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**Partner Buffering in Interdependent Relationships: An Attachment Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

Insecurely attached people have less happy, more unstable romantic relationships, but the quality of their relationships should depend on how their partners regulate them. Some partners find ways to buffer (emotionally and behaviorally regulate) insecurely attached individuals, which can make them feel better, behave more constructively, and improve their relationships. Understanding when, how, and why this important interpersonal process works requires a dyad-centered approach. In this chapter, we first review key tenets of attachment theory and the two primary forms of attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance). We then discuss the Dyadic Regulation of Attachment Insecurity Model (Overall & Simpson, 2015), which outlines how and why certain types of buffering behaviors should soothe the worries and improve the relationship perceptions and behaviors of highly anxious and highly avoidant people. Following this, we discuss recent studies that illustrate some of the ways in which partners can successfully buffer the insecure reactions of highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals and how they can develop and maintain more “secure” environments. We conclude by suggesting future studies that might extend these recent findings and compare our model with some of the core concepts of Emotion-Focused Therapy.

**Partner Buffering in Interdependent Relationships: An Attachment Perspective**

Insecurely attached people tend to have difficulties resolving relationship issues, regulating their negative emotions, and maintaining satisfying relationships. Recent theory and research, however, has begun to identify ways in which the romantic partners of insecurely attached people may be able to buffer (or soothe) these difficulties, especially in stressful situations or during difficult interactions involving interdependence between partners. In this chapter, we canvass the most recent theoretical and empirical literature on partner buffering in intimate relationships and we outline various ways in which partners may be able to meet the needs and assuage the concerns of insecure individuals, resulting in better relationship outcomes and improved satisfaction over time.

To address these goals, we begin by discussing some foundational principles of attachment theory along with the two primary forms of attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance). We then describe recent models that focus on partner buffering and discuss an updated process model that describes how partner buffering works in interdependent relationships. After doing so, we review the small but growing empirical literature on partner buffering and discuss current findings in relation to the process model of partner buffering. Finally, we identify possible directions for future research on this important, rapidly expanding topic in relationship science.

**Attachment Theory and Orientations**

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988), humans evolved to remain in close proximity to, and form strong attachment bonds with, their primary caregivers (i.e., attachment figures) because individuals who possessed these behavioral and emotional tendencies were more likely to survive and eventually reproduce. When feeling threatened, distressed, or overly challenged, children (as well as adolescents and adults) rely on the attachment bonds they have forged with their attachment figures not only to promote safety, but also to enhance their sense of felt security and well-being (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). The nature of these attachment bonds, however, depends in part on the way in which individuals have been treated by different attachment figures over the course of their lives (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Johnson, Dweck, & Chen, 2007; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), which shapes the internal working models they develop of themselves and close others (e.g., current and future attachment figures). Internal working models are comprised of episodic memories associated with prior and current attachment figures, the emotional content of past attachment-related experiences with specific attachment figures, and generalized beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding what partners should and should not do as well as what close relationships should be like (Collins & Read, 1990; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994). Once developed, working models guide how individuals think, feel, and behave, especially in stressful situations that activate (or turn on) the attachment system (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 1994, 2012).

Individuals who have received responsive, reliable care and support from prior attachment figures (e.g., parents, close friends, romantic partners) typically develop secure working models characterized by positive views of the self (i.e., as someone deserving of love and respect) and positive views/expectations of others (i.e., that attachment figures will provide appropriate comfort and support when needed). Due to the nature of their working models, when securely attached individuals feel threatened, stressed, or overly challenged, they utilize “problem-focused” coping strategies, whereby they turn to their partners for support and assistance, which typically dissipates their negative affect and allows them to experience increased closeness and intimacy with their partners over time (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Insecurely attached individuals, on the other hand, have different working models and, therefore, cope with stress differently. Anxiously attached people harbor negative views of themselves as relationship partners and hopeful yet conflicted views/expectations that their partners will provide sufficient care and support when it is needed. As a result, they are hypervigilant to signs of abandonment and crave greater closeness to and acceptance from their partners, due in part to their prior experiences of receiving inconsistent care and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In response to this hyperactivation of the attachment system, anxiously attached people monitor and demand considerable attention from their partners and rely on ruminative, emotion-focused coping strategies, which keep them feeling insecure and can be detrimental to their partners and relationships (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

