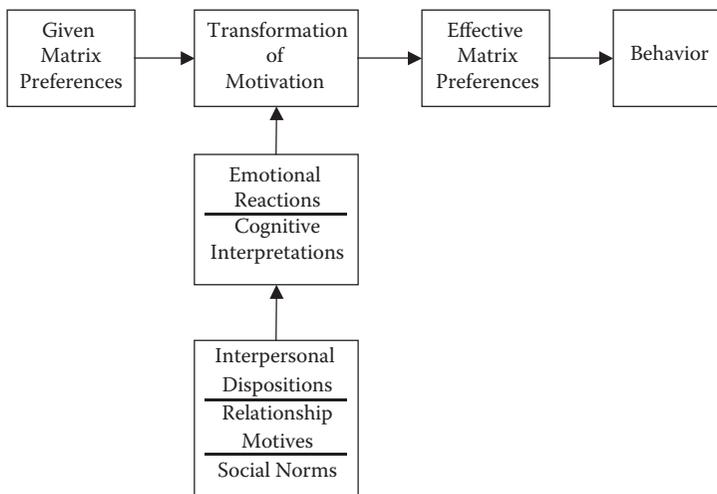


Figure 6.1 The transformation of motivation model (Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996).

in kind. Reactions indexed by the given matrix, however, do not necessarily dictate how an individual actually behaves when confronted with partner negativity. According to interdependence theory, most individuals undergo a transformation of motivation when deciding whether to act on their initial, self-interested preferences (e.g., to retaliate) or whether to behave in ways that might promote broader relationship goals (e.g., to find constructive ways to resolve the problem; see Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2002). Determinants of transformation tendencies include interpersonal orientations, such as individuals' dispositional tendencies or relationship goals and motives. These variables are believed to determine the amount of transformation that occurs via their impact on cognitive interpretations of and emotional reactions to the specific situation in which relationship partners' self-interests are at odds with their broader relationship goals. In other words, the transformation process model proposes that the regulation of one's thoughts and emotions results in more adaptive behaviors during accommodative dilemmas. The effective matrix, therefore, reflects the eventual transformation of the given matrix (if transformation occurs), and it ultimately guides how individuals behave toward their partners.

According to Rusbult and colleagues (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), an individual's willingness to respond constructively and inhibit impulses to react destructively when a partner displays potentially destructive behaviors defines accommodation. Commitment is believed to be the most important construct for understanding motivations that eventually produce accommodation (Rusbult et al., 1991). Commitment represents concern for the future and the stability of the relationship plus the desire for the relationship to continue. Commitment, therefore, correlates highly with persistence in relationships (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; Etcheverry & Le, 2005), and it is the strongest predictor of most pro-relationship maintenance behaviors, such as derogation of alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989) and willingness to make sacrifices for the partner or relationship (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). Greater commitment also predicts the enactment of more constructive behaviors and fewer destructive ones when partners' interests are not perfectly aligned (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Etcheverry & Le; Menzies-Toman & Lydon, 2005; Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991; Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

A Dyadic View of Attachment and Commitment

For some individuals, a history of negative interpersonal experiences may prevent them from behaving in ways that could bolster the stability and

longevity of their relationships. In response to previous maladaptive relationships, people are likely to develop negative or unrealistic expectations about the availability, responsiveness, and intentions of romantic partners (Baldwin, 1992). Patterns of negativity may thus be maintained in current relationships via behavioral confirmation processes (Snyder & Stukas, 1999). For example, insecurely attached individuals may anticipate negative reactions or behaviors from their romantic partners, perceive greater partner negativity or malintent, overreact to these perceptions and, as a result, unwittingly elicit negative behaviors from their partners. Indeed, women who are more rejection sensitive (and who also tend to be more anxiously attached) behave in a more hostile and defensive manner during conflict interactions, which leads their romantic partners to experience greater anger and dissatisfaction (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Negative expectations and relationship insecurities, therefore, can easily subvert relationship quality.

