

The association between attachment orientations and partner evaluations: An ideal standards perspective

Gery C. Karantzas¹  | Jeffrey A. Simpson²  | Nickola C. Overall³ | Lorne Campbell⁴

¹School of Psychology, Deakin University, Burwood, Victoria, Australia

²Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

³School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

⁴Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

Correspondence

Gery C. Karantzas, School of Psychology, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia.
Email: gery.karantzas@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

This research examined links between attachment orientations and evaluations of potential and existing relationship partners with respect to ideal standards. In Study 1, attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted the tradeoffs individuals made when choosing between potential mates. In Studies 2 and 3, attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with ideal partner discrepancies within existing relationships. The findings across the three studies suggest that highly anxious individuals are more likely to use the ideal partner warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources dimensions when evaluating hypothetical and actual romantic partners, whereas highly avoidant individuals are more inclined to use the ideal partner vitality/attractiveness and status/resources dimensions when making partner evaluations. These novel findings are discussed in terms of evolutionary models of mating strategies and evaluations.

KEYWORDS

attachment, partner evaluation, partner ideals, romantic relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research on attachment theory has yielded important insights into how prior relationship experiences are associated with the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships (Feeney, 2016; Schindler, Fagundes, & Murdock, 2010). However, despite over 30 years of research on adult attachment, very little is known about how attachment orientations are systematically associated with how

people evaluate potential and current romantic partners in relation to the qualities deemed most important in a mate. In their overview of adult attachment and relationship processes, Gillath, Karantzas, and Fraley (2016) highlight that research has focused on investigating links between attachment orientations and relationship *behaviors*, with little research addressing the *cognitive appraisal* aspects of partner evaluations.

To address this gap, the current article integrates an adult attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Gillath et al., 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) with the ideal standards model (ISM; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001)—a widely applied relationships framework that describes the content and structure of cognitions associated with evaluations of potential and actual romantic partners. The integration of these two major approaches can provide valuable insights into how attachment orientations are related to the evaluation of partners vis-à-vis ideal standards and the degree to which they impact relationship quality. Because we use an ideal standards perspective to inform our understanding of the possible connections between attachment orientations and partner evaluations, we begin by describing the ISM followed by attachment theory in romantic relationships.

1.1 | Ideal standards model

Ideal standards, like other relationship schemas (Baldwin, 1992; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996), are chronically accessible mental representations of romantic partners and relationships that can be used to evaluate both potential and current romantic partners. According to the ISM (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Simpson et al., 2001), partners tend to be evaluated on three broad ideal standards: warmth/trustworthiness (e.g., understanding, supportive), vitality/attractiveness (e.g., sexy, adventurous), and status/resources (e.g., successful, financially secure). These ideal dimensions are consistent with evolutionary models of mate criteria that are relevant to reproductive fitness (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), such as “good genes” (an indicator that a mate has some genetic advantage that could be passed on to offspring [e.g., vitality/attractiveness]) and “good investment” (an indicator that a mate is likely to be supportive and has resources to ensure offspring survive [e.g., warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources]).

Although individuals make judgments about the suitability of a potential or existing partner on all three ideal standards, greater emphasis may be placed on certain ideals, depending on an individual's mating strategy (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). According to Gangestad and Simpson (2000), for example, men and women may pursue either a short-term mating strategy, characterized by casual or fleeting sexual encounters and less committed or shorter-lived romantic relationships, or a long-term mating strategy, characterized by greater investment of time, effort, and resources into a relationship. These different mating strategies are likely to be enacted when individuals are faced with environmental pressures that require tradeoffs between investing time and energy toward mating effort versus parenting effort. In this respect, a short-term mating strategy is often indicative of a fast life history strategy, which typically entails accelerated sexual maturity and greater mating effort in environments characterized as harsh (where there are high rates of mortality) and/or unpredictable (where events change in unpredictable ways) (Simpson & Belsky, 2016). A long-term mating strategy, on the other hand, is often indicative of a slow life history strategy, which usually entails slower sexual maturity and greater investment in offspring in environments characterized as safe and predictable (Simpson & Belsky, 2016).