Avoidantly attached individuals hold negative and cynical views of their partners and either positive or negative views of themselves as relationship partners (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). They are particularly sensitive to potential threats to their independence and autonomy, and cope with such threats by withdrawing emotionally or becoming rigidly self-reliant, due in large part to their prior experiences with rejecting or distant attachment figures (Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett, 1997). When stressed, avoidantly attached people are less inclined to seek and give support to their partners (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), which reflects their use of avoidance coping strategies. By deactivating their attachment system and distancing themselves from their partners in stressful situations, avoidantly attached individuals are able to maintain independence and autonomy and regulate their negative emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Both types of attachment insecurity tend to weaken relationships by lowering relationship satisfaction, escalating relationship problems, and inhibiting positive experiences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The romantic partners of insecurely attached people can, however, play a key role in dampening the negative reactions of insecure individuals. We now summarize recent partner buffering models and the current empirical literature on how partners buffer the negative outcomes associated with attachment insecurity.

**Attachment Partner Buffering Models**

Most of the research conducted on attachment insecurity has adopted an individual-centered viewpoint in which partners are rarely considered. Recent work, however, has shifted to a more dyadic and interdependent conceptualization of attachment processes, especially when couples are under stress (see Simpson & Rholes, 2012, 2017, for reviews). By broadening the theoretical scope to include *both* partners and their interaction patterns, researchers can not only identify how partners reciprocally affect each other, but the most effective ways in which partners can buffer attachment anxiety and avoidance in relationships. Several models have outlined some of the primary interpersonal processes through which partner buffering can occur.

Simpson and Overall (2014) proposed the Dyadic Regulation Model of Insecurity Buffering, which highlights how partner buffering can occur during stressful, attachment-relevant dyadic interactions. According to this model, when insecure individuals encounter a stressful or threatening event, their attachment system and insecurities are activated. The non-distressed partner (i.e., the agent) can then attempt to down-regulate the distress experienced by insecure individuals (i.e., the target) by enacting specific partner buffering behaviors (either deliberately or automatically without thought or planning) to soothe him/her. Buffering behaviors can include accommodating the target’s wishes or needs, validating the target’s viewpoints, and/or providing some form of support to help the target regulate his/her thoughts and emotions more constructively.

Successful partner buffering is more likely to occur when the agent’s support is responsive to the particular needs of the target—that is, when the agent “matches” and addresses the target’s attachment-relevant needs, motives, and concerns. This happens when individuals are highly responsive to the needs, motives, and concerns of their partners. For anxiously attached targets, buffering behaviors reassuring them that they are loved and supported should be particularly effective, such as providing strong emotional support, directly accommodating to their wishes and needs, and/or easing their concerns regarding loss or abandonment. For avoidantly attached targets, in contrast, buffering behaviors that allow them to maintain autonomy and independence should be most beneficial, such as providing instrumental support by discussing practical solutions to distressing problems, using “soft” influence tactics when trying to motivate change in problematic features of the avoidant partner, or meeting their needs while still allowing them to remain autonomous (also see Overall & Simpson, 2015).

If the agent’s buffering attempts are successful, targets should report greater felt-security, which in turn should result in less distress, better emotion regulation, and more constructive behavior by the target. If this pattern, which can be described as mutual cyclical growth (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1995), occurs repeatedly over time, positive longer-term outcomes should follow, including targets feeling more positively about themselves, targets evaluating the relationship more positively, and agents also evaluating the relationship more positively.

Building on Simpson and Overall (2014), Arriaga, Kumashiro, Simpson, and Overall (2018) developed the Attachment Security Enhancement Model, which further integrates partner buffering and security enhancement processes. According to this model, there are two broad buffering strategies: safe strategies (that should work for anxiously attached individuals) and soft strategies (that should work for avoidantly attached individuals). Safe strategies assuage attachment anxiety by calming the target through clear displays of strong, unwavering commitment (e.g., Tran & Simpson, 2009). Soft strategies assuage attachment avoidance by allowing the target to step away from a problem or issue without negative repercussions or by making requests of targets in a less emotionally-laden, more matter-of-fact manner (e.g., Farrell, Simpson, Overall, & Shallcross, 2016; Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013). All of these strategies are geared to alleviate the momentary insecurities of highly anxious and highly avoidant targets that arise in threatening or distressing situations.