Fortunately, not all relationships in which one or both partners are insecurely attached (or hold negative relationship expectations) are destined for failure. Highly anxious people who perceive higher levels of support from their spouses report better marital functioning (Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001) and believe they will have better future relationship outcomes (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Insecurely attached people involved in highly committed relationships might be able to quell or suspend their worries about rejection and loss, eventually extricating themselves from a continuing cycle of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, and Rholes (2001) also found that the negative effects generally observed for people with greater attachment insecurities are attenuated when insecure individuals are more dependent on their partners. In other words, greater dependence or commitment may provide insecurely attached people with a broader, long-term perspective that might help them achieve happier and more stable relationships (Kelley, 1983). This motivation to sustain the relationship might allow them to disregard or sidestep their immediate attachment-based concerns and worries and work more effectively toward meeting their long-term relationship goals. Greater relationship commitment, in other words, may effectively buffer attachment insecurities.

However, the *partner's* level of commitment should have an even stronger effect on an individual's emotions and behavioral reactions to relationship-threatening events, given that partners can easily destabilize and terminate relationships (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995). Indeed, greater commitment by *partners* may be the foundation upon which insecurely attached individuals can feel more confident that their partners truly love, care for, and respect them. Rather than being wrapped up in feelings of

vulnerability and insecurity, this realization may allow insecure people to experience less intense negative affect and better regulate their emotions, which could in turn enable them to behave in a more constructive, accommodating manner when relationship-threatening events are encountered.

Less committed individuals, in contrast, should experience more negative outcomes, especially if they are involved with highly insecure partners. The combination of low personal commitment and high partner insecurity should culminate in particularly negative outcomes in terms of how less committed people think, feel, and behave in relationship-threatening situations. The maladaptive coping strategies characteristic of highly insecure individuals, in other words, may be even worse for the relationship if one or both partners lack the commitment and positive motivation necessary to counteract these tendencies.

The buffering effects of commitment, however, should be stronger for more anxiously attached than for more avoidantly attached people. Avoidantly attached individuals are motivated to create and maintain control and sufficient emotional distance in their relationships (Mikulincer, 1998). Without sufficient control and autonomy, highly avoidant people may feel vulnerable and even “trapped” in relationships. As a consequence, higher levels of one’s own commitment or having partners who are highly committed may threaten highly avoidant individuals’ need for autonomy and control. In contrast, highly anxious individuals are motivated to achieve greater security and reassurance from their partners (Mikulincer). For this reason, greater self commitment *and especially greater partner commitment* may reduce relationship threat and allow highly anxious people to believe they are closer to achieving sufficient feelings of security.

According to transformation of motivation principles (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), individuals’ interpersonal dispositions (e.g., attachment anxiety) and relationship motives (e.g., the desire to maintain the current relationship) should affect their perceptual and emotional responses to important relationship events (e.g., an accommodative dilemma in the relationship). These thoughts and emotions, in turn, should affect whether individuals behave in an accommodating manner, especially during a relationship-threatening interaction. The specific behaviors individuals enact, however, should be more strongly influenced by the specific thoughts and feelings that they have during a threatening interaction than by their global dispositions or motives. For example, the deep-seated insecurities of highly anxious individuals may be manifested in intense negative emotional responses to a threatening situation, which results in hostile or defensive behaviors. However, the countervailing desire to maintain the current relationship may help these individuals sidestep their immediate, gut impulse to behave defensively by transforming their perceptions

or interpretations of the threatening situation. This, in turn, may permit highly anxious individuals to regulate their emotions more constructively and respond to their partners in a more adaptive and benevolent manner.

A Study of Attachment, Commitment, and Accommodation

To test these predictions, we conducted a videotaped social interaction study (see Tran & Simpson, 2009). A total of 74 married couples in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area participated in the study. The mean length of marriage was 5 years, and the mean ages of men and women were 32 and 33, respectively. Of the participants, 126 were Caucasian, 3 were African American, 7 were Hispanic, 6 were American Indian, and 6 were Asian.

Participants first completed a set of questionnaires privately and independently of their spouse. An adapted version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) was used to assess the two adult attachment dimensions (anxiety and avoidance). The anxiety dimension assesses the degree to which individuals have negative views of themselves as relationship partners and are preoccupied with abandonment and loss of attachment figures. Sample items from the anxiety scale are, "I worry about being abandoned," and, "I find that romantic partners don't want to get as close as I would like." The avoidance dimension taps the degree to which individuals harbor negative views of others and seek to avoid closeness and intimacy in relationships. Sample items from the avoidance scale are, "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners," and "I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners" (reverse scored). Relationship commitment was assessed using the Investment Model Commitment Scale (Rusbult, 1983). Sample items include, "How much longer do you want your current relationship to last?" and "Do you feel committed to maintaining your relationship with your partner?"