Research on the ISM has traditionally focused on two areas. First, studies have examined which ideal dimensions matter most when people are evaluating *hypothetical or potential* partners. Some of this research has also examined the extent to which short-term versus long-term mating strategies play a role in the evaluations individuals make when presented with hypothetical partners who vary in the degree to which they possess each of the three partner ideals. Fletcher et al. (2004), for example, investigated the extent to which specific ideal standards explain the tradeoffs individuals make when presented with two hypothetical mates who differed in their warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources. They found that endorsement of a long-term mating strategy mediated both men's and women's selection of a partner who exhibited greater warmth/trustworthiness over the other two ideals. This finding is consistent with the premise that long-term mating strategies entail more parenting effort, suggesting that mate qualities such as warmth/trustworthiness are considered signs that a potential mate is more likely to have the characteristics necessary for greater parental investment and a more committed relationship (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000).

Fletcher et al. (2004) also found that endorsement of a short-term mating strategy mediated evaluations of hypothetical partners by both sexes. Specifically, potential mates who exhibited more vitality/attractiveness were evaluated more positively (were preferred) over the other two mate qualities. This is consistent with the notion that short-term mating strategies involve greater mating effort, which suggests that qualities indicative of a mate's reproductive health (e.g., vitality/attractiveness) are likely to be more salient when evaluating potential partners compared to their warmth/trustworthiness or status/resources (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000).

The second major focus of prior research on the ISM is the role that ideal standards play in evaluating *current* romantic partners (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Simpson et al., 2001). The ISM proposes that discrepancies between perceptions of current partners and ideal standards—termed *ideal-partner discrepancies*—help individuals evaluate the quality or suitability of their current partner and relationship. According to the ISM, ideal discrepancies are particularly important when evaluating partners because they may contain diagnostic information regarding the extent to which a partner meets one's mate criteria in order to have a good, satisfying relationship (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Simpson et al., 2001). Accordingly, discrepancies should predict relationship outcomes over and above partner perceptions given that these perceptions, by themselves, do not assess whether a partner matches one's ideals. Numerous studies have confirmed that larger ideal-partner discrepancies are associated with more negative affect and more negative relationship evaluations of both hypothetical and actual partners (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014; Fletcher et al., 1999; Lackenbauer & Campbell, 2012).

Despite this fairly large body of work, little research has investigated whether theoretically plausible individual differences are systematically associated with these evaluations; the exceptions of course are gender and mating strategies. This gap in our knowledge is noteworthy because certain individual differences that may have been shaped by experiences in past or current romantic relationships are often assumed to underpin people's evaluations of potential and/or existing partners (Campbell et al., 2001; Simpson et al., 2001). There are compelling reasons to believe that individual differences in adult romantic attachment orientations could be pivotal in determining which ideal dimensions are relied upon more (vs. less) when individuals evaluate hypothetical and current romantic partners.

1.2 | Attachment orientations and ideal standards

Adult romantic attachment orientations are assessed on two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment anxiety centers on concerns about self-worth and fear of rejection, excessive reassurance seeking, and preoccupation with whether a partner's love and care is sufficient and will continue (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Attachment avoidance reflects discomfort with closeness and intimacy, a lack of trust in others, excessive self-reliance, and dismissing relationships as less important than other life domains (Brennan et al., 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Research has demonstrated that attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with more negative general perceptions of partners along with more negative partner appraisals, including perceptions of less intimacy, less trust, and less support (Feeney, 2016; Karantzas, Feeney, Goncalves, & McCabe, 2014). The most widely espoused reasons for these findings align with behavioral confirmation and self-consistency processes (Snyder & Swann Jr, 1978; Swann Jr & Read, 1981). Feeney (2016) and Gillath et al. (2016) suggest that attachment orientations often act as self-fulfilling prophecies, whereby insecurely attached individuals engage in relationship behaviors and harbor cognitive biases that typically confirm their negative relationship beliefs and expectations.