To generate greater long-term attachment security, Arriaga et al. (2018) describe additional security enhancement strategies that can be employed in situations that do not involve conflict or relationship-relevant distress. For anxiously attached people, for example, experiences that instill greater self-confidence or more positive models of self should reduce their hyperactivation tendencies. For avoidantly attached individuals, experiences that facilitate stronger emotional connection to their partners or more positive models of their partners should reduce their deactivation tendencies. Thus, immediate partner buffering strategies and longer-term security enhancement strategies are likely to work in tandem to both reduce attachment insecurity and increase attachment security across time, ultimately yielding benefits for both partners as well as their relationship.

In order to synthesize these models and account for recent partner buffering findings (reviewed below), we propose a slightly revised and expanded version of Simpson and Overall’s Dyadic Regulation Model of Attachment Insecurity (2014). As shown in Figure 1, some triggering event initially activates a target’s attachment system, which generates hyperactivation in anxiously attached individuals and deactivation in avoidantly attached individuals. Partners (or agents) may then buffer the target by providing the type and amount of comfort/support that matches the target’s form of attachment insecurity. Because anxiously attached targets need greater closeness in order to allay their felt insecurity, agents should enact safe strategies, which include accommodation, responsive emotional support, and physical touch (see Jakubiak, this volume) to down-regulate the target’s negative state. The partners of avoidantly attached targets, in contrast, should enact soft strategies, which include softened (attenuated) influence attempts and instrumental or practical forms of support. This should help avoidant targets feel as if they still have some degree of autonomy and independence while being helped or supported by their partners. If these patterns occur repeatedly over time, partner buffering should lead targets to generally feel more accepted, less distressed, and better able to regulate their emotions more constructively. Across time, these outcomes should generate higher levels of self-esteem and greater competence along with higher levels of intimacy, commitment, and relationship satisfaction in both targets and agents.

**Empirical Research on Effective Partner Buffering Strategies**

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of various strategies/tactics that, from a theoretical standpoint, should buffer insecurely attached partners, especially during stressful couple conflict discussions. In most romantic relationships, major conflicts are often threatening situations capable of triggering the attachment system in one or both partners, providing a good context in which to investigate partner buffering processes and outcomes. We now summarize key partner buffering findings in the current empirical literature, several of which are relevant to some of the paths depicted in Figure 1.

**Anxious attachment**

Much of the research on buffering anxiously attached individuals has been conducted outside the context of interpersonal conflict. Lemay and Clark (2008), for example, found that when people harbor insecurities about their partner’s actual regard for them, as anxiously attached people often do, they frequently express their insecurity and emotional vulnerability, which can lead their partners to perceive them as vulnerable. The partners of insecure individuals may then try to express positive sentiments, which insecure individuals may interpret as inauthentic, making their partners feel as if they are “walking on eggshells.” These authenticity doubts typically perpetuate this cycle of insecurity. Lemay and Clark (2008) suggested that this cycle can be disrupted by helping insecure targets (i.e., those being buffered) defocus or consider other factors that could be affecting the agent’s (i.e., the bufferer’s) evaluation of the target. By altering these cognitive distortions with the help of agents, targets can begin to recognize and acknowledge positive behaviors enacted by agents as authentic. Additionally, perceived goal validation also reduces attachment anxiety across three years via changes in partner trust (Arriaga, Kumashiro, Finkel, VanderDrift, & Luchies, 2013), and sexual satisfaction also appears to buffer anxiously attached partners from declines in marital satisfaction (Little, McNulty, & Russell, 2010). Although these findings pertain to situations other than conflict, shifting appraisals, providing goal validation, increasing trust, and improving sexual satisfaction are avenues agents can possibly utilize to buffer insecure targets.

Several studies have also investigated buffering anxiously attached people in conflict. As mentioned previously, when anxiously attached people experience conflict with their romantic partners, they usually perceive higher levels of negativity from their partners and yearn to gain reassurance by drawing their partners closer emotionally. Tran and Simpson (2009) observed (video recorded) married partners discussing negative habits that each partner wanted to change in the other to improve the relationship. In each discussion, they assessed each partner’s degree of felt security, their emotional reactions, and their constructive accommodation behaviors (e.g., taking the partner’s feelings/views into account, reassuring the partner when s/he was distressed, working collaboratively to do what was best for the partner or relationship; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Likpus, 1991). Tran and Simpson found that anxiously attached individuals did, in fact, express more negative emotions and display fewer accommodation behaviors in these discussions. However, when their *partners* displayed more constructive accommodation behaviors and reported being more committed in the relationship, anxiously attached individuals felt relatively more positive emotions and greater acceptance. Greater partner accommodation and commitment, in other words, helped anxiously attached individuals regulate their negative emotions more constructively and feel more secure during these discussions.

