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Buffering Attachment-Related Avoidance: Softening Emotional and Behavioral Defenses During Conflict Discussions

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This study examined whether partners can soften the defenses associated with attachment-related avoidance. Heterosexual couples ($N = 180$) were video-recorded having 2 discussions in which 1 partner (the agent of influence) wanted the other partner (the target of influence) to change in some way. After rating how successful the discussion was in producing change, agents and targets reviewed their discussions. At the end of every 30 s of the interaction, they reported how angry they were during that portion of the discussion. For each 30-s interval, objective coders rated the extent to which targets of influence exhibited withdrawal and agents of influence (partners) softened their influence by being sensitive to targets' autonomy needs and by conveying that targets were valued. As predicted, avoidant targets showed greater anger and withdrawal when they were the target of their partner's influence, and these defensive reactions were associated with less successful discussions. However, analyzing within-person changes in emotions and behavior across the discussion revealed that avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal were attenuated at points during the discussion when their *partners* exhibited higher levels of softening communication. Between-person analyses comparing average levels of anger and partner softening across dyads also revealed that avoidant targets whose *partners* engaged in more softening experienced less anger and, in turn, couples' discussions were more successful. These results highlight the importance of dyadic processes in understanding the impact of attachment insecurity on relationships, and indicate that partners *can* buffer avoidant defenses by down-regulating anger and circumventing withdrawal during conflict discussions.

Keywords: attachment-related avoidance, relationship conflict, influence, anger, withdrawal

It is well established that attachment-related avoidance is detrimental to the functioning of adult romantic relationships. Attachment-related avoidance is characterized by a deep-seated distrust of others and entrenched beliefs that partners cannot be depended on in times of need (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). As a result, avoidantly attached individuals defensively suppress their attachment needs, avoid emotional closeness, and become rigidly self-reliant (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). These defenses, in turn, often lead avoidant individuals to become angry or cold when their autonomy is threatened, such as when they or their partners need support (Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) or when they encounter relationship conflict (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). The autonomy-protecting strategies enacted by avoidant people may further damage their relationships. Accordingly, greater attachment-related avoidance predicts reductions in both partners' satisfaction across time (Tan, Overall, & Taylor, 2012) and greater likelihood of relationship dissolution (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010).

Prior adult attachment research has almost exclusively examined how attachment-related avoidance produces maladaptive relationship cognitions and behaviors. Recent research, however, indicates that important dyadic processes may protect relationships from the harmful effects of avoidance. Examining caregiving behaviors, Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, and Oriña (2007) found that avoidant intimates were more calmed when their partners delivered instrumental caregiving rather than more threatening forms of emotional support during conflictual interactions. More recently, Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, and Collins (2011) found that the increased probability of dissolution associated with being insecurely attached as a young child was reduced if the

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partners of insecure intimates showed better recovery immediately following relationship conflict discussions.

In the present research, we extend these investigations by examining whether partners can actually soften the emotional and behavioral defenses associated with attachment-related avoidance during conflict discussions in which avoidant intimates are the *target* of their partner's influence—a context that should be particularly threatening to the strong need to sustain autonomy and independence that defines avoidant people. We expected that avoidant intimates would respond to their partner's influence attempts with anger and withdrawal, thereby impeding successful conflict resolution. However, using a unique design to model how the partner's behavior altered the avoidant target's emotions and behavior, we tested whether partners could *buffer* these defenses by displaying "softening" communications.

Attachment Insecurity and Defensive Reactions to Threat

A massive body of research has examined how individual differences in attachment security shape reactions to threat, distress, or challenge in adult romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Optimal regulation of threats to felt-security occur when people are high in attachment *security* and trust that their attachment figures will be responsive and supportive, particularly in times of need (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Secure individuals directly seek help and support when they feel vulnerable (e.g., Simpson et al., 1992) and use constructive, problem-focused strategies to reestablish intimacy and emotional connections, even when their partner is the source of threat, such as during heated relationship conflicts (Simpson et al., 1996).

Two forms of attachment *insecurity* are associated with poorer emotion regulation and more destructive behavioral reactions in threatening contexts. Individuals who are high in attachment anxiety desire closeness and acceptance, but fear that close others will eventually hurt, reject, or abandon them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Anxious individuals are hypervigilant about the availability of their partners and are very sensitive to potential rejection, resulting in pronounced and prolonged distress during relationship conflicts (Simpson et al., 1996) or when their partners fail to provide sufficient support (Rholes et al., 1999). In these situations, anxiously attached individuals often lash out at their partner with high levels of anger and hostility (Simpson et al., 1996).

In contrast, individuals who are high in attachment-related avoidance believe they cannot trust and depend on others and, as a result, they suppress attachment needs and become rigidly self-reliant (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Avoidant individuals, for example, limit emotional closeness and intimacy (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997; Tan et al., 2012; Tidwell, Reis, & Shaver, 1996), and they often refuse to seek support when it might be beneficial (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson et al., 1992). These distancing strategies allow avoidant individuals to maintain a sense of autonomy and personal control.

Research detailing the destructive effects of attachment insecurity is extensive. Much less is known about the factors that can *protect* individuals and relationships from the damaging behaviors arising from attachment insecurity. A few recent studies, however, indicate that partners play a key role in bolstering felt security and containing the damage. When committed individuals behave in a more accommodating way during conflict discussions (Tran & Simpson, 2009) or hide their negative feelings and emphasize the positive regard they have for their romantic partners (Lemay & Dudley, 2011), anxious intimates experience greater felt-acceptance and security. Frequent or satisfying sex also attenuates the typical associations between attachment insecurity and lower marital satisfaction, in part because sex bolsters the perceived emotional availability of the partner (Little, McNulty, & Russell, 2010). Most recently, Salvatore et al. (2011) found that people who were insecure as young children tend to have more stable romantic relationships over time if their adult romantic partners disengage and recover from conflicts more quickly.

Extending these investigations, in the present study we examine whether partners can soften the emotional and behavioral defenses associated with attachment-related avoidance during observed conflict discussions. We focus on attachment-related avoidance for two primary reasons. First, a larger body of research has investigated the impact of attachment anxiety and related dispositions, such as rejection-sensitivity and low self-esteem, than has examined attachment-related avoidance. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that defensive suppression and distancing tactics associated with attachment-related avoidance are more difficult to detect and therefore produce null or muted patterns, particularly when global self-report methods are used. The methods used in the present study limit recall and reporting biases. More importantly, the distancing strategies and lack of motivation to maintain relationships characteristic of avoidance indicate that avoidant individuals' *partners* need to play a significant "buffering role" to sustain these relationships.

Attachment-Related Avoidance and Resistance to Partner's Influence

Our investigation centers on an interpersonal context that should be particularly relevant to the concerns and fears associated with attachment-related avoidance—conflict discussions with romantic partners in which avoidant intimates are the *target* of their partner's influence attempts. Desiring and attempting to change the partner's attitudes and behavior is a central element of people's efforts to resolve most conflicts (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). Moreover, the way in which intimates react when they are the target of their partner's influence powerfully shapes the outcomes of conflict. For example, when targets are responsive to their partner's desires and influence attempts, problems should and do tend to improve over time and both couple members become more satisfied (Overall et al., 2006, 2009). In contrast, resistance to change by targets undermines immediate conflict resolution and predicts less improvement over time (Overall et al., 2006, 2009; Overall, Sibley, & Tan, 2011). Greater anger, defensiveness, and withdrawal by the person who is targeted for change also forecasts declines in relationship satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman, 1998; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Thus, conflict resolution and subsequent relationship success are strongly influenced by the resistance versus responsiveness of the *target* of influence.

Being the target of a partner's influence attempts should be especially threatening to highly avoidant individuals, who strive to achieve and sustain autonomy and independence. The defensive strategies that define avoidance often co-occur in caregiving (e.g.,

Rholes et al., 1999; Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002) and self-disclosure contexts (e.g., Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, & Frazier, 2011; Tan et al., 2012). In these contexts, partners seek closeness or responsiveness, which encroaches on avoidant intimates' strong desire for autonomy and independence. Greater avoidance is also associated with more negative reactions during conflict discussions (Creasey, 2002; Gouin et al., 2009; Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 2003; Simpson et al., 1996). As noted above, conflict inherently entails influence attempts, and avoidant individuals are less satisfied and behave less constructively when their partners try to influence their thoughts and feelings (Overall & Sibley, 2009). In sum, being the target of influence should activate the defenses of highly avoidant people and trigger resistance, which should be evident in heightened anger and greater withdrawal.

Attachment-Related Avoidance and Anger

People typically experience anger when an important goal has been blocked or when they experience an unjustified offense (Keltner & Lerner, 2010). Being the target of influence directly impinges on avoidant individuals' autonomy goals, and avoidant targets should be more likely to perceive this encroachment as unwarranted, maliciously motivated, and intentional. For example, avoidant individuals are more likely to attribute hostile intent and responsibility to their partners in anger-eliciting scenarios that involve interruptions of their goal-directed behavior (Mikulincer, 1998; also see Collins, 1996). Converting relationship-related distress to anger by blaming the partner and construing her/his motives as underhanded allows avoidant intimates to re-establish a sense of control and independence.

Prior research has found no associations between attachment-related avoidance and self-reported anger in anger-eliciting contexts or conflict discussions (Mikulincer, 1998; Simpson et al., 1996). However, greater attachment-related avoidance has been linked to higher observer-ratings of anger in contexts in which attachment figures are directly impinging on an avoidant individual's autonomy, such as when distressed partners need support (Rholes et al., 1999) or during mother–teenager conflict interactions (a situation in which avoidant teenagers are likely to be, or perceive themselves to be, the target of strong influence attempts; Kobak et al., 1993). Likewise, during conflict discussions in which individuals are targeted for change by their romantic partners, we expect that avoidant intimates will experience greater anger, resisting their partner's influence attempts in an effort to maintain autonomy and control.