Most prior research on adult attachment and partner perceptions, however, has two limitations. First, past research has either focused on global partner perceptions (i.e., the extent to which a relationship partner is generally perceived as negative) or conflated perceptions of specific *partner characteristics* (e.g., trust) with perceptions of *relationship functioning* (e.g., relationship satisfaction or passion; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991). Second, the exclusive focus on partner perceptions (rather than ideal-partner discrepancies) has not offered insights into which ideal dimensions are more heavily weighted or used by people with different attachment orientations. As a result, we know very little about whether or how attachment orientations are associated with evaluations of partners on the ISM dimensions or whether these appraisals predict relationship quality. Recent work on attachment orientations and mating strategies, however, provides a theoretical foundation on which to develop predictions regarding what kinds of associations should exist between certain attachment orientations and partner evaluations on the ideal standard dimensions.

According to Del Giudice (2018), attachment anxiety may function as a *commitment or investment maximization strategy* in adulthood as part of a long-term mating strategy in which parental effort is traded off *over* mating/reproductive effort (Del Giudice, 2018). From this perspective, highly anxious individuals should evaluate their partners on the basis of characteristics indicative of parental investment. Attachment anxiety should, therefore, be more strongly associated with evaluating potential and current partners on the warmth/trustworthiness ideal dimension.

Attachment avoidance in adulthood, on the other hand, may function as a *commitment minimization strategy* because it is associated with a short-term mating strategy in which mating/reproductive effort is traded off *over* parental effort. If so, highly avoidant individuals should evaluate partners based on characteristics indicative of their fertility and "good genes." Attachment avoidance, therefore, should be more strongly associated with evaluating potential and current partners on the vitality/attractiveness ideal dimension.

With respect to status/resources, both highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals are likely to evaluate potential and current partners along this ideal dimension. Highly anxious individuals may evaluate mates who embody this ideal more favorably if such mates could assuage the chronic need for approval of highly anxious individuals by investing or sharing tangible resources with them or by elevating their social standing. Framed another way, anxious individuals may evaluate a mate who possesses status/resources as having more of an ability to invest in the relationship, which may

translate into greater partner validation, approval, and commitment. From this perspective, the chronic attachment needs and worries of highly anxious individuals should make them more keenly aware of—and, thus, focus on the characteristics of—partners who can “invest” resources or status in the partner/relationship. Highly anxious individuals, therefore, might evaluate potential and current partners on both warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources characteristics.

Given that status/resources are qualities central to mating/reproductive effort, highly avoidant individuals may evaluate partners positively if they are higher on this ideal standard dimension. Highly avoidant individuals tend to view relationships as secondary to achievement in other life domains (Karantzas, Feeney, & Wilkinson, 2010). Accordingly, partners who have more status/resources might be appealing to them, especially if such partners can help to facilitate their achievement or success outside the relationship. In addition, partners with more status/resources might be able to help their mates ascend social hierarchies and develop alliances with other people who have, or can obtain, social status or additional resources (Fletcher et al., 1999). Accordingly, highly avoidant individuals may evaluate potential and current partners on both vitality/attractiveness and status/resources characteristics.

1.3 | Research overview

The overarching goal of this research was to apply the ISM to determine (a) how attachment orientations are associated with the evaluation of potential and current mates in relation to the three partner ideal standards (warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources) and (b) the degree to which these evaluations are related to relationship quality. We addressed this overarching goal in three studies. Our research questions, predictions, and study designs/paradigms are outlined in Table 1.

In Study 1, we examined associations between attachment orientations and the evaluation of *hypothetical* (i.e., potential) mates in relation to each of the three partner ideal dimensions. Our research question was “Which ideal partner dimensions do insecure people place emphasis on when evaluating hypothetical partners?” We investigated this question using a tradeoffs paradigm (Fletcher et al., 2004) in which participants were required to evaluate and decide between two potential mates who varied in how much they possessed characteristics across the three ideal dimensions (Table 1).

In Studies 2 and 3, we examined associations between attachment orientations and evaluations of *current* (i.e., actual) partners in relation to ideal standards. In both studies, our research question was “Which ideal partner dimensions do insecure people place emphasis on when evaluating their romantic partners?” (Table 1). In both studies, we also examined the degree to which attachment orientations predicted the extent to which perceptions of current partners fall short of ideals (i.e., ideal-partner discrepancies; see Table 1). We focused on ideal-partner discrepancies because, according to the ISM, it is not only the perception of one's partner (or the importance placed on partner ideals) that should be taken into account when evaluating a romantic partner or relationship. Rather, it is the degree to which a partner falls below a given standard that should be particularly diagnostic of the “value” of one's partner and relationship. Moreover, the relative pattern of associations between attachment orientations and ideal-partner discrepancies should provide insights into the partner characteristics that insecure people place emphasis on when evaluating their partners.