Similar kinds of effects have been documented for physical touch. Jakubiak and Feeney (2016) conducted two experiments on the effects of touch from a friend or a romantic partner on feelings of attachment security. When participants imagined receiving touch from a friend or a romantic partner, they had greater accessibility to secure words (e.g., love, comfort) on a later memory task. In the second study, participants received physically affectionate touch from their romantic partners, which produced greater state security compared to participants who did not receive touch. Both of these effects, however, emerged only for securely and anxiously attached people, not avoidantly attached ones.

**Avoidant attachment**

Unlike anxiously attached people, avoidant individuals frequently withdraw in distressing situations, especially when their autonomy and independence are threatened. Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes and Oriña (2007) observed (video recorded) romantic partners as they tried to resolve their most important relationship problem. Compared to securely attached care recipients, avoidantly attached recipients were rated as more calmed when they received instrumental care (e.g., advice or suggestions for how to solve the problem, discussing the problem in a rational, logical way), whereas emotional care (e.g., encouraging recipients to talk about their emotions and experiences, expressing emotional support to them) calmed securely attached individuals the most. Expanding on these findings, Girme, Overall, Simpson, and Fletcher (2015) have documented a curvilinear effect of practical support, such that low-to-moderate levels of practical support offered to avoidantly attached people are associated with negative outcomes, but as practical support shifts toward moderate-to-high levels, avoidantly attached people experience more positive outcomes (e.g., less distress, less perceived partner control/criticism, less distancing, greater self-efficacy).

In addition to instrumental or practical support, soft influence tactics should also soothe avoidantly attached people. Indeed, Overall, Simpson and Struthers (2013) observed (video recorded) couples discussing problems in which one partner (the agent) wanted to change a problematic feature of the other partner (the target), which should threaten most avoidant people. Behavioral coding of the agent’s use of soft influence tactics (e.g., being sensitive to the target’s autonomy needs, acknowledging the target’s efforts/good qualities) indicated that avoidantly attached individuals did, in fact, report feeling angrier and withdrew more during these discussions. However, avoidantly attached targets whose partners displayed softer influence tactics were less angry and less withdrawn compared to those whose partners did not display soft influence tactics. These more positive responses, in turn, were associated with better conflict resolution as rated by coders.

Additionally, asking avoidantly attached people to make major personal sacrifices should elicit defensiveness due to the possible constraints that such requests might impose on their independence and autonomy. However, two types of buffering behaviors—expressing confidence that avoidant partners will make the requested sacrifice, and acknowledging and giving credit for the sacrifice—appear to be effective at reducing negative reactions in avoidant people. Farrell, Simpson, Overall, and Shallcross (2016) observed (video recorded) couples as they discussed major strain-test issues. Even though avoidantly attached partners were less accommodating in general when asked to make a sacrifice and reported lower trust and commitment, when partners expressed greater confidence in their ability to make the sacrifice and acknowledged their efforts, avoidant individuals reacted more positively.

Partner buffering has also been examined in clinically distressed couples. Johnson and her colleagues, for example, have integrated attachment theory into clinical practice through Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). Moser, Johnson, Dalgleish, Lafontaine, Wiebe, and Tasca (2016) have investigated the effects of EFT on changes in attachment insecurity across time, focusing on blamer softening (in which the “blaming” partner, who has been harmed or betrayed, is vulnerable while expressing fears of emotional or physical abandonment as the “withdrawing” partner, who often is the source of harm or betrayal, attempts to respond with warmth, empathy, and acceptance). When couples engaged in blamer softening, couples (both the “blaming” and “withdrawing” partner) experienced significant decreases in relationship-specific attachment avoidance, decreases in relationship-specific attachment anxiety, and increases in relationship satisfaction pre- to post-therapy.