Each couple then engaged in two videotaped accommodative dilemma discussions. In the first dilemma, one partner (the initiator) was randomly assigned to initiate a discussion about a characteristic, habit, or behavior of the other partner that the initiator wanted to see change. Accommodative dilemmas are a particularly good context in which to test transformation of motivation processes because the partner (the accommodator) has the option to react constructively (by attempting to accommodate the request for change), to react neutrally, or to react destructively (in line with personal self-interests). The initiator and accommodator roles were reversed in the second accommodative dilemma discussion.

Immediately following each discussion, a self-report measure assessed attachment-related feelings of acceptance (e.g., loved, supported, cared for, comforted, secure) and rejection (e.g., dismissed, abandoned, hostile, rejected, insecure) during the discussion. A composite variable for

emotional reactions was computed with positive scores signifying more positive emotions and negative scores signifying more negative emotions.

To assess participants' constructive and destructive behaviors, each videotaped interaction was independently rated by five trained researchers. The coding scheme was developed based on Rusbult and Zembrodt's (1983) dimensions of constructive and destructive behaviors. Specifically, each coder rated the target partners (the accommodators) in terms of the extent to which they displayed constructive behaviors (e.g., compromising, suggesting solutions, showing optimism, attempting to resolve the problem) and destructive behaviors (e.g., criticizing their partner, using a condescending tone, allowing the problem to continue, avoiding the issue). The composite variable for accommodative behaviors was composed of ratings of constructive and destructive behaviors. Positive scores reflected the enactment of more constructive behaviors, and negative scores reflected the enactment of more destructive behaviors.

Primary Results

Descriptive Analyses at the Individual Level

In each interaction, only one person was assigned to initiate the accommodative dilemma topic for discussion, and the other person was allowed to respond. Although both partners participated in each discussion, the measures of emotional and behavioral reactions for each individual were assessed from the discussion in which the individual was the responder (accommodator). A summary of the zero-order correlations between all major variables are shown in [Table 6.1](#). As expected, women's and men's anxiety and avoidance scores were negatively correlated with adaptive emotional responses during the discussions. In other words, more insecurely attached individuals felt greater rejection and less acceptance during their interactions. Women's anxiety and avoidance scores were also negatively associated with observer-rated accommodative behaviors. Specifically, highly anxious and highly avoidant women displayed fewer constructive behaviors, and highly avoidant women displayed more destructive behaviors.

In contrast to the effects for attachment insecurity, women who were more committed to their partners and relationships reported feeling greater acceptance and less rejection during their discussions. Additionally, women's commitment was positively associated with their accommodative behaviors. Because there were nonsignificant correlations between men's commitment and their emotional and behavioral outcomes, differences between the correlations for men's commitment and women's commitment were tested. Compared with men's commitment, women's commitment

Table 6.1 Correlations Among All Major Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Women's anxiety									
Women's avoidance	.38**								
Women's commitment	-.30**	-.50**							
Women's emotional reactions	-.33**	-.31**	.44**						
Women's behavioral reactions	-.24**	-.26**	.41**	.52**					
Men's anxiety	.17	.28*	-.21†	-.06	-.29*				
Men's avoidance	.10	.16	-.14	-.11	.02	.28*			
Men's commitment	-.03	-.03	.22†	.06	.11	-.07	-.44*		
Men's emotional reactions	-.27*	-.31**	.39**	.44**	.48**	-.26*	-.25*	.16	
Men's behavioral reactions	-.20†	-.21†	.45**	.54**	.43**	-.18	-.12	.16	.43**

Note: $N = 74$ women, 74 men.

† $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

was significantly more strongly related to their own emotional experiences during the discussions and with the constructive and destructive behaviors they enacted. Given these gender differences, we model and discuss them in greater detail in the primary analyses.