Attachment-Related Avoidance and Withdrawal

Being targeted for change should also trigger distancing strategies in avoidant people. Avoidant individuals cope with threats and negative affect by suppressing their attachment concerns and needs and by creating emotional and psychological distance in order to reestablish independence and control (Mikulincer, 1998). One relevant and particularly destructive distancing strategy is withdrawal, which includes avoiding discussing the problem, refusing to acknowledge the issue or dismissing its importance or relevance, disengaging from the partner, and withdrawing from the discussion (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1995, Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Gottman, 1998). Although withdrawal should help avoidant intimates restore feelings of control, it undermines intimacy and leaves the partner with fewer options to improve the relationship. Accordingly, withdrawal has negative concurrent and longitudinal associations with relationship quality (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1995, 1993; Gottman, 1998).

Although no prior research has shown links between attachment-related avoidance and withdrawal in video-recorded conflict discussions, avoidance has been tied to greater observer-rated negativity using combined behavioral indices that include withdrawal and disengagement (Creasey, 2002; Gouin et al., 2009; Roisman et al., 2007; Simpson et al., 1996). Self-report studies also indicate that avoidance is associated with greater use of distancing tactics to escape from difficult situations (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Mikulincer, 1998). Behavioral indicators of withdrawal, such as looking away, being distracted, and physically disengaging, have also been witnessed when avoidant individuals separate from their partners at airports (Fraley & Shaver, 1998).

In sum, we predicted that avoidant targets would experience greater anger and exhibit more withdrawal during conflict discussions in which their partner was targeting them for change. Because defensiveness on the part of the target of influence is detrimental to problem resolution, we also expected that these defensive reactions would lead couples' discussions to be less successful in producing desired improvement. However, guided by recent work on the importance of dyadic processes in understanding attachment dynamics (Overall & Simpson, 2013), we also tested whether the *partners* of avoidant targets play an important role in curbing avoidant defenses and their detrimental effects on discussion success.

The Role of the Partner in Softening Avoidant Anger and Withdrawal

Partners' reactions can exacerbate or minimize the harmful effects of destructive conflict behavior. Reciprocating hostility and negativity compounds the damage, whereas accommodating hurtful acts by reacting in a calm, forgiving, and supportive manner can contain negativity and actually improve conditions (Gottman, 1998; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Accommodative attempts to de-escalate conflict involve trying to repair or down-regulate the target's anger and defensiveness (Gottman, 1994; Overall & Simpson, 2013), which can improve feelings of acceptance and regard (Overall & Sibley, 2008; Tran & Simpson, 2009) and reduce target resistance and hostility (Heavey et al., 1993; Overall et al., 2009, 2011).

Such repair efforts by the partner should be particularly important for managing relationships with avoidant intimates. Because avoidant individuals cope with negative affect by suppressing their emotions and attachment needs, they may never learn how to regulate their distress constructively. Avoidance is linked to increased physiological reactivity in conflict-relevant situations, such as increased heart rate (Mikulincer, 1998), higher cortisol levels (Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006), and elevated inflammatory responses (Gouin et al., 2009). This heightened reactivity does not dissipate even when avoidant individuals

consciously attempt to suppress their negative emotions (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2006). As a result, disengagement and withdrawal from conflict discussions may be the only way that many avoidant targets can alleviate their anger and distress without having their partners help them down-regulate their reactivity.

Moreover, because avoidant individuals are not as concerned with sustaining a close emotional connection with their partners, they have less motivation to overcome their initial anger and impulses to withdraw (Rusbult et al., 1991; Simpson, 1990). Instead, avoidant intimates tend to express any anger they feel overtly, and then indulge their urge to disengage by reducing warmth and closeness (Overall & Sibley, 2009; Rholes et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 1996). During conflict, and particularly when partners desire change, resistance and distancing strategies should make it difficult for the partners of avoidant intimates to improve their relationship. Thus, finding a way around avoidant defenses is crucial for the partners of avoidant intimates if they want to develop and maintain successful relationships.

A recent study highlights the importance of the partner in protecting the relationship from the destructive conflict reactions associated with attachment insecurity. Salvatore et al. (2011) examined conflict recovery during a 4-min "cool down" task that immediately followed adult romantic couples' discussions of a major relationship problem. Better conflict recovery was evident when partners focused on the positive aspects of their relationships and were responsive to each other's repair attempts. Attachment insecurity (primarily avoidance) assessed during infancy, approximately 19 years earlier, predicted poorer conflict recovery, and insecure individuals whose partners could not "move beyond conflict" were less likely to be together 2 years later. In contrast, insecure participants involved with partners who exhibited better conflict recovery were more likely to still be together 2 years later.

What we do not yet know is whether and how partners can down-regulate avoidant defenses as conflict interactions progress, with the result of producing more successful conflict discussions. Other research examining caregiving behaviors provides clues about the types of behavior that might soothe avoidant intimates. Simpson et al. (2007) assessed the degree to which individuals were visibly calmed (as rated by observers) by different types of support at moments during problem-solving discussions when individuals were most visibly upset. Avoidant individuals were rated as more calmed when their partners delivered instrumental support, such as concrete advice or suggestions, but were not calmed by emotional reassurance, which should be threatening to the needs of avoidant individuals to maintain independence and control. Consistent with the premise that avoidant intimates need help to regulate distress, Simpson et al. (1992) also found that, although avoidant women sought less support when they were upset, they were visibly more calmed than secure women when their partners made more supportive, and even emotionally reassuring, comments.

Viewed together, these two studies indicate that partners can help to down-regulate avoidant individuals' negative affect when partners (a) communicate clear, unambiguous support that counteracts avoidant intimates' negative caregiving expectations, and (b) deliver supportive communications in ways that are sensitive to the autonomy needs of avoidant individuals. In the present research, we assessed the degree to which partners' softening communications shaped the ongoing emotional and behavioral reactions of avoidant targets during couples' conflict interactions. Guided by the theory and research described above, we pinpointed a class of behaviors that should be sensitive to the needs and underlying negative expectations of avoidant intimates, which included "softening" influence attempts by (1) being sensitive to the autonomy needs and reactivity of avoidant targets, and (2) offering clear evidence that avoidant targets were still valued, even though their partners were requesting change. Specific softening tactics include downplaying problem severity, validating the target's point of view, recognizing positive aspects of the target, and acknowledging progress made by the target. These behaviors should soften the blow of influence attempts and reduce targets' reactance (Overall et al., 2009, 2011). Other softening tactics include inhibiting hurt reactions to convey regard and maintain positivity with affection or affiliative humor, which should also reduce the harshness of influence attempts and minimize tension in the discussion. Consistent with the soothing role of support shown by Simpson et al. (1992, 2007), these types of softening behaviors should ameliorate the defenses of avoidant targets because they are less direct, not autonomy-threatening, and contradict the hostile intentions that avoidant individuals' often attribute to their partners.

To test whether partners' softening communications alleviated defensive reactions, we assessed targets' emotional (anger) and behavioral (withdrawal) reactance along with partners' softening attempts at multiple time-points during their conflict discussions. This unique design allowed us to directly test whether partners' softening attempts were successful in alleviating avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal when these defenses occurred during each discussion. We predicted that when partners enacted more softening communication, this would reduce the defensive anger and withdrawal that we predicted would be enacted by highly avoidant targets. We also predicted that partners who engaged in more softening communication when attempting to influence highly avoidant targets would have more success in resolving the problem and producing the intended change.

Overview of Study and Predictions

Our procedures are outlined in Figure 1. After assessing attachment-related avoidance, we video-recorded 180 heterosexual couples discussing relationship problems in which one partner (the agent of influence) desired a change in the other partner (the target of influence). We focused on how attachment-related avoidance shaped the reactions of the person being targeted for change because (1) problem resolution and discussion success is powerfully affected by the reactions of the target of influence, and (2) being targeted for change challenges autonomy and independence and, therefore, should produce greater anger and withdrawal in avoidant intimates.

Immediately following each discussion, both couple members reported how successful the discussion was at resolving the problem and producing intended change (see the final outcome in Figure 1). To assess anger during the discussion, both couple members then reviewed their video-recorded discussions and reported the degree to which they experienced anger during each 30-s interval across the entire discussion (see the middle box in Figure 1). Following this, trained coders reviewed the discussions and rated each target's amount of withdrawal within each 30-s

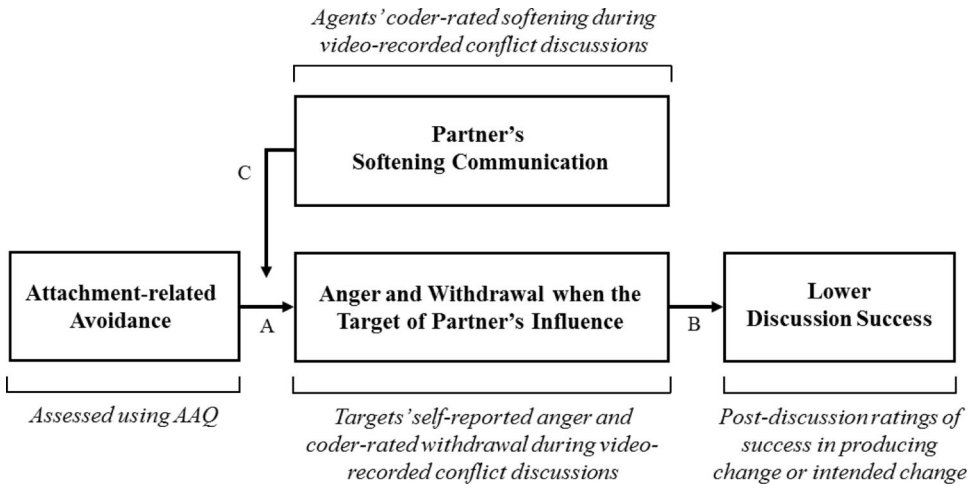

Figure 1. The predicted reactions associated with attachment-related avoidance when targeted for change by his/her partner, and the moderating role of the partner's softening communication. AAQ = Adult Attachment Questionnaire.

interval. As shown in Figure 1 (Path A), we predicted that, compared to targets low in attachment-related avoidance, highly avoidant targets would experience greater anger when targeted for change and would display more withdrawal. We also predicted that the greater anger and withdrawal enacted by avoidant targets would be associated with less successful discussions (see Figure 1, Path B).