**Future Directions of Partner Buffering**

Based on the findings of partner buffering research, the general effectiveness of matching buffering strategies to the specific motives, needs, and concerns of insecurely attached partners given their type of insecurity is fairly well supported. Future research, however, could appreciably extend what we currently know by examining potential moderators of these partner buffering effects, identify who is more versus less likely to “burnout” from enacting prolonged partner buffering, and clarifying differences between EFT (which applies mainly to highly distressed couples) and our model (which is geared to couples who tend to be less distressed).

**Accounting for the history of insecure targets and agents**

Some targets are bound to be easier to buffer than others. We conjecture that the effects of partner buffering on targets could be moderated by their relationship history (e.g., targets’ earlier attachment relationships, their current relationship with their romantic partner, and previous attachment-relevant experiences in romantic relationships). If, for example, insecure targets were securely attached to their parents in childhood, they may be easier to buffer than insecure targets who were insecurely attached to one or both of their parents. Agents (i.e., those doing the buffering) may be able to utilize targets’ prior secure attachment history to their advantage when attempting to buffer them. If insecure targets had secure attachments during childhood, agents might be able to draw upon these positive experiences and help targets think about times when their parent(s) reacted responsively to them during difficult situations.

Indirect evidence supporting the possible efficacy of this approach comes from studies that have investigated attachment security priming (see Gillath & Karantzas, 2019, for a review). Repeatedly priming secure attachment concepts decreases attachment anxiety, increases positive self-views, and increases positive relationship evaluations for up to five days post-priming (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007). Hudson and Fraley (2018) have also found that repeatedly priming attachment security across four months produces fairly stable decreases in attachment anxiety. Buffering by attempting to prime insecure partners with memories or images of attachment security could, therefore, improve long-term personal and relational outcomes by instilling more positive self and relationship evaluations. Carnelley and Rowe (2007), however, also found that, among participants experimentally primed with attachment security, securely attached individuals were *more* likely to shift their relationship expectations in a positive direction than insecurely attached people were. Thus, even though insecure targets who had secure attachment figures in the past may be easier to buffer than insecure targets who experienced only insecure attachment figures, doing so may still be relatively challenging.

In addition to the history of the target’s attachment, the attachment security of the agent may be an emergent property that influences the effectiveness of buffering insecurely attached partners. While our model describes how agents can buffer their partner’s insecurity, it does not focus on the attachment orientation of the agents themselves. If agents are also insecurely attached, they may have more difficulty regulating their own emotions along with their partner’s emotions, especially in highly stressful situations. Employing the strategies outlined in our model assumes that agents can effectively regulate their own emotions well enough and long enough to provide appropriate care to their distressed insecure partners. But when insecure agents must deal with targets who are highly dysregulated and responding in highly maladaptive ways, the two partners may feed off of each other’s emotionally dysregulated state, preventing both partners from down-regulating their heightened distress. Some evidence supports this claim. Particularly for anxious wives and avoidant husbands, insecure dyads respond to the anticipation of conflict with greater cortisol reactivity, anxious wives have greater difficulty recognizing their avoidant husband’s distress during conflict, and avoidant husbands have greater difficulty constructively expressing their need for support (Beck, Pietromonaco, DeBuse, Powers, & Sayer, 2013).

**Accounting for agent burnout**

If agents buffer their target partners well and consistently over time, insecurely attached targets may learn to regulate their negative emotions more constructively, which should improve relationship satisfaction for both targets and agents. Oftentimes, however, the buffering attempts of agents may not be effective because of their lack of skill or knowledge regarding how to help their insecure partners reduce their distress and function better. Moreover, targets may perceive agents’ buffering attempts as insincere or disingenuous, which could increase targets’ distress and dysfunction (Lemay & Dudley, 2011). This could create a cycle of mutual cyclical deterioration in which: (a) targets communicate their needs less effectively by exaggerating their negative emotions, elevate their demands for reassurance, or perceive their partners more negatively, which (b) leads agents to perceive that their attempts to quell the target’s concerns are not being acknowledged or are not working, which (c) then motivates agents to reduce their buffering attempts. If agents’ buffering attempts repeatedly fail, they are likely to burn out and terminate all attempts to console their insecure partners.