We focused on associations between attachment orientations and *discrepancies* rather than associations between attachment orientations and current partner perceptions or ideal importance for several reasons. The absolute importance that individuals place on a specific ideal standard dimension is not likely to be associated with either anxious or avoidant attachment orientations. Rather, ideal

TABLE 1 Overview of study research questions, paradigms, predictions, and findings

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Question	Which ideal dimensions do insecure people place emphasis on when evaluating <i>hypothetical</i> partners?	Which ideal dimensions do insecure people place emphasis on when evaluating <i>current</i> romantic partners?	Which ideal dimensions do insecure people place emphasis on when evaluating <i>current</i> romantic partners?
Paradigm	Trading off characteristics of hypothetical partners across each ideal dimension	Evaluation of current romantic partners based on ideal-partner discrepancies (i.e., comparing perceptions of current romantic partners to ideal standards on each dimension)	Evaluation of current romantic partners based on ideal-partner discrepancies (i.e., comparing perceptions of current romantic partners to ideal standards on each dimension)
Predictions	Att. Anxiety place emphasis on W/T and S/R (over V/A) Att. Avoidance place emphasis on V/A and S/R (over W/T)	Att. Anxiety predicts large W/T and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality Att. Avoidance predicts larger V/A and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality	Att. Anxiety predicts larger W/T and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality Att. Avoidance predicts larger V/A and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality
Results	Att. Anxiety place emphasis on W/T (over S/R) Att. Avoidance place emphasis on S/R (over W/T)	Att. Anxiety predicts larger W/T and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality Avoidance predicts larger V/A and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality	Att. Anxiety predicts larger W/T ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality Att. Avoidance predicts larger V/A and S/R ideal-partner discrepancies, which predict lower relationship quality

Abbreviations: Att., attachment; S/R, status/resources; V/A, vitality/attractiveness; W/T, warmth/trustworthiness.

importance is likely determined by various factors beyond one's current and past relationship experiences, such as social norms, film and television, and literature, as well as other forms of media and the public communication of relationship-oriented material (Fletcher et al., 1999). Likewise, perceptions of partners are predicted by factors beyond attachment orientations, such as self-perceived mate value and preexisting levels of relationship satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000).

In contrast, ideal-partner discrepancies should be central to understanding how attachment orientations are related to evaluations of existing romantic partners. According to the ISM, people wish to minimize the discrepancy between their partner ideals and perceptions of the current partner as "...a function of the general motivation to achieve positive views of their relationships and partners" (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000, p. 74). However, individuals who have insecure attachment orientations typically harbor more negative views of their relationship partners compared to those with secure orientations (Feeney, 2016). Attachment insecurity should, therefore, be associated with judging partners as falling short on specific ideals. This shortfall, in turn, should to be diagnostic of

the particular ideals on which insecurely attached individuals place greater emphasis when evaluating current relationship partners.

As part of Studies 2 and 3, we also tested whether larger discrepancies are associated with poorer relationship quality (Fletcher et al., 1999) and, more importantly, the extent to which partner evaluations on specific ideal dimensions mediate the link between attachment orientations and relationship quality. To conduct more rigorous tests of the mediating role of discrepancies, we controlled for partner perceptions on all three ideals to demonstrate that it is evaluating partners as falling short on specific ideal dimensions—rather than merely partner perceptions—that explain the connection between attachment orientations and relationship quality.

2 | STUDY 1

Study 1 examines the extent to which attachment orientations are associated with the tradeoffs individuals make when evaluating hypothetical relationship partners who differ in the degree to which they possess certain ideal standard attributes. The purpose of presenting individuals with tradeoffs is threefold. First, in real life, mate choices often involve tradeoffs between mating effort and parenting effort (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) given that few potential partners score high on all three partner ideal dimensions (Fletcher et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 2001). Thus, most individuals have to choose potential mates by evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses on each ideal standard (Fletcher et al., 2004). Second, by forcing individuals to decide between different potential partners, ceiling effects, which are often found in studies using self-reported mate preferences, are avoided. Third, needing to decide between two hypothetical partners can provide insight into the particular partner ideals that insecurely attached individuals place emphasis on when evaluating relationship partners. We used the tradeoffs procedure implemented by Fletcher et al. (2004) in which individuals are forced to make a series of decisions between descriptions of two potential mates that vary on the three ideal dimensions—warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources.