Correlations between partners (i.e., within couple correlations) showed that women's anxiety and avoidance scores were negatively associated with men's emotional responses during the discussion, and women's relationship commitment scores were positively correlated with men's emotional and behavioral responses. Interestingly, men's anxiety, avoidance, and commitment scores revealed considerably fewer significant associations with women's outcomes. Not surprisingly, however, women's and men's emotional and behavioral responses to the discussion were closely linked.

Primary Analyses at the Dyadic Level

The primary analyses were conducted using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM is appropriate for use when the dyad (the romantic couple) is the unit of analysis and tests are performed between and within dyads (Kashy & Kenny, 2000). The APIM tests not only whether actors' own attributes predict their responses and behaviors, controlling for their partner's attributes, but also whether their partner's attributes predict their responses and behaviors, controlling for their attributes. For example, in the current study, an actor effect for attachment anxiety would be evident if individuals' scores on the anxiety dimension predicted their destructive behaviors, controlling for their partner's level of anxiety. A partner effect would be evident if actors' *partner's* anxiety score predicted their destructive behaviors, controlling for their own level of anxiety.

Au: Kashy and Kenny
2000 not in ref list.

Similar to previous analyses, persons were labeled differently depending on their role in each of the discussions. Specifically, measures from the target person (the individual in the role of responder or accommodator) were coded as "actor" variables, and measures from the other person (the individual in the role of discussion initiator) were coded as "partner" variables. Thus, each couple member was an "actor" in only one discussion. For our analyses, actor anxiety, actor avoidance, partner anxiety, and partner avoidance scores were entered as the first block of predictor variables; actor and partner commitment scores and actor gender were entered in the second block; the two-way interactions between actor anxiety \times actor commitment, actor avoidance \times actor commitment, partner anxiety \times partner commitment, and partner avoidance \times partner commitment were entered in the third block; and actor anxiety \times partner commitment, actor avoidance \times partner commitment, partner anxiety \times actor commitment, and partner avoidance \times actor commitment were entered in the final block.

Attachment by Commitment Effects

As hypothesized, we found significant interactions between partner anxiety and actor commitment predicting both emotional reactions and accommodative behaviors during the discussions. These interactions, which are depicted in **Figures 6.2a and 6.2b**, indicate that people married to less anxious partners revealed no significant difference in their emotional reactions and behavioral accommodation during the discussions, regardless of their degree of commitment to the relationship. These findings suggest that being married to less anxious (or more secure) partners allowed individuals to maintain a more positive set of emotional and behavioral reactions to the discussions, regardless of their own level of commitment.