Our major aim was to test whether partners who softened their influence attempts were able to ameliorate or counteract the defenses of avoidant targets (see Path C, Figure 1). To assess partner softening, for each 30-s segment of each discussion, trained coders rated the degree to which partners softened their communication by being sensitive to avoidant targets' autonomy and demonstrating regard, which included downplaying problem severity, validating the target's point of view, minimizing conflict with affiliative humor, and inhibiting negative reactions. We predicted that the more partners engaged in softening communications, the less avoidant intimates would be angry and the less they would withdraw. We also predicted that if partners' softening communications buffered avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal, this would predict more successful discussions.

Our unique design also allowed us to test the buffering role of partner softening at both the within-person and the between-person levels. First, because we assessed both targets' anger and withdrawal and partners' softening at each 30-s interval across each conflict discussion, we could examine whether *within-person* fluctuations in targets' anger and withdrawal across the discussion were associated with varying levels of partners' softening behavior. This novel approach tests whether avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal were attenuated at points during the discussion when partners exhibited more softening. Second, we averaged the multiple ratings of anger, withdrawal, and softening across each discussion to test our predictions at the *between-person* level. This approach tests whether avoidant targets are less angry and withdrawn when they have partners who exhibit more softening compared to avoidant targets whose partners display less softening. Because discussion success was measured at a single time-point post-discussion, the between-person analyses also allowed us to test whether targets' anger and withdrawal, and any beneficial between-person differences associated with partner softening, predicted more successful discussions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 180 heterosexual couples who responded to paper and electronic announcements posted across a New Zealand university campus and at associated student-based organizations (e.g., employment agencies and health centers). Couples had to be involved for at least 1 year. Sixty-one percent of the couples were living together or married, and the mean relationship length was 2.95 years (SD = 2.26). Participants ranged from 18 to 45 years of age (M = 23.07, SD = 4.18). Couples were paid NZ$70 for the 3-hr session described below.

Procedure

Participants first completed scales assessing relationship quality and attachment security. Next, they identified and ranked (in order of importance) three aspects of their *partner* they wanted improved, which would then be discussed with their partner. The most important ranked feature was selected for the discussion. Participants then rated the severity of the issues to be discussed, and engaged in three video-recorded discussions. To relax participants and familiarize them with the discussion format, couples first discussed events they had experienced during the past week (excluding the discussion topics of the study). Participants were encouraged to talk and interact as they normally would, and were left alone to discuss the topic for 5 min. Following the warm-up discussion, couples had two 7-min discussions regarding the attribute that each partner had identified they would like changed in some way. In one discussion, the male was the agent targeting his female partner for change; in the other, the female was the agent

and the male was the target. Discussion order was counterbalanced across couples. Couples understood that the aim of the discussions was to help resolve the issue, and to facilitate the discussion, agents were asked to consider why they wanted change and how the targeted attribute could be changed. Prior to each discussion, the experimenter emphasized that the couple should talk about the issue as they normally would and reassured them of the confidentiality of their data. Immediately following each discussion, partners independently rated how successful the discussion was.[1]

After completing both discussions, partners were led to separate rooms where each individual reviewed the discussions and reported his/her feelings of anger at specified time-points during each discussion. This review procedure provides a sensitive measure of participants' subjectively experienced emotions during their discussions (Welsh & Dickson, 2005). Participants reviewed their discussions in the order in which the discussions occurred. For each discussion, participants stopped the video-recording 14 times (every 30 s) and rated how angry and frustrated they felt during that 30-s portion of the discussion.

Measures

Relationship quality. The Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) assessed relationship quality. Items tapping satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, love, and romance (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"; where 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *extremely*) were averaged to provide an overall index of relationship quality (α = .82 and .83 for women and men, respectively).

Attachment security. We measured attachment security with the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson et al., 1996). Participants completed eight items with reference to their romantic relationships in general to assess attachment-related avoidance (e.g., "I'm not very comfortable having to depend on romantic partners") and nine items to assess attachment anxiety (e.g., "I often worry that my romantic partners don't really love me"; 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*). Items were keyed so that higher scores represented greater attachment insecurity, and were averaged to index attachment-related avoidance (α = .77 and .74 for women and men) and anxiety (α = .84 and .78). As is typical using this measure, avoidance and anxiety were positively correlated (r = .35 and .32, $p < .05$, for women and men). Because the primary goals of the current research centered on attachment-related avoidance, and given the complexity of the analyses reported below, the analyses modeled avoidance only. We briefly report analyses involving attachment anxiety in the section on alternative explanations.

Problem severity. Prior to the discussions, both couple members rated three items that measured problem severity, including the degree to which (a) the topic/issue to be discussed was a serious problem in the relationship (1 = *not at all serious*, 7 = *extremely serious*), (b) the agent desired change in the targeted feature (1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*), and (c) it was important to the agent that the targeted feature was changed (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *extremely important*). These three ratings were averaged to create separate ratings of problem severity for targets and agents (α range = .73–.83).

Discussion success. Immediately following each discussion, agents and targets (worded to their perspective) independently rated the success of the discussion (1 = *not at all successful*, 7 = *extremely successful*), including (a) how successful the discussion was, and (b) how successful the agent was in bringing about change (or the intention to change) in the issue that was discussed. The two success ratings were averaged (rs = .78–.83) to assess targets' and agents' perceptions of success in producing change or intention to change.

Assessing anger during the discussion. During the video-review procedure, both agents and targets reported their feelings of anger during the discussion. For each 30-s segment of the discussion, participants rated the degree to which they felt "angry" and "frustrated" during that 30-s segment of the discussion. The two items were highly correlated (average r = .74) and thus were combined to index participants' anger at each time segment. For analyses focusing on within-person changes in anger, we used the multiple ratings of anger for each person. For between-person analyses focusing on average levels of anger across the discussion, we used an across-discussion index of anger based on averaging the multiple ratings for each participant over the 14 discussion segments (average α = .97).

Coding Procedure

Six trained coders, all of whom were blind to all other data and hypotheses, independently rated the extent to which targets' exhibited withdrawal and agents' exhibited softening. The specific behaviors capturing each communication category were selected for their consistency across major coding systems designed to assess conflict behavior (Heyman, 2001; Weiss & Heyman, 2004) and for having been shown to predict important relationship outcomes, such as problem resolution and relationship quality (e.g., Gottman, 1998; Heavey et al., 1993; Heyman, 2001; Overall et al., 2009). Ratings of *withdrawal* were based on behaviors assumed to deactivate attachment concerns and fulfill autonomy needs by avoiding discussing the problem, refusing to acknowledge the issue or dismissing its importance, disengaging from the partner, and/or withdrawing from the conversation.

Ratings of *softening* also captured a range of behaviors. Guided by research illustrating the benefits of caregiving behaviors for avoidant intimates (Simpson et al., 2002, 2007), two overarching principles defined softening: communication that (1) was sensitive to the autonomy needs and reactivity of avoidant targets, and (2) clearly conveyed that targets were valued by their partners. Specific verbal and nonverbal tactics capturing these principles included (a) downplaying problem severity, dissatisfaction, or neg-

[1] Our procedures and instructions are similar to those used in hundreds of observational studies that generate behavior that is (a) similar to that observed within the home, (b) rated as realistic and typical by couples who have participated in research, (c) relatively stable across time, (d) associated with key relationship and personal outcomes over time, and (e) related to core constructs in theoretically relevant ways (Gottman, 1998; Heyman, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The topics chosen reflected ongoing issues in relationships; all couples had discussed their topic before, and most had discussed it a great deal (average mean 5.5 out of 7.0). Participants also rated the discussions as realistic and as reflecting how they normally discuss the chosen issue (average mean 5.4 out of 7.0). Additional analyses also revealed that discussion realism did not alter any of the effects reported.

ative affect; (b) acknowledging the target's efforts to change or his/her past improvements; (c) highlighting other positive aspects of the partner or relationship; (d) validating the target and his/her point of view; (e) inhibiting negative reactions to the problem or the target's destructive responses; (f) minimizing the harshness of influence attempts with positive affect and affiliative humor; (g) communicating caring, acceptance, and regard; and (h) showing optimism regarding the problem or the relationship.

Coders were given detailed descriptions of the behaviors and tactics associated with withdrawal and softening, and then globally rated the presence of target withdrawal and partner softening for each 30-s segment of the discussion. Coders were instructed to take into account the frequency, intensity, and duration of the specific behaviors associated with each strategy (1–2 = *low*, 3–5 = *moderate*, 6–7 = *high*). We gathered global ratings to capture the range of possible tactics because withdrawal and softening involve clusters of interrelated behaviors; individuals may not exhibit all of the tactics associated with each category or employ associated behaviors to the same degree. Accordingly, ratings of withdrawal and softening captured a general communicative approach or style that could involve a range of behaviors that reflected the essence of each strategy. Partners in this sample exhibited all of the behavioral tactics listed above, but they varied in the specific configurations of tactics displayed.