As outlined in Table 1, we predicted that individuals who score higher in attachment anxiety would be more likely to evaluate potential partners along the ideal dimensions of warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources. Therefore, attachment anxiety should be associated with choosing a partner who exhibits more warmth/trustworthiness or more status/resources over a partner who exhibits more vitality/attractiveness. We also predicted that individuals who score higher in attachment avoidance would be more likely to evaluate potential partners along the ideal dimensions of attractiveness/vitality and status/resources. That is, attachment avoidance should be associated with choosing a partner who exhibits more vitality/attractiveness or more status/resources over a partner who exhibits more warmth/trustworthiness.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

A total of 208 participants (mean age = 25.32, $SD = 7.63$ years; 68 men, 140 women) were recruited in Australia through the social networking site Facebook. Over 90% of the participants were of Anglo-Saxon background, and all participants identified themselves as heterosexual. Consistent with past research on tradeoffs, the participants included people who were single (32%), as well as those who were dating but not living together (28%) or were in a cohabitating or marital relationship (40%). For those in a relationship, the mean relationship length was 30 months (range:

6–228 months). As reported below, tradeoffs did not vary according to whether people were single or in a current relationship.

2.1.2 | Materials and procedure

Participants first completed an online questionnaire in which they answered demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, relationship status, relationship length, cultural background). They then completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ, Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), a well-validated scale with eight items assessing attachment anxiety ($\alpha = .79$) and nine items assessing attachment avoidance ($\alpha = .76$). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*).

Participants then read descriptions of pairs of possible romantic partners. Those currently involved in a relationship were asked to imagine not being in a relationship for this task. Participants were presented with six pairs of partner descriptions. For each pair, they were asked to select the partner they found most appealing. Each description included a short statement that described each partner's level of warmth/trustworthiness, attractiveness/vitality, and status/resources. The partner tradeoffs were set up so that participants had to choose which of the two partners had a more preferable set of ideal standard characteristics from their perspective. Thus, for each set of tradeoffs, one ideal standard was held constant, whereas the positivity and negativity of the other two standards were reversed for each potential partner. For example, the key tradeoff between vitality/attractiveness and status/resources reads as follows:

Person A is a loving, trusting, and warm person who is very physically attractive and spends time working out and keeping fit. S/he has little money and works in a low-status, low-paying job with little potential for getting a better job in the future.

Person B is a loving, trusting, and warm person who is quite physically unattractive and gives little time or importance to keeping fit. S/he has a high status, high paying job and earns a lot of money.

Please circle below which partner is more appealing to you

Partner A

Partner B

Across the six pairs of partner tradeoffs, descriptions were framed as in the example above to assess participants' decisions between (a) attractiveness/vitality versus status/resources, (b) warmth/trustworthiness versus status/resources, and (c) warmth/trustworthiness versus vitality/attractiveness. In three pairs of partner tradeoff descriptions, the constant trait was framed as positive. In three additional tradeoff descriptions, the constant trait was framed as negative. To illustrate, the constant trait of “warm and trustworthy” was replaced with “cold and untrustworthy.” Consistent with Fletcher et al. (2004), this method ensured that the results could be replicated across partner descriptions that varied in overall positivity. The order in which the sets of descriptions containing positive and negative constant traits were administered was counterbalanced.

TABLE 2 Tradeoff frequencies:
Study 1

			<i>n</i>	Moderator		
Scenario 1 (W/T held constant)						
W/T	V/A	S/R	152	No moderation		
W/T	V/A	S/R	56	No moderation		
Scenario 2 (V/A held constant)						
W/T	V/A	S/R	167	Type	Anx	
W/T	V/A	S/R	41	Type	Av	
Scenario 3 (S/R held constant)						
W/T	V/A	S/R	83	Type	Av	
W/T	V/A	S/R	124	Type	Anx	

Note: The overscore indicates that the partner did not possess the ideal standard. Abbreviations: Anx, attachment anxiety; Av, attachment avoidance; S/R, status/resources; V/A, vitality/attractiveness; W/T, warmth/trustworthiness.