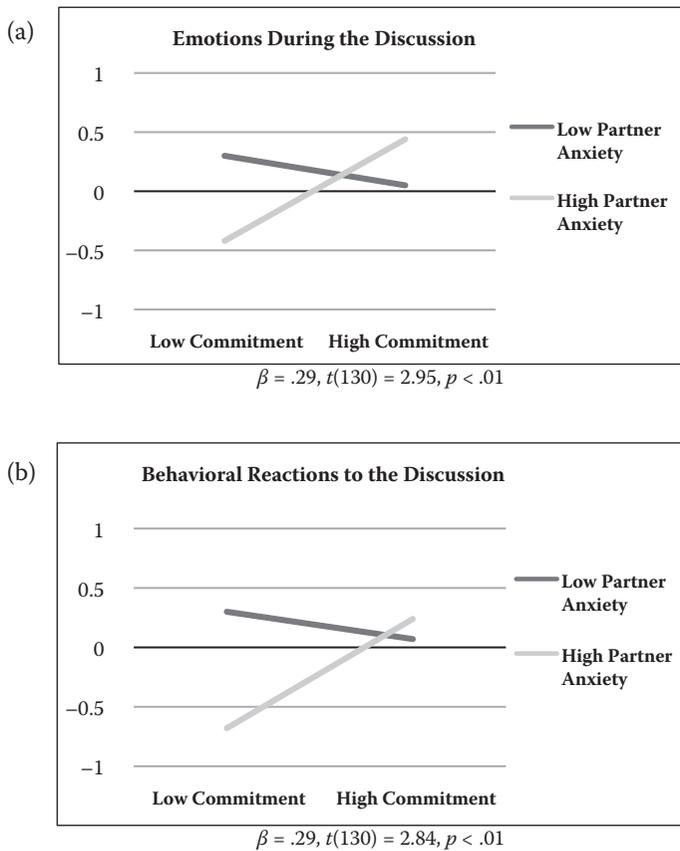


Figure 6.2 (a) The 2-way interaction between actor commitment and partner attachment anxiety predicting emotional reactions to the discussion. (b) The 2-way interaction between actor commitment and partner attachment anxiety predicting behavioral reactions to the discussion. All of the variables are centered. Regression lines are plotted for individuals scoring 1 standard deviation above and below the sample means on anxiety and commitment.

However, individuals who were involved with highly anxious partners experienced more negative emotions and behaved more destructively, but only if they were less committed to the relationship. Being married to a highly anxious spouse likely requires the display of persistent reassurance to calm and abate insecure spouses' worries and insecurities. It may be difficult to engage in and sustain effective reassurance, particularly if one is less committed to the relationship. However, if individuals who are involved with highly anxious partners reported greater relationship commitment, they experience more positive emotions and display more accommodative behaviors during the accommodative discussions. Greater

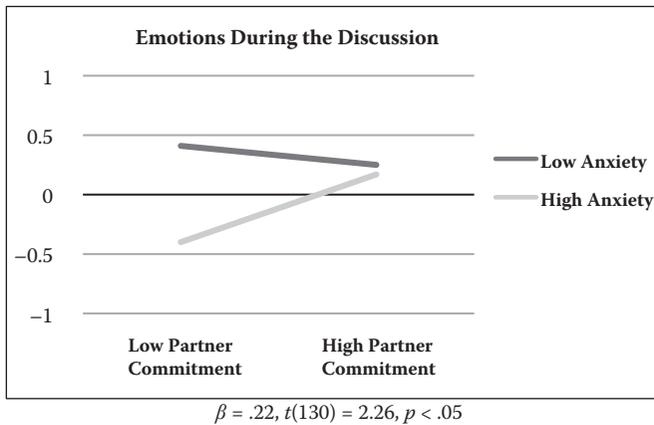


Figure 6.3 The 2-way interaction between actor attachment anxiety and partner commitment predicting emotional reactions to the discussion. All of the variables are centered. Regression lines are plotted for individuals scoring 1 standard deviation above and below the sample means on anxiety and commitment.

commitment, in other words, appears to curtail or cushion the potentially negative emotions and destructive behaviors that can arise when interacting with highly anxious partners in relationship-threatening situations.

Moreover, the inverse relation between *individuals'* attachment anxiety and their emotional reactions during the discussions was moderated by their *partners'* commitment to the relationship. As depicted in **Figure 6.3**, highly anxious individuals reported more negative emotions than their less anxious counterparts did, particularly when their partners reported being less committed to the relationship. In other words, being married to a less committed partner appears to exacerbate feelings of insecurity in highly anxious individuals. If, however, their partners report being more committed, highly anxious individuals report comparatively fewer negative emotions. Greater partner commitment, therefore, seems to diminish highly anxious people's negative reactions during potentially relationship-threatening interactions.

A Process Model for Dyadic Gender Effects

Relative to men, women's commitment was significantly more strongly associated with their emotional responses and with the constructive and destructive behaviors they displayed during the discussions. Given these gender differences, we developed and tested a process model of relations between wives' commitment, husbands' commitment, their respective reports of emotional reactions during their discussion, and their respec-