The behaviors exhibited by targets and agents were coded in separate viewings. For half the discussions, the targeted partner was coded first; for the other half, the agent was coded first. Two to four coders rated each participant, and ratings were then averaged across coders to index the amount of target withdrawal (*intraclass correlation coefficient* [*ICC*] = .87) and partner softening (*ICC* = .86) in each segment. For analyses focusing on within-person changes across the discussion, we modeled the multiple ratings of withdrawal and softening. For between-person analyses, we used an across-discussion index of withdrawal and softening based on averaging the multiple ratings for each person across the 14 segments (α = .93–.95 for women and men).

Targeted features. Two independent coders also categorized the issue/feature targeted in each discussion (95% agreement). Just over half comprised interpersonal qualities, such as commitment, trust, and intimacy (17%), being understanding and equitable (18%), and reacting in certain ways during times of stress or conflict (17%). Self-esteem, mood, and confidence (15%), bad habits and health behaviors (11%), and motivation and finances (7%) were also commonly targeted. Less common issues involved autonomy and independence (6%), family (3%), religion (1%), and other idiosyncratic difficulties (5%). These issues are representative of the problems couples commonly face (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997).

Results

Our analytic strategy was guided by our theoretical focus as depicted in Figure 1. We predicted that highly avoidant individuals would exhibit greater anger and withdrawal when targeted for change by their partners (Path A), and these defensive reactions would be associated with lower discussion success (Path B), but would be attenuated when partners, as agents of change, softened their influence attempts (Path C). Thus, we structured our analyses around predicting the emotions and behaviors of targets of change, using the label "target" to signify this role. We designated the agent as the partner, using the term "partner" when modeling agents' softening communications and perceived discussion success.

Targets' Avoidance, Anger, and Withdrawal, and Discussion Success

We first examined our core predictions that targets who scored higher in avoidance would exhibit greater anger and withdrawal compared to targets who scored lower in avoidance (see Figure 1, Path A), and that couples with targets higher in avoidance would, in turn, experience lower discussion success (Path B). These predictions involve between-person differences. Thus, analyses examined average levels of anger and withdrawal across each discussion. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics. On average, attachment-related avoidance and targets' anger and withdrawal

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

Measure	Women		Men		Gender difference *t*
	M (*SD*)	Range	*M* (*SD*)	Range	
Attachment-related avoidance	2.94 (1.00)	1.13–5.88	2.72 (0.95)	1.00–5.25	2.05*
Relationship quality	6.05 (0.68)	3.43–7.00	6.09 (0.64)	3.86–7.00	−0.89
Problem severity					
Targets' perceptions of severity	5.60 (1.09)	2.00–7.00	5.66 (0.98)	2.00–7.00	−0.61
Partners' perceptions of severity	5.52 (1.10)	1.00–7.00	4.98 (1.33)	1.00–7.00	4.81*
Anger and behavior during the discussion					
Targets' anger	2.02 (1.31)	1.00–6.14	1.81 (1.13)	1.00–5.54	1.90*
Targets' withdrawal	1.52 (0.61)	1.00–5.26	1.92 (0.82)	1.00–5.26	−5.84*
Partners' anger	2.25 (1.46)	1.00–6.64	1.74 (0.97)	1.00–5.18	4.51*
Partners' softening	2.53 (0.82)	1.00–4.36	2.61 (0.85)	1.00–4.86	−1.24
Discussion success					
Targets' perceptions of success	4.79 (1.52)	1.00–7.00	4.79 (1.41)	1.00–7.00	0.02
Partners' perceptions of success	4.57 (1.48)	1.00–7.00	4.61 (1.48)	1.00–7.00	−0.28

Note. Anger and behavior during the discussion represent averages across the 14 ratings for each discussion.
* $p < .05$.

were relatively low, and most couples perceived their discussions to be relatively successful in producing change. Nevertheless, the range and standard deviations of all variables revealed substantial variation.

To test the direct associations between all target and partner variables, we conducted standard Actor Partner Independence Model (APIM) analyses using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 19 to account for the statistical dependence in the data across dyad members (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). All predictor variables were grand-mean centered. We pooled the effects across men and women, but included the main and interaction effects for gender in all analyses. Women reported greater anger and men exhibited greater withdrawal (see Table 1), but there were very few significant gender differences in the associations among variables. Thus, we present the effects pooled across gender except in the rare instances in which significant gender differences emerged, in which case we present the coefficients separately for men and women. The results are shown in Table 2.

Tests of our predictions regarding the links between avoidance, targets' reactions, and discussion success are shown in column 1 of Table 2. Targets' who were higher in attachment-related avoidance experienced greater anger ($B = .23$, $p < .01$), exhibited greater withdrawal ($B = .09$, $p < .05$), and reported lower discussion success ($B = –.22$, $p < .01$). Targets' avoidance, however, was not directly associated with their partners' rating of discussion success ($B = –.03$, $p = .66$), perhaps because, as we predicted, the degree to which avoidance undermined discussion success depended on how partners responded to avoidant defenses. Nonetheless, consistent with the paths shown in Figure 1, greater anger and withdrawal by targets was negatively associated with both targets' and partners' lower discussion success ($B = –.24$ to $–.35$, $p < .01$; see Table 2, columns 7 and 8). Thus, we next tested whether targets' avoidance contributed to lower discussion success (as perceived by both partners) via avoidant targets' greater anger and withdrawal. To do this, we used procedures recommended by MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, and Lockwood (2007) to compute asymmetric confidence intervals for the indirect effects linking attachment-related avoidance, targets' reactions, and discussion success (as depicted in Figure 1, Path A and Path B). The results, including estimates of the effect sizes for Paths A and B, are presented in Table 3 (for further examples of this approach, see McNulty & Russell, 2010; O'Mara, McNulty, & Karney, 2011).

The first row in Table 3 presents the effects for the pathway between targets' avoidance, targets' anger, and targets' (left half) and partners' (right half) perceptions of discussion success. Greater attachment-related avoidance predicted greater anger (see Figure 1, Path A). Controlling for targets' avoidance, greater target anger, in turn, predicted lower discussion success reported by both partners (Path B, controlling for Path A). Significant indirect effects were indicated by the 95% confidence interval, which did not include zero, and supported the interpretation that the greater anger experienced by targets higher in avoidance undermined discussion success. When examining targets' withdrawal (second row of Table 3), Paths A and B were significant, but the indirect effects were smaller and only marginally significant (the 90% confidence interval did not include zero). Altogether, these results provide support for our predictions that targets who are higher in attachment-related avoidance react with greater resistance and defensiveness when targeted for change, and these reactions impede discussion success (although the results were stronger for targets' anger than for withdrawal).

Partners' Softening of Avoidant Defenses: Within-Person Analyses

Our next set of analyses tested whether partners were able to soothe avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal through the use of softening communications (see Figure 1, Path C). We first tested

Table 2
Unstandardized Coefficients From Actor Partner Independence Model Analyses Testing Associations Among Target and Partner Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Targets' avoidance	—										
2. Partners' avoidance	−.06	—									
3. Targets' RQ	−.49*	−.15*	—								
4. Partners' RQ	−.15*	−.49*	.48*	—							
Problem severity											
5. Targets' perceptions	.00	−.01	−.03	−.03	—						
6. Partners' perceptions	.12*	.05	−.05	−.12*	.39*	—					
Anger and behavior											
7. Targets' anger	.23*	−.01	.50*	.30*	.10	.16*	—				
8. Targets' withdrawal	.09*	−.04	−.06	.06	−.05	.01	−.02	—			
9. Partners' anger	.01	.16*	−.30*	−.47*	.09	.20*	.52*$_W$ .91*$_M$	−.02$_W$ .30*$_M$	—		
10. Partners' softening	.05	−.06	.15*	.25*	−.01	−.15*	−.21*	.15*	−.20*	—	
Discussion success											
11. Targets' perceptions	−.22*	.05	.60*	.06	.05	−.13*	−.35*	−.27*	−.21*	.30*	—
12. Partners' perceptions	−.03	−.02	.18	.38*	−.10	.06$_W$ −.20*$_M$	−.24*	−.30*	−.32*	.39*	.46*

Note. Associations calculated with anger and behavior during the discussion were conducted with anger and behavior averaged across the 14 time-points in the discussion. Coefficients are pooled across women and men except when significant gender differences emerged, in which case the effects are reported separately (noted with subscripts *W* and *M*, respectively). RQ = relationship quality.
* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Direct and Indirect Effects Between Attachment-Related Avoidance, Targets' Anger and Withdrawal, and Discussion Success

	Avoidance → Anger/ withdrawal		Anger/withdrawal → Targets' perceived success?				Anger/withdrawal → Agents' perceived success?			
	Path A		Path B (controlling Path A)		Indirect effects on targets' perceived success		Path B (controlling Path A)		Indirect effects on agents' perceived success	
Targets' reaction	*B*	*r*	*B*	*r*	*B*	95% CI	*B*	*r*	*B*	95% CI
Targets' anger	.23	.20**	−.33	.28**	−.08	−.13, −.03	−.25	.20**	−.06	−.11, −.02
Targets' withdrawal	.09	.13*	−.23	.12*	−.02	−.05, .00	−.30	.15*	−.03	−.06, −.00

Note. There were no significant gender differences so the coefficients represent effects pooled across men and women. Coefficients for Path B control for Path A associations. Effect sizes were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/t^2 + df)}$. CI = confidence interval.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

this prediction by analyzing the repeated measures of targets' anger and withdrawal and partners' softening at each 30-s interval to determine whether partners' softening was associated with *within-person* changes in anger and withdrawal across the discussions. These analyses uniquely examine how targets' emotions and behaviors change across a discussion as a function of their partners' softening responses.