Certain relationships or partners may be more prone to burning out. The partner buffering model shown in Figure 1 assumes that agents may be capable of enacting certain strategies that can effectively down-regulate their partner’s insecure reactions. At the beginning of relationships or when they are relatively new, if agents are not buffering their partners properly or their strategies do not downregulate their partner’s distress, agents may still remain hopeful about long-term prospects of the relationship. But as time passes, ineffective partner buffering may start to weigh negatively on both the target and the agent, which could manifest in reductions of buffering behavior across time, feelings of frustration, exhaustion or being undervalued, and general withdrawal from the relationships. By contrast, effective partner buffering may reinforce continued buffing efforts, build competence and feeling of relational value, and engagement.

Relational factors may also play a role in partner burnout, particularly commitment. Being highly committed might protect against partner burnout. People who are more committed tend to be more willing to sacrifice in order to benefit their partner and relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997), suggesting that highly committed agents may on average be less prone to burning out over time. Although most agents are likely to eventually tire from constantly trying to buffer their partners, especially if it is to no avail, agents who are more committed may be more willing to make and endure this long-term sacrifice. The willingness to sacrifice may also depend on the agent’s attachment orientation. Avoidantly attached individuals, for example, are less inclined to make sacrifices for their relationships and may also be more susceptible to burnout (Farrell et al., 2016).

**Ties with Emotionally Focused Therapy**

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) (Johnson, 2004), which is grounded in attachment theory, addresses attachment insecurity concerns in distressed couples. EFT and our model both highlight the importance of incorporating attachment principles to help partners regulate their negative emotions in order to behave more constructively and increase relationship satisfaction. Several concepts in EFT align well with some of the processes outlined in our model, but there are some key differences, including the dyadic conceptualization of the processes that unfold between partners, the source of the problem or conflict, its severity, and how distress is best alleviated.

To identify the similarities between EFT and our model, one must understand the therapeutic steps of EFT in relation to our model. In EFT, the first therapeutic step is cycle de-escalation, whereby the therapist helps the couple recognize the destructive cycle in which the partners typically engage that maintains distress and sustains attachment insecurity (Johnson, 2004). This step is relevant to the portion of our model that outlines how attachment insecurity is triggered and the subsequent behavior that insecurely attached targets normally display.

The second therapeutic step in EFT involves restructuring the couple’s interaction patterns (Johnson, 2004), which is related to the partner buffering section in our model. In this second step, both partners learn to enact strategies that help each other regulate their emotions more constructively during difficult conversations in order to break habitual demand-withdrawal patterns of communication. Two techniques are taught as part of this step: withdrawer re-engagement, and blamer softening. Withdrawer re-engagement encourages disclosing attachment needs and fears of rejection while still being available and responsive to the partner’s needs and concerns. Blamer softening encourages expressing feelings from a position of vulnerability without blame or criticism. Similarly, our model focuses on the enactment of strategies that ought to mitigate attachment insecurities and concerns in targets, leading to immediate outcomes in which feelings are communicated more accurately and emotions are experienced more constructively.

Despite these similarities, there are several differences between the two frameworks. First, EFT directly addresses how *both* partners have contributed to the problem/conflict and can possibly contribute to its solution. In EFT, for example, the therapist focuses on the communication patterns and emotional expression of both partners while taking into account each partner’s attachment history. In our model, the focus is on two fairly separate roles: the partner in the potential buffering role (the agent), and the partner who is being buffered (the target). Moreover, our model does not directly consider the agent’s attachment history or how the agent is affected by the target’s emotional and behavioral reactions when distressed.

In addition, EFT specifically addresses demand-withdrawal patterns, whereby one partner usually blames or criticizes the other partner, which then leads the other partner to shut down or withdraw from the conversation (Christensen, 1988). This pattern of communication is frequently seen in distressed couples. Indeed, many couples treated with EFT have a history of one partner betraying the other, meaning that the primary source of distress is often tied to the partner who did the betraying. To complicate matters, one or both partners may also be struggling with mental health issues, which exacerbate the negative communication patterns commonly witnessed in clinical populations. Unlike EFT, our model does not focus on specific communication patterns, and it applies to distressing situations both those in which one partner is and is not the primary source of distress, such as problems at work, conflicts with friends or family, and difficulties making important decisions. Finally, the issues that generate distress are often not as severe as those that occur for couples undergoing EFT.