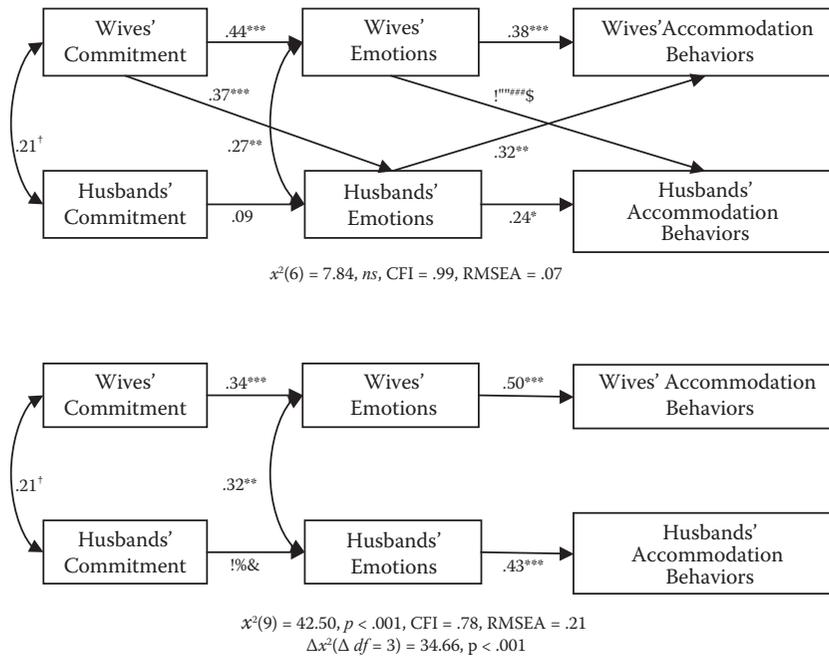


Figure 6.4 (a) The dyadic process model for the mediating role of emotions. (b) The comparison model without the dyadic paths.

tive behavioral reactions during the discussion. As shown in **Figure 6.4a**, this model fit the data reasonably well.

As expected, the link between wives' commitment and their own accommodative behaviors was mediated by their emotional reactions. This outcome supports a core theoretical proposition made by Kelley and Thibaut (1978). Specifically, greater commitment to the relationship was associated with having more positive emotions during a potentially relationship-threatening event, and these positive emotions in turn predicted the enactment of more constructive behaviors. Consistent with the transformation of motivation process model (see **Figure 6.1**), more accommodative behaviors were due at least in part to relationship-enhancing motives (assessed by wives' commitment to the partner or relationship) as mediated through the effective control or suppression of potentially harmful emotional reactions during the accommodative dilemma discussions.

Although husbands' emotional reactions were significantly associated with their accommodative behaviors, husbands' level of commitment was not significantly associated with their emotional reactions during the discussion. Indeed, wives' degree of commitment had a stronger impact

on husbands' emotional reactions than did husbands' own reported levels of commitment. These findings imply that there could be a slight disconnect between men's level of commitment and their expression of commitment. Thus, despite the fact that a man is highly committed to his current relationship, he may not necessarily communicate that devotion to his spouse via his emotions and behaviors. Women, by comparison, may express their thoughts and feelings more openly and more directly. These findings suggest that wives' level of commitment may play a stronger role in determining how their husbands feel and behave during threatening interactions, independent of how committed their husbands report being.

Interestingly, wives' degree of commitment predicted their husbands' emotional reactions during the discussions, and husbands' emotional reactions predicted their wives' discussion behaviors. The association between wives' commitment and their accommodative behaviors, in other words, was partially mediated by their *husbands'* emotional responses during the discussions, highlighting the dynamic interchange between partners. Consistent with these dyadic effects, wives' emotional reactions also predicted their husbands' discussion behaviors. These findings reveal that individuals' behaviors are impacted not only by their own motivational and emotional underpinnings but also by their *partners'* reactions to accommodative dilemmas.

The large correlations between husbands' and wives' emotions and behaviors (r 's range from .54 to .79) indicate that partners' reactions were closely linked. Not only did husbands and wives influence one another's responses; each spouse's own emotional and behavioral reactions had a reciprocal influence as well. Although the transformation of motivation model (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) offers one explanation for the mediating role of emotion regulation in predicting more accommodative behaviors, a second alternative model was tested to examine the mediating role of constructive behaviors on the relation between partners' relationship commitment and their emotional reactions. Similar to the first model, this alternative model (shown in [Figure 6.5a](#)) also revealed an adequate fit to the data, suggesting a mutually influential role between emotional and behavioral responses. Although the present cross sectional study cannot test for a causal relation between these variables, it is clear that there is a strong dyadic link between the way partners feel and the way they behave in their relationships. Framed another way, the control and suppression of potentially harmful emotional responses from one or both partners most likely led to more accommodating behaviors; conversely, more constructive behaviors displayed by one or both partners most likely produced more positive emotional responses.