Partners' softening and targets' anger. Applying multilevel modeling methods for analyzing repeated measures data within dyads (Kenny et al., 2006), we tested whether partners' softening buffered avoidant targets' anger using the following model:

$$\text{Target Anger}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{target anger at } i-1) + \beta_{2j}(\text{target avoidance}) + \beta_{3j}(\text{partners softening at } i) + \beta_{4j}(\text{target avoidnace} \times \text{partner softening at } i) + v_{0j} + u_{ij}. \quad (1)$$

In this equation, the anger of target *j* at a particular point during the discussion (*i*) is a function of target *j*'s (1) intercept (β_0), representing the target's average level of anger across the discussion; (2) anger in the 30-s segment prior to that point in the discussion (β_{1j}), so that any significant effect represents residual change in anger; (3) the target's attachment-related avoidance (β_{2j}); (4) the partner's softening communication during that segment of the discussion (β_{3j}); and (5) the interaction between the target's attachment-related avoidance and their partner's softening (β_{4j}). All Level 1 predictors (targets' prior anger and partners' softening) were person-centered, and attachment-related avoidance was grand-mean centered.

Analyses were conducted using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 19. Accounting for the dependence in the data across dyad members, we estimated all parameters pooled across men and women, but allowed the error variances to differ for men and women (see Kenny et al., 2006). We also included the main effect of gender and the interactions between gender and all variables in Equation 1 to test for gender differences. None of the parameters significantly differed between men and women. Finally, we allowed the intercept and partners' softening to vary by male and female targets for each dyad (i.e., to be random variables).

The focal fixed effects are presented in the top left half of Table 4. Attachment-related avoidance was associated with greater anger, and partners' softening communications were associated with lower anger. The interaction term, indicating whether partners' softening allayed the defenses of avoidant targets, was also significant. This interaction is shown in Figure 2, which plots within-person changes in anger according to whether targets were low (−1 *SD*) or high (+1 *SD*) in attachment-related avoidance and

Table 4
The Effects of Attachment-Related Avoidance and Partners' Softening Communication on Targets' Anger and Withdrawal

Attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening	Within-person analyses				Between-person analyses			
	B	*SE*	*t*	*r*	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*r*
Predicting targets' anger								
Avoidance	.23	.06	3.65**	.20	.21	.06	3.54**	.19
Partners' softening	−.05	.01	−3.35**	.29	$.63_W$	.10	6.08**	.42
					$-.34_M$	.09	−3.68**	.27
Avoidance × Partners' Softening	−.03	.02	−2.09*	.14	−.22	.06	−3.17**	.17
Predicting targets' withdrawal								
Avoidance	.08	.04	2.10*	.12	.09	.04	2.25*	.13
Partners' softening	−.03	.01	−2.06*	.17	.03	.05	0.73	.01
Avoidance × Partners' Softening	−.04	.02	−2.42*	.14	.01	.05	0.19	.04

Note. Only the focal fixed effects are shown to simplify the presentation across the different analyses. Effects were pooled across men and women except when significant differences emerged, in which case the effects are reported separately for women and men noted with subscripts *W* and *M*, respectively. Effect sizes were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/t^2 + df)}$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

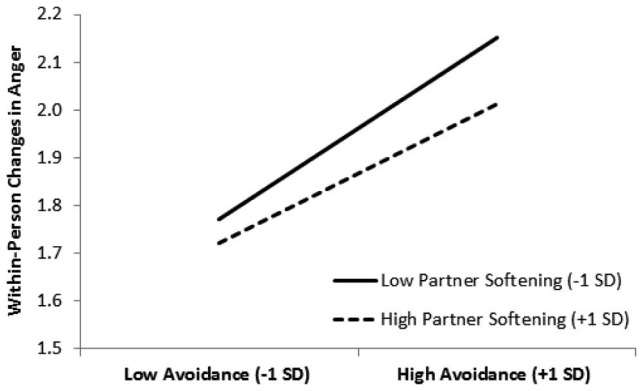

Figure 2. Within-person changes in anger as a function of targets' attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening communication.

whether their partners provided low (−1 *SD*) or high (+1 *SD*) levels of softening. Compared to targets who were low in avoidance, targets high in avoidance reported greater anger, regardless of whether their partners engaged in high (*slope* = 0.20, *SE* = 0.06, $t = 3.20$, $p < .01$) or low (*slope* = 0.26, *SE* = 0.07, $t = 3.88$, $p < .01$) levels of softening. Nonetheless, highly avoidant targets' anger was reduced when their partners delivered higher levels of softening (see the right half of Figure 2; *slope* = −0.07, *SE* = 0.02, $t = -3.89$, $p < .01$), whereas partners' softening was not significantly associated with the anger of targets who were low in avoidance (see the left side of Figure 2; *slope* = −0.02, *SE* = 0.02, $t = -1.41$, $p = .16$). These results indicate that avoidant targets' anger was attenuated during moments in the discussion when their partners softened their influence attempts.

Partners' softening and targets' withdrawal. We next tested whether partners' softening buffered avoidant targets' withdrawal during the discussions. Behavioral ratings of a single discussion segment are constrained by the partner's behavior (such as the degree to which each partner talked during that segment), so we tested the behavioral consequences of partners' softening by examining whether softening was related to lower withdrawal during the next discussion segment. We modeled the degree to which (a) targets' avoidance, (b) partners' softening communications in segment *i*, and (c) the interaction between targets' avoidance and partners' softening predicted targets' levels of withdrawal during the next 30-s segment of the discussion ($i + 1$), controlling for targets' withdrawal in segment *i*. All main and interaction effects of gender were modeled, the Level 1 predictors were person-centered, and the intercept and partner softening were modeled as random variables.

The fixed effects are shown in the bottom left half of Table 4. Partners' softening was associated with lower target withdrawal, and the interaction between targets' avoidance and partners' softening was also significant. As shown in Figure 3, avoidant targets exhibited greater withdrawal at points during the discussion when their partners' softening was low (*slope* = 0.12, *SE* = 0.04, $t = 2.76$, $p < .01$), but not at points when their partners' softening was high (*slope* = 0.04, *SE* = 0.04, $t = 1.07$, $p = .29$). Thus, for highly avoidant targets (see the right side of Figure 3), partners' softening predicted significant reductions in the degree to which targets withdrew from the discussion (*slope* = −0.06, *SE* = 0.02, $t = -3.05$, $p < .01$), whereas softening communication was not associated with the low levels of withdrawal exhibited by less avoidant targets across the discussion (see the left side of Figure 3; *slope* = −0.01, *SE* = 0.02, $t = -0.18$, $p = .86$). These results indicate that when partners increased their softening attempts during the discussion, this alleviated avoidant targets' withdrawal and coaxed them back into the discussion.

Partners' Softening of Avoidant Defenses: Between-Person Analyses

Next, we tested our buffering predictions at the between-person level by analyzing anger, withdrawal, and softening averaged across each discussion. The within-person analyses compared emotions and behavior within targets across discussion segments as a function of their partners' softening. These between-person analyses test whether the between-person differences in average levels of anger and withdrawal across low versus high avoidant targets (shown in Tables 2 and 3) are attenuated when their partners exhibit more softening than other partners do. Thus, in these analyses, the benchmark for testing the effectiveness of partners' softening is the anger and withdrawal displayed by avoidant targets involved with partners who did not deliver softening across the discussion. An across-dyad comparison provides additional information regarding whether relationships can be protected from avoidant defenses. Accordingly, we also tested whether softening, or any associated buffering effects, predicted greater discussion success, which was assessed at a single timepoint post-discussion and could be analyzed only at the between-person level.

Partners' softening and targets' anger. We adopted a standard APIM approach (Kenny et al., 2006) in which targets' anger averaged across the discussion was predicted by (a) targets' avoidance, (b) partners' softening averaged across the discussion, and (c) the interaction between targets' avoidance and average levels of partners' softening. As before, all main and interaction effects of gender were modeled. We report the pooled effects except when there were significant differences between men and women (noted in Table 4).

The results appear in the top right of Table 4. As already demonstrated, higher avoidance was associated with greater anger.

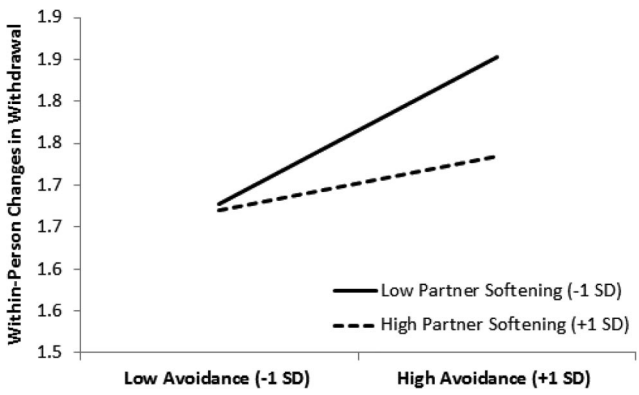

Figure 3. Within-person changes in targets' withdrawal as a function of targets' attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening communication.

Targets whose partners exhibited greater softening (relative to other partners in the sample) experienced less anger, particularly when targets were women. The interaction between targets' avoidance and partners' softening was also significant. As shown in Figure 4, when partners' softening was relatively low, higher avoidance was associated with greater anger (*slope* = 0.40, *SE* = 0.08, $t = 4.78$, $p < .01$), but when partners' softening was high, avoidant targets did not experience greater anger than targets low in attachment avoidance (*slope* = 0.03, *SE* = 0.08, $t = 0.31$, $p = .76$). Thus, even though partner softening was related to lower anger for targets who were low in avoidance (see the left side of Figure 4; *slope* = –0.27, *SE* = 0.09, $t = -2.78$, $p < .01$), high levels of partner softening had a stronger buffering effect for targets high in avoidance (see the right side of Figure 4; *slope* = –0.70, *SE* = 0.10, $t = -7.01$, $p < .01$). These analyses indicate that avoidant targets experienced average levels of anger comparable to targets low in avoidance when they had partners who displayed high levels of softening compared to other partners.