Because the source of conflict and severity of issues differ between EFT and our model, the buffering strategies employed also differ to some extent. EFT therapists, for example, encourage couples to experience and recognize their negative affect and dysfunctional communication patterns during some therapy sessions. Doing so allows both partners to experience a state of vulnerability, which can instigate change in their attachment working models. Inducing vulnerability is especially important for relationships characterized by severe transgressions or betrayals because it often facilitates their improvement. Our model, by comparison, suggests that agents should typically try to downregulate targets immediately, instead of allowing them to experience or escalate negative feelings when they feel distressed. Among couples with less severe problems, many agents may be able to buffer targets without being adversely affected by the target’s dysregulation, especially if agents are not responsible for the target’s distress. Agents who can continue to manage their emotions well and constructively should be able to provide better, more appropriate support to their insecurely attached partners. Particularly when problems are less chronic and severe, allowing targets to remain distressed may only escalate the target’s dysregulation, making it even harder for agents to buffer them effectively.

Acknowledging differences between EFT and our model may help clarify the direction in which future research on partner buffering might head. Because the goal in our model is for agents to buffer targets, the agent’s attachment history and the outcomes of their prior buffering attempts are not included in our model. These important variables, however, are more directly addressed and considered in EFT. In addition, future studies should examine how the attachment insecurity of agents affects the success of their buffering behavior and how buffering targets impacts the agent’s likelihood of burning out over time. Finally, for conflicts in which an agent has betrayed a target or that involve severe issues (e.g., domestic violence, chronic substance use), it will be important to determine whether the specific buffering strategies outlined in our model are still effective.

**Conclusions**

The last 10 years has seen a surge of research adopting a dyadic perspective to understand attachment insecurity better. Partner buffering is one of the most important demonstrations of the value of a dyadic perspective because it reveals how the negative outcomes associated with one partner’s attachment insecurity can be buffered by partners who enact strategies that down-regulate insecure reactions during stressful interactions. The growing literature has identified specific partner buffering behaviors that appear to reduce attachment insecurity and improve relationship outcomes. Taking a dyadic perspective, however, also involves considering the strengths, weaknesses, and potential burnout of partners who engage in buffering. Therapeutic models that focus on dyadic patterns, such as EFT, provide valuable insights into how buffering may be maximized by helping *both* partners develop effective strategies that work together to improve attachment dynamics in relationships.

**Target’s Immediate**

**Perceptions**

Partner A (target) feels

greater felt security

(e.g., positive emotions,

less distress,

more acceptance)

**Triggering Event**

Stress/threat activates

Partner A’s (target’s) insecurities

**Target’s Insecure Attachment**

Partner A’s (target’s) attachment system is activated

**Anxious Attachment**

Hyperactivation of

attachment system

(e.g., hypervigilance to

cues of abandonment,

seeking felt security)

**Avoidant Attachment**

Deactivation of

attachment system

(e.g., emotional

withdrawal, seeking

autonomy)

**Partner Buffering**

Partner B (agent) attempts to

down-regulate insecure reactions of Partner A (target)

**Anxious Attachment**

Safe Strategies

Accommodation

Responsive Support

Physical Touch

**Avoidant Attachment**

Soft Strategies

Softened Influence

Instrumental Care

Practical Support

**Target’s Relationship**

**Perceptions**

Partner A (target) evaluates

the relationship more positively

(e.g., relationship satisfaction, intimacy, commitment)

**Target’s Self-Perceptions**

Partner A (target) evaluates

him/herself more positively

(e.g., self-esteem,

competence)

**Agent’s Relationship**

**Perceptions**

Partner B (agent) evaluates

the relationship more positively

(e.g., relationship satisfaction, intimacy, commitment)

**LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES**

**IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES**

**Target’s Immediate**

**Behavior**

Partner A (target) regulates

his/her own emotions and

behaviors more constructively

(e.g., problem-focused

coping, more positive

conflict behavior)

*Figure 1.* The Revised Dyadic Regulation Model of Insecurity Buffering.

The revised model outlines how certain types of events activate the attachment systems of insecurely attached individuals (targets), which results in specific reactions depending on the target’s form of attachment insecurity. Agents (i.e., the partners of targets) can buffer insecurely attached targets by engaging in specific buffering strategies. Partner buffering that addresses the needs, motives, and concerns of anxious or avoidant targets should generate positive immediate outcomes and, eventually, positive long-term outcomes in both the target and the agent.

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