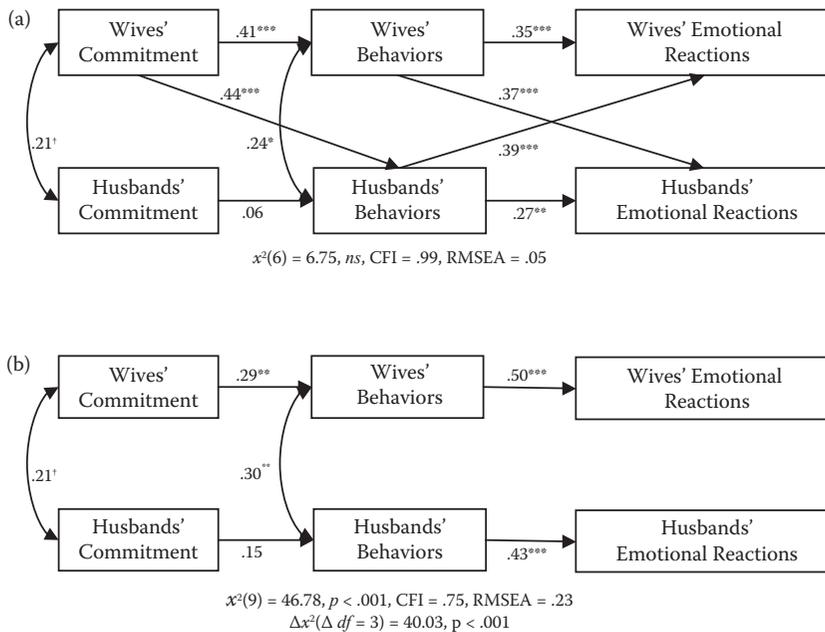


Figure 6.5 (a) The dyadic process model for the mediating role of behaviors. (b) The comparison model without the dyadic paths.

Finally, we tested a set of comparison models that excluded the dyadic paths between wives and husbands. As shown in Figures 6.4b and 6.5b, the comparison models fit the data less adequately than did the models that included the dyadic paths. These results attest to the importance of modeling *both* partners when examining relationship dynamics. After all, relationship outcomes depend on the interaction *between* the partners rather than the thoughts and feelings harbored by merely one partner.

Implications

The findings of this study are novel by revealing how certain individual characteristics (e.g., attachment orientations) intersect with important features of a specific relationship (e.g., commitment) to jointly affect how romantic partners feel and behave during an accommodative dilemma discussion. By examining actual relationship dynamics as they unfold between marital partners during a potentially relationship-threatening interaction, we were able to model how individuals' feelings and behaviors were tied to those of their spouse. As expected, we found that more

insecurely attached individuals felt greater rejection and less acceptance from their partners during these discussions. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Gaines et al., 1997; Simpson et al., 1996), such persons also displayed fewer constructive and more destructive behaviors. However, individuals' feelings of insecurity appeared to be diminished by their partners' relatively greater commitment to the relationship. Highly anxious individuals' chronic fears of abandonment and their hypervigilance to signs of imminent rejection make them feel particularly vulnerable in relationship-threatening situations. However, when their partners consistently show signs of commitment and motivation to sustain the relationship, these fears seem to be quelled and quieted, resulting in reduced feelings of insecurity and enhanced positive emotions.

Not surprisingly, lower levels of partner commitment merely exacerbated the insecurities harbored by highly anxious individuals. Less committed individuals who were married to highly anxious partners, for instance, felt more negative emotions and behaved more destructively during the accommodative dilemma discussions. In other words, the specific combination of lower self-commitment and higher partner anxiety culminated in the most negative outcomes. Fortunately, greater self-commitment buffered many of the deleterious effects normally associated with greater attachment anxiety in partners. More committed individuals, for example, experienced more positive emotions during the discussions and in turn behaved more constructively, despite having highly anxious partners. Thus, if individuals are involved with highly anxious partners, it is important that they create and sustain higher levels of commitment and then directly express their heightened commitment to counteract the negative effects of their partners' attachment insecurity.