Partners' softening and targets' withdrawal. We ran analogous analyses testing whether higher partner softening was associated with lower average levels of withdrawal. As shown in the bottom right of Table 4, comparing across targets, partners' softening was not related to average levels of withdrawal, and the interaction between partners' softening and targets' avoidance was not significant. Thus, although the within-person analyses indicated that avoidant targets' responded to their partners' softening in the discussion with lower withdrawal, the between-person analyses suggest that highly avoidant targets continued to show higher levels of withdrawal, on average, even when their partners were engaging in higher levels of softening relative to other partners in the sample.

Partners' softening and discussion success. We next tested whether partners' softening predicted greater success in resolving the issue and/or producing intention to change. We also calculated indirect effects to test whether partners' softening contributed to discussion success via the buffering effect that partners' softening had on average levels of anger. Using the APIM approach described previously, we first ran analyses regressing targets' perceptions of success on (a) targets' attachment-related avoidance, (b) partners' average levels of softening communication, and (c) the interaction between these two variables. The effects, pooled across men and women, are reported in the top of Table 5, except when there were significant gender differences (which are noted in Table 5). As noted previously, avoidant targets reported that their discussions were less successful. However, partners' softening was associated with greater discussion success, and the interaction between avoidance and partners' softening was marginally significant ($p = .06$), but only for women. As shown in Figure 5, when partners displayed low average levels of softening communication, highly avoidant female targets rated their discussions as less successful than did targets low in avoidance (*slope* = –0.39, *SE* = 0.14, $t = -2.78$, $p < .01$). However, when partners displayed high levels of softening relative to the sample, the negative association between avoidance and discussion success was eliminated (*slope* = –0.01, *SE* = 0.15, $t = -0.60$, $p = .95$). Consistent with the buffering effects shown in Figures 2–4, avoidant female targets perceived that their discussions were more successful when they had partners who engaged in greater softening (right side of Figure 5; *slope* = 0.57, *SE* = 0.17, $t = 3.29$, $p < .01$), whereas low avoidant targets perceived high discussion success, regardless of whether partners' softening was high or low (left side of Figure 5; *slope* = 0.12, *SE* = 0.17, $t = 0.70$, $p = .49$).

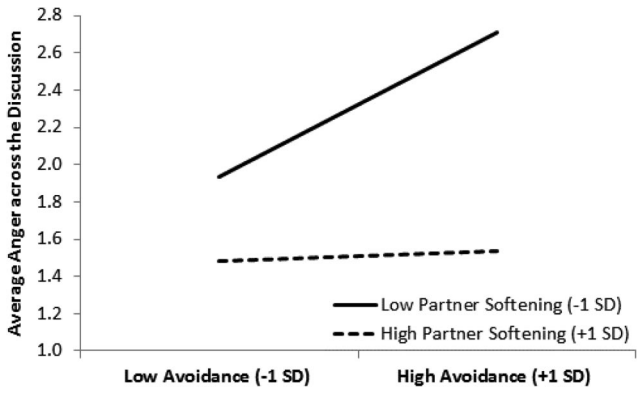

Figure 4. Between-person differences in targets' average levels of anger as a function of targets' attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening communication.

Adopting the procedures of MacKinnon et al. (2007), we also tested whether partners' softening contributed to greater discussion success for female avoidant targets (see Figure 5) via the buffering effect that partners' softening had on average levels of anger (see Figure 4). Once the interactive effects of partners' softening and targets' avoidance on anger were controlled, the direct effect of the interaction between partners' softening and avoidance on female avoidant targets' perceived success was reduced ($B = .17$, *SE* = .12, $t = 1.49$), and the associated indirect effect was significant ($B = .09$, 95% CI [.03, .17]). This pattern suggests that partners' softening was linked with avoidant targets' reports of greater discussion success, at least in part because avoidant targets experienced less anger when they had partners who exhibited more softening communication.

We next ran analogous analyses predicting the *partners'* perceptions of success. The results are shown in the bottom of Table 5, and reveal a similar pattern that did not differ by gender. Although attachment-related avoidance was not associated with partners' perceptions of discussion success at the mean level (as discussed previously), the degree to which partners perceived the discussion to be successful depended on both the targets' level of avoidance and their partners' average level of softening (the significant interaction). As shown in Figure 6, when partners displayed relatively low softening communication, targets' avoidance was linked with lower discussion success (*slope* = –0.20, *SE* = 0.10, $t = -1.85$, $p = .07$), but when partners engaged in relatively high levels of softening, this negative effect was eliminated (*slope* = 0.17, *SE* = 0.11, $t = 1.53$, $p = .13$). Thus, when examining differences across avoidant targets whose partners delivered low versus high softening, greater partner softening predicted greater success (and vice versa; *slope* = 0.62, *SE* = 0.13, $t = 4.65$, $p < .01$), whereas partner softening was not associated with significant improvements in the high levels of success witnessed when targets were low in avoidance (*slope* = 0.18, *SE* = 0.13, $t = 1.45$, $p = .15$). Finally, when controlling for the buffering effect on partners' anger, this interaction effect remained significant ($B = .17$, $r = .11$, $p < .01$), and the associated indirect effect

Table 5
The Effects of Attachment-Related Avoidance and Partners' Softening Communication on Discussion Success

Attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening	Between-person analyses			
	B	*SE*	*t*	*r*
Predicting targets' perceived discussion success				
Avoidance	−.20	.07	−2.72**	.15
Partners' softening	.28	.09	3.09**	.16
Avoidance × Partners' Softening	$.23_W$	.12	1.87†	.14
	$-.11_M$	.13	−0.84	.06
Predicting partners' perceived discussion success				
Avoidance	−.02	.07	−0.09	.01
Partners' softening	.40	.09	4.27**	.23
Avoidance × Partners' Softening	.22	.09	2.41*	.13

Note. Effects were pooled across men and women except when significant differences emerged, in which case the effects are reported separately for women and men noted with subscripts *W* and *M*, respectively. Effect sizes were estimated using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/t^2 + df)}$.
† $p = .06$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

involving the links between partners' softening and discussion success via targets' anger was only marginally significant ($B = .04$, 94% CI [.01, .08]). These results suggest that the positive impact that partners' softening appeared to have on discussion success when targets were high in avoidance was only partly due to avoidant targets experiencing less overall anger when they had partners who enacted more softening.

Alternative Explanations and Additional Analyses

We next examined whether, instead of partners' softening reducing avoidant targets' defenses, avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal shaped their partners' softening. Given the defenses they might typically encounter, the partners of avoidant targets might be particularly responsive when avoidant targets exhibit lower levels of anger and withdrawal. Alternatively, the associations shown in Figures 2–4 could arise because when avoidant targets express anger and withdrawal, their partners inhibit positive, softening communications. We tested these alternative explanations by examining whether within-person changes in partners' softening were predicted by avoidant targets' anger or withdrawal, and whether these links were moderated by targets' avoidance (analogous to the within-person analyses modeling changes in anger or withdrawal as a function of partners' softening). Greater anger by targets was related to reduced partner softening ($B = –.05$, $t = –2.79$, $p < .05$), but this effect was not stronger or weaker for avoidant targets ($B = .01$, $t = 0.43$, $p = .67$). Targets' withdrawal was not associated with changes in their partners' softening ($B = .03$, $t = 1.32$, $p = .19$), and this null effect was also not moderated by targets' avoidance ($B = .01$, $t = 0.53$, $p = .60$). These analyses provide little evidence of a reverse process. Although greater anger by targets predicted lower partner softening, when partners did respond with softening communications, this was accompanied by reductions in avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal.

We also wanted to rule out the possibility that avoidant defenses were triggered when the partner was angry and hostile rather than being ameliorated by softening communications. As shown in Table 1, greater partner anger was associated with greater target anger and (for male targets) greater withdrawal, as well as lower partner softening and discussion success. Thus, the buffering effects of softening might reflect lower partner anger and associated behavioral expressions rather than the *presence* of more softening.

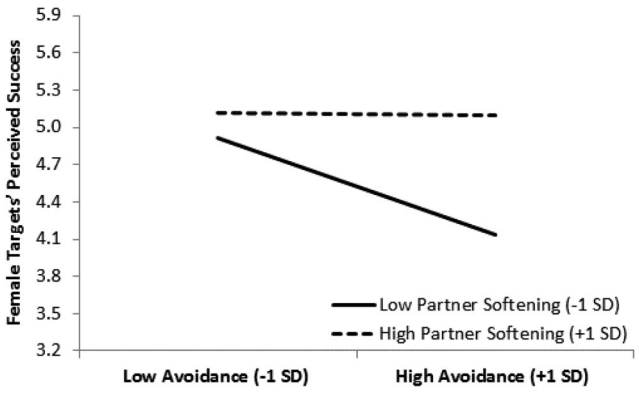

Figure 5. Women's perceptions of discussion success when targeted for change as a function of targets' attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening communication.

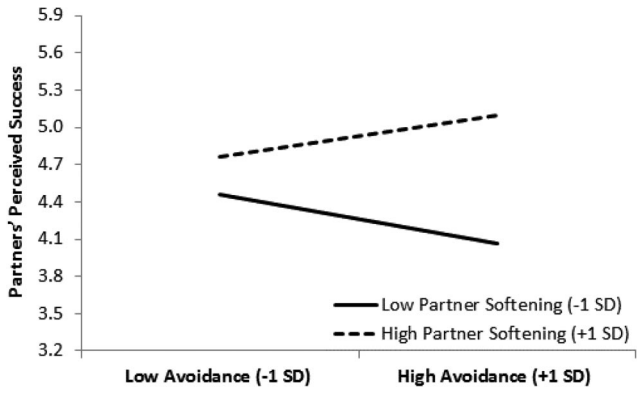

Figure 6. Partners' perceptions of discussion success as a function of targets' attachment-related avoidance and partners' softening communication.

However, the effects of partners' anger were *not* more pronounced for highly avoidant targets (testing the opposite of the buffering shown in Figures 2–6). Moreover, controlling for partners' anger and the associated interaction terms did *not* alter the buffering effects of partners' softening.

We also wanted to ensure that the results were not due to relationship quality. As shown in Table 1, greater target avoidance was associated with lower relationship quality, and lower relationship quality was associated with greater target anger, lower partner softening, and lower discussion success. However, targets' or partners' relationship quality did not significantly interact with targets' avoidance to predict targets' reactions, partners' softening, or discussion success, and the significant effects displayed in Tables 2–5 did not change when controlling for the main and interaction effects of targets' or partners' relationship evaluations.

Higher target avoidance was also associated with greater problem severity rated by the partner, perhaps because avoidant targets are so resistant to change (see Table 1). Greater problem severity was also associated with greater anger in both partners and less softening. However, controlling for problem severity did *not* alter any of the primary effects shown in Tables 2–5. In the case of discussion success, when controlling for partner-rated problem severity, which constrained discussion success (see Table 1), the interaction effect predicting targets' perceptions of success became somewhat stronger ($B = .25$, $t = 1.97$, $p = .05$).

We also explored whether the partners' avoidance influenced how effectively partners buffered avoidant targets' destructive reactions. Higher partner avoidance was associated with greater partner anger, but it was *not* associated with either partner softening or target anger and withdrawal (see Table 1). Additional analyses also revealed that the effect of partner softening on avoidant targets' defenses did *not* depend on the partners' attachment avoidance scores. Thus, targets' avoidance had a greater impact on the nature of the discussion than did their partners' attachment security, which is consistent with the major role that target reactions assume in conflict resolution (see Overall & Simpson, 2013).

Finally, we ran additional analyses to ensure the results were not attributable to attachment anxiety. Targets' anxiety was associated with greater anger ($B = .23$, $p < .05$), but not withdrawal ($B = -.03$, *ns*). When controlling for anxiety, the direct and indirect effects reported in Table 3, which illustrate the defenses of avoidant targets, remained significant and, in the case of withdrawal, became even stronger. We also ran within-person and between-person analyses to assess whether partner softening buffered anxious targets' anger as softening did with avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal. Partners' softening did *not* alleviate anxious targets' anger in any of the analyses. Accordingly, controlling for attachment anxiety did not substantively alter the buffering effects of partner softening on avoidant targets' defenses reported in the primary analyses.

Discussion

This study examined how attachment-related avoidance shapes emotional and behavioral reactions when individuals are being targeted for influence during relationship conflict discussions, and whether partners can buffer the defenses of highly avoidant intimates by softening their influence attempts. Romantic couples were video-recorded discussing relationship problems identified by one partner (the agent of influence) who desired changes in the other partner (the target of influence). Self-reported anger and observer-rated withdrawal were assessed multiple times during each discussion, and both partners then reported how successful the discussion was in resolving the problem and producing desired change. As predicted, highly avoidant individuals resisted their partner, as evident by greater anger and withdrawal, and these defensive reactions predicted less success in resolving or producing changes in the targeted problem.

Modeling dyadic processes, however, revealed that some partners were able to soothe the heightened anger and withdrawal of avoidant targets by using "softening" communications. Partners' softening involved being sensitive to the targets' autonomy needs and conveying positive regard, such as downplaying the severity of the problem, validating the target's point of view, acknowledging the target's efforts and positive qualities, inhibiting negativity, and reducing tension via affiliative humor. Analyses of within-person changes in emotions and behavior across each discussion revealed that avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal were attenuated at points during the discussion when coders rated their partners as displaying more softening communication. Between-person analyses also indicated that partners' softening protected relationships from the defensive reactions of avoidant intimates. Compared to avoidant targets whose partners displayed less softening, avoidant targets whose partners displayed more softening experienced less anger and, in turn, their discussions were more successful at producing change.

These results advance our understanding of attachment processes in several significant ways. We identified a context that has important implications for relationship success, but also activates the attachment concerns and defensive strategies of highly avoidant people. The pattern of results that emerged highlights that avoidant intimates' resistance to their partners' influence attempts is a critical factor underpinning the difficulties that attachment-related avoidance presents in romantic relationships. By assessing *both* partners' emotions and behaviors at *multiple intervals* across conflict discussions, we also identified how partners can circumvent avoidant intimates' defensive reactions as they unfold during conflict interactions. The results also suggest that partners who try to soothe avoidant intimates' emotional and behavioral resistance can produce relationship benefits, such as more success at resolving relationship problems and beginning to change problematic partner traits or behaviors. We elaborate on the important implications of our results below.

Avoidance, Defensive Reactions to Influence Attempts, and Relationship Functioning

A large body of research has documented the destructive effects of attachment insecurity on relationship functioning. The defensive desire for independence that is characteristic of attachment-related avoidance breeds lower trust and commitment (e.g., Simpson, 1990), less responsiveness to partners' needs and desires (e.g., Rholes et al., 1999; Shallcross et al., 2011), and more emotional distancing during both routine (e.g., Tan et al., 2012; Tidwell et al., 1996) and threatening (e.g., Kobak et al., 1993; Simpson et al., 1992, 1996) relationship interactions. No prior research, however, has documented how avoidant intimates respond to the influence

attempts of their partners or how avoidant intimates' emotional (anger) and behavioral (withdrawal) defenses impede problem-solving discussions.

The effective management of conflict is critical to relationship success (Gottman, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and problem resolution often hinges on whether intimates who are targeted for change are open and responsive to their partner's influence attempts (Overall et al., 2006, 2009, 2011; Overall & Simpson, 2013). However, being targeted for change challenges the autonomy and independence that avoidant individuals cherish and are motivated to protect. Because of this, avoidant targets in our study displayed greater anger and withdrawal, and these defensive reactions impeded problem resolution. These reactions can take a real toll on relationships. When targeted partners become defensive and withdraw, this damages relationships over time (Heavey et al., 1995, 1993; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1991) because more defensive targets tend to change less and relationship problems persist or become more serious (Overall et al., 2006, 2009, 2011). Thus, defensive resistance to a partner's influence attempts when dealing with important relationship problems may be a primary reason why attachment-related avoidance threatens relationship stability and undermines satisfaction, especially the satisfaction of the partners of highly avoidant people.

Understanding why avoidant intimates react with anger and withdrawal in this context also helps to isolate how these defenses might be buffered or circumvented. Anger and other defensive reactions tend to quell feelings of rejection and restore personal control by reducing how much one's partner can continue to hurt oneself (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Williams, 2007). Withdrawal also helps to reestablish and communicate autonomy and control, which undercuts the power of the partner to influence or harm the self. Moreover, shutting down and disengaging is the principal way in which avoidant intimates regulate their negative, aversive affect and arousal (Simpson & Rholes, 1994, 2012). As a result, these automatic coping strategies protect avoidant intimates from feelings of vulnerability and dependence. If partners can provide a safe environment that is sensitive to the autonomy needs of highly avoidant people and clearly disconfirms their negative expectations, this should reduce the need for being defensive and draw many avoidant intimates back into the relationship.

Softening Avoidant Defenses and Improving the Relationship

Our results indicate that partners who are more responsive to targets' autonomy needs and reactivity, and who soften their influence attempts, can effectively down-regulate avoidant targets' anger and disengagement during conflict. Softening behaviors involve reducing direct influence attempts that "challenge" targets by downplaying problem severity, acknowledging positive aspects of the target, validating the target's point of view, and tempering friction by inhibiting negativity or expressing positive affect. This type of communication limits and repairs negativity by demonstrating positive regard and trustworthiness, and it minimizes reactance on the part of targets by indirectly and subtly conveying the partner's desire for change (Gottman, 1994; Overall et al., 2009; Rusbult et al., 1991; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Softening communications should be particularly effective at alleviating avoidant defenses because they are less confrontational and less autonomy-threatening, and they contradict the hostile intentions that avoidant individuals often anticipate from their partners.

We found strong evidence that partners' softening buffered avoidant defenses in both within-person and between-person levels of analysis. The within-person analyses are provocative because they demonstrated that avoidant intimates' anger and withdrawal were reduced when their partners' exhibited softening behaviors at points when defensiveness occurred during conflict interactions. The between-person analyses are also informative regarding whether couples involving highly avoidant intimates fare better when partners display more softening behavior. Avoidant targets generally experienced greater anger across the discussions than did targets low in avoidance, but this between-person difference was eliminated when avoidant targets had partners who engaged in more softening behaviors. These couples also had more successful discussions compared to couples comprising highly avoidant targets and partners who engaged in lower levels of softening. These latter results confirm that partner buffering can lead to more positive relationship outcomes.

In contrast, there was little evidence that partner softening had an ameliorating effect on targets who were lower in attachment-related avoidance. One possible explanation is that targets low in avoidance exhibited such low levels of withdrawal and anger that any subsequent reductions were inevitably minimal. However, the levels of anger and withdrawal displayed by low avoidant targets were above minimum (see Figures 2–4), and additional analyses revealed that lower avoidance was *not* associated with less within-person variation in anger and withdrawal across each discussion. Thus, there was sufficient "room" for partner softening to reduce low avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal. Instead, the different impact of softening for high versus low avoidant targets probably arises from their different needs and expectations. Low avoidant individuals trust that their partners will respond with love and support in difficult situations, so they approach challenging interactions with more positive expectations and pro-relationship motives (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Harboring confidence that their partners have good intentions and being unencumbered by attachment concerns, low avoidant individuals constructively focus on solving the problem rather than the potentially negative implications of their partner's current conflict behavior (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). This broader relationship focus should help less avoidant or secure individuals traverse difficult interactions, maintain closeness, and behave constructively. It also should produce less reactivity in response to what the partner says and does at each moment of conflict discussions, including when the partner behaves positively.