The results also confirmed that both wives' and husbands' emotions and behaviors during the discussion exerted a significant impact on the other's emotional and behavioral responses during the discussion. This reciprocal influence indicates why studying only one partner in a relationship provides insufficient data and information. The current findings make even more sense when one recognizes that the *partner's* reactions to major relationship events often may be the best barometer of how well the relationship is doing (Attridge et al., 1995). Indeed, the effect of the *partners'* responses on each individual's own responses testifies to the importance of dyadic influences in regulating emotional and behavioral experiences in partners.

Although longitudinal effects could not be examined in the current study, the constructs that we examined appeared to have a reciprocal affect on another. As this research highlights, higher levels of relationship commitment were conveyed through more positive emotional reactions during potentially relationship-threatening interactions. These emotions, in

turn, predicted the enactment of more constructive as well as less destructive behaviors in both the self and the partner. This pattern of findings attests to the importance of emotion regulation in promoting and perhaps enabling constructive accommodation behaviors. Inversely, the present research also shows that constructive behaviors mediated the link between relationship commitment and emotional responses. Thus, being motivated to sustain the relationship led to greater accommodative behaviors, which then led to more positive emotional responses in both the self and partner. Over time one may begin to see the reciprocal influence of emotional and behavioral reactions even more clearly as the motivation to sustain or improve the relationship establishes a new interaction trajectory that gradually generates enhanced positivity.

Greater commitment may sustain “vulnerable” relationships sufficiently long enough for partners to develop a sense of greater trust in one another, allowing attachment insecurities to gradually wane. Declines in attachment insecurity may then shift how highly anxious individuals react when compromises must be forged with their partners, ultimately resulting in more positive emotional and behavioral reactions. Highly committed individuals, in other words, may diminish their partners’ degree of insecurity over time by consistently providing a “secure base,” especially in situations where the partners’ outcomes are not correspondent (Simpson, 2007). Conversely, highly anxious individuals who begin to feel more secure in their relationship may learn to accept their partners’ support and affection fully, coming to believe that they are worthy of love. These feelings of enhanced security may then launch greater commitment.

The current research highlights how individuals’ mental representations (working models) presumably forged in earlier relationships operate in conjunction with proximal qualities of interdependence between partners that exists in current relationships. As this research shows, being highly anxious or being involved with a highly anxious partner may initially impede one’s inclination to react constructively to relationship-threatening events. Greater relationship commitment from oneself or one’s partner, however, functions as a buffer against the potential negative effects of attachment insecurity, diminishing feelings of rejection, enhancing feelings of acceptance, and promoting more constructive accommodative behaviors. The motivation to preserve and stabilize relationships, therefore, can at times override the maladaptive working models and coping strategies harbored by insecure people.

Conclusion

This research showcases the need and value of adopting a dyadic perspective to the study of relationships. Previous investigations of attachment

and interdependence phenomena have all too often studied individuals in relationships rather than *partners* in relationships. Studies that focus solely on individuals cannot measure and model the ways partners jointly impact one another. As this research documents, greater commitment on the part of at least one partner buffers the other partner's attachment insecurity. Moreover, each partner's emotional and behavioral reactions also have clear effects on the other's outcomes. The characteristics of *both* partners, therefore, are essential to examining, modeling, and fully understanding relationship phenomena.

The research reviewed in this chapter underscores the need to understand characteristics that exist *within* individuals as well as emergent properties that exist *between* partners if one wants to fully comprehend relationship dynamics. To return to our hypothetical couple, one might anticipate that Tom is likely to have less satisfying and less stable romantic relationships in light of his prior history of attachment insecurity. Sarah's commitment and devotion to Tom, however, ought to quell the potentially negative effects of Tom's working models and attenuate the link between his negative working models and his negative emotional and behavioral reactions when the two disagree or do not see eye to eye. Negative relationship histories can and often do hinder an individual's ability to cope effectively with relationship-threatening events. However, commitment—particularly the *partner's* level of commitment—can offset negative outcomes by curtailing the tendency of insecurely attached people to react negatively and by promoting more constructive responses. Despite their negative relationship histories, individuals who are strongly motivated to overcome their vulnerabilities may be able to realign relationship dynamics to enhance adaptive functioning and eventually attain positive outcomes.

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