Highly avoidant individuals, on the other hand, should remain rigidly focused on whether their partner is trying to manipulate or exert control over them, which motivates them to continually assess and reassess their partner's underlying intentions. These concerns and this "myopic focus" should make highly avoidant targets more reactive to their partners' actions, as the results of the present research show. Partners' softening communications may also be viewed by avoidant targets as evidence that their partner is "backing down" or they have successfully "retained control" in the relationship. Regardless, avoidant intimates' concerns about protecting their autonomy and independence might ironically be a central reason why their partner's behavior can have both a neg-

ative and a positive influence on their emotional and behavioral reactions in threatening contexts.

The Long-Term Benefits and Potential Costs of Partner Softening

Given the destructive impact of target defensiveness shown by prior longitudinal research, the defensiveness of avoidant targets is likely to escalate relationship problems and increase dissatisfaction and instability in most relationships over time. As we have seen, however, partner softening can buffer relationships from these negative effects. By bypassing reactance and being responsive to the broader needs and goals of avoidant targets, partner softening might help avoidant intimates develop deeper trust, stronger commitment, and more secure beliefs and expectations (see Simpson, 2007). Recent research, however, suggests that the use of a direct approach by agents of change might be more effective than a soft, loyal approach in generating relationship improvement across time in most couples (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009), probably because loyal, indirect responses that soothe conflict often go unnoticed (Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995; Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010), and therefore fail to induce target change. Softening influence attempts might also make many avoidant targets feel as if they have successfully resisted influence and do not need to change. Thus, the benefits we have documented here, including alleviating avoidant targets' anger and withdrawal and making initial progress toward improving a targeted problem and the relationship, might not hold across time.

However, the benefits of very direct strategies enacted by agents of change do not eliminate the lower improvement associated with the immediate resistance that such strategies elicit in most targeted partners (Overall et al., 2009). Harsh, direct strategies are also likely to motivate change only in targets who are committed to maintaining their relationships and consider their partner's broader needs without becoming defensive or disengaging. Avoidant individuals who are less committed and responsive to their partner's needs may not be motivated by the threat of their partner's unhappiness, meaning that direct influence strategies might elicit strong resistance and disengagement by avoidant targets over time. Thus, for rigidly defensive and reactive targets, softening influence might be the only way in which partners can express their needs and concerns, and the only strategy that generates openness and change in highly avoidant people. Although future research needs to test the longitudinal outcome of these buffering effects, if partners cannot contain targets' defensiveness in conflict discussions, they are likely to have limited success maintaining satisfying relationships across time.

The repeated enactment of softening attempts, however, may have costs for partners. It takes great effort, motivation, and commitment to inhibit negative reactions and transform dissatisfaction into more controlled efforts that effectively "manage" avoidant targets' continued reactivity (Rusbult et al., 1991). Partners are likely to tire of continually having to contain and regulate their partner's defensiveness, and they may become resentful of avoidant targets who neither understand nor value the care that their partners are delivering when they soften their influence attempts. Consequently, the repeated enactment of softening behaviors may increase dissatisfaction in some partners, especially if avoidant targets remain defensiveness and the problem and relationship never improves (see Lemay & Dudley, 2011). On the other hand, experiencing success in down-regulating avoidant defenses during important, diagnostic relationship interactions might be enough to keep the partners of many avoidant intimates motivated to "stay in the game," particularly if avoidant intimates show signs of positive change.

Strengths, Caveats, and Future Research Directions

The buffering role of partner softening replicated across emotional and behavioral indices of defensiveness and post-discussion reports of success, and it was remarkably robust, remaining significant when we controlled for several alternative explanations, including the partner's anger, problem severity, and both partners' relationship evaluations. Models testing alternative processes also offered little evidence that the buffering effects of partner softening were attributable to resistance by avoidant targets, which may have altered partner softening. The buffering effects of partner softening were also witnessed in both within-person and between-person analyses, with two exceptions: (1) greater partner softening did not eliminate the differences in withdrawal between targets who were high versus low in avoidance, and (2) avoidant male targets did not report greater discussion success when their partner's softening was greater. These exceptions might have occurred because between-person analyses provide a less sensitive test. Differences across dyads in withdrawal, anger, and partner softening are shaped by myriad factors in addition to avoidance, and these differences are removed in within-person analyses. Alternatively, these exceptions could indicate that withdrawal is a particularly consistent behavioral difference between individuals who score high and low in avoidance (consistent with the goals and tendencies associated with avoidance), regardless of the defense-buffering impact of partners' softening. Nonetheless, the within-person analyses illustrate that partners can ameliorate withdrawal displayed by avoidant people when it occurs in important, defense-activating contexts.

We also demonstrated buffering effects using observer-rated indices of behavioral disengagement and self-reports of emotional defensiveness. The discussion-review procedure that we used should have reduced recall and reporting biases by providing participants with direct access to their discussions and by collecting ratings of anger at multiple specific time-points (compared to global, post-discussion assessments). Although subjective experiences should shape behavioral reactions, and we found that self-reported anger did predict the success of the discussions as reported by both partners, intimates may not always be able to report their emotional experiences accurately. Mikulincer (1998) found, consistent with the tendency to suppress painful attachment experiences, that avoidant individuals' report lower anger than is suggested by their concurrent physiological arousal. Instead of undermining our results, if avoidant targets under-reported their anger or were less able to detect changes in their emotions, the size of the effects found in this study are likely to *underestimate* the degree to which avoidance triggers anger and partners' softening buffers it. Examining changes in physiological indices is another important direction for future research.

Our sample consisted of relatively young couples who were involved for 3 years on average, about 60% of whom were cohabiting or married. Younger targets may be more reactive in

relationship-threatening contexts, making partner softening attempts even more crucial and impactful. In contrast, older partners in longer-term relationships might be more skilled at softening target defensiveness or, alternatively, they might be less tolerant of target reactance. In our sample, age and relationship length were not related to any of the focal variables, with one exception: Younger targets exhibited greater withdrawal. Age and relationship length, however, did not moderate the buffering effects on either target reactions or discussion success. Nonetheless, how partners develop effective strategies to manage avoidant defenses as their relationships develop is a valuable topic for future research.

There were also a few gender differences in our focal variables. Women reported greater anger and rated the problems they wanted changed in their partners as more serious, whereas men exhibited greater withdrawal. These differences are consistent with prior research showing that women tend to be more focused on maintaining and improving their relationships, whereas men tend to display more distancing coping strategies during conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman, 1994, 1998). Women also reported greater attachment-related avoidance, which is atypical (see Del Giudice, 2011). This unexpected gender difference might be attributable to the nature of our study. Participation involved recorded discussions of relationship problems and reporting feelings while reviewing those discussions. Given the avoidance of closeness and maintenance of autonomy associated with men and attachment-related avoidance, couples with highly avoidant men may have been less likely to participate. Nonetheless, there was significant variation in avoidance for both men and women, the defenses associated with avoidance were evident in both male and female targets, and the impact of partner buffering did not systematically differ across men and women (only once in six primary analyses).

Finally, we examined only one way in which partners can soothe avoidant individuals in a context that activates their core attachment concerns. There are likely to be a variety of other ways that partners can create safer environments on a daily basis to help increase trust and security in avoidant people. As described earlier, Little et al. (2010) found that greater avoidance was associated with lower marital satisfaction, except when committed newlyweds reported having more frequent sex, perhaps because frequent sex increased trust in the partner. Future research needs to examine how the daily relationship atmosphere can temper insecure defenses, particularly when couples confront threatening situations.

Identifying the communication strategies that buffer other relationship insecurities, such as attachment anxiety, rejection-sensitivity, and low self-esteem, is also important. In this study, partners' softening did not reduce the heightened anger that anxiously attached targets reported, despite the fact that prior research has shown that exaggerating affection and accommodation during conflict can bolster feelings of acceptance in highly anxious and low self-esteem individuals (see Lemay & Dudley, 2011; Tran & Simpson, 2009). Our null findings might reflect the fact that anxious/low self-esteem intimates are vigilant about the authenticity of their partners' expressions of regard, and these persistent doubts further undermine their felt-security (Lemay & Clark, 2008). These doubts should be magnified in situations where highly anxious intimates know their partners want change, in which case softening may be interpreted as attempts by the partner to conceal his or her true feelings, which may only exacerbate feelings of rejection. The indirect, autonomy-supportive nature of the softening behaviors we assessed may also be irrelevant to, or may clash with, anxious intimates' chronic need for closeness—the antithesis of avoidant individuals' need for autonomy and independence. Finally, the defensive reactions we assessed in this study—especially withdrawal—do not capture either the hyperactivating, emotion-focused strategies that define attachment anxiety (e.g., intense feelings of rejection and hurt) or emotionally laden resistance (e.g., appeals to the partner's love and obligations, expressing perceived unfairness or inequity, other guilt-inducing communications) we think anxious intimates might use. Isolating how the specific needs and emotion-focused coping strategies of anxious intimates are manifested and, in turn, soothed in threatening contexts is an important next step.

Conclusions

In conclusion, insecure people *can* and sometimes *do* have happy and stable relationships. Relatively little research, however, has investigated what the partners of insecure people say or do to maintain and improve these tenuous relationships. By measuring levels of anger and withdrawal displayed by targets of influence attempts along with their partners' "softening" communications at multiple time-points during video-recorded conflict discussions, we were able to document the pivotal role that partner softening assumes in reducing anger and withdrawal in highly avoidant targets. Clearly, partners can and do play major roles in the lives and well-being of insecure intimates, but we are only beginning to understand the ways in which buffering takes place (see Overall & Simpson, 2013). We view this as one of the most important directions in which the next decade of research on close relationships should head.

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