2.2 | Results

Descriptive frequencies (*n*) are presented in Table 2 for the partner choices made by participants when presented with the three tradeoff scenarios. The role of attachment orientations in predicting the partner tradeoff frequencies presented in Table 2 was analyzed using Configural Frequency Analysis (CFA). We took a CFA data-analytic approach as we were interested in the tradeoff patterns that *people* (i.e., individuals) make. Thus, we adopted a person-centered, rather than a variable-centered, analysis such as logistic regression (von Eye & Bogat, 2005). Moreover, unlike logistic regression, which estimates the odds of given frequencies in a dichotomous outcome as a function of a set of predictors, CFA identifies patterns of individuals “that stand out because they contradict a base model” (p. 70; von Eye, Mair, & Mun, 2010). The base model (or null model) assumes that the predictor variables are unrelated to the frequencies observed in the outcome. Thus, CFA is a multivariate cross-classification technique that estimates whether particular cells in a cross-tabulation contain significantly more or significantly fewer individuals than estimated as part of the base model (von Eye, 1990). Cells with observed frequencies significantly *greater* than expected are referred to as “types.” Cells with observed frequencies significantly *less* than expected are referred to as “antitypes.” Observed cell frequencies that do not differ from expectancies represent neither a type nor an antitype. Covariates can be included to assess their effects on the patterning of frequencies (von Eye et al., 2010). In line with procedures for conducting CFA, a Bonferroni adjustment ($\alpha = .0125$) was made for each analysis to guard against threshold α . CFAs were conducted using the CFA 2000 program (von Eye, 2001) and were estimated using Pearson's chi-square component test.

A preliminary CFA was first conducted to determine whether relationship status was associated with the tradeoff decisions made by participants. Relationship status had no effect on participants' tradeoffs ($t_s = 1.12\text{--}1.68$, all $p_s > .05$). Consistent with past research and to maximize the power of our primary analyses, we then conducted the primary analyses on the full sample. In relation to the main analyses, two CFAs were conducted: one in which attachment anxiety was the predictor and another in which attachment avoidance was the predictor. This approach facilitated easier interpretation of the role of each predictor, simultaneously maintaining a standard design matrix

(i.e., orthogonal patterning of frequencies across cells, see von Eye, 1990).¹ To ensure that the valence (i.e., positivity or negativity) of the trait held constant and did not confound the results, the CFA analyses were repeated once when the trait held constant was positively worded and once when it was negatively worded. The CFA results were identical across the valence of constant traits. To limit redundancy, the tradeoff results for only when the trait held constant was positively worded are presented.

Both attachment anxiety ($\chi^2[4] = 110.98, p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($\chi^2[4] = 214.65, p < .001$) were related to participants' evaluations of partners when faced with tradeoff decisions. In Scenario 1, when warmth/trustworthiness was held constant (Table 2), neither attachment anxiety nor attachment avoidance were associated with the decision to tradeoff between a hypothetical partner who exhibited status/resources versus vitality/attractiveness. However, the observed frequencies that emerged for partner tradeoffs involving Scenarios 2 and 3 (Table 2) were associated with attachment orientations. Specifically, in Scenario 2, when vitality/attractiveness was held constant, highly anxious individuals selected a hypothetical partner who exhibited warmth/trustworthiness more than expected by chance over a partner who exhibited status/resources ($t = 36.38, p < .001$). The opposite effect was found for attachment avoidance, with highly avoidant individuals selecting a hypothetical partner who exhibited status/resources over a partner who exhibited warmth/trustworthiness ($t = 79.38, p < .001$). In Scenario 3, when status/resources was held constant, highly anxious individuals selected a partner who exhibited warmth/trustworthiness ($t = 42.76, p < .001$) and highly avoidant individuals selected a hypothetical partner who exhibited vitality/attractiveness ($t = 34.38, p < .001$).

2.3 | Discussion

Study 1 examined the degree to which attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with partner evaluations when participants were faced with choices between hypothetical partners who varied in their level of warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resource attributes. The findings partially supported our hypotheses. Highly anxious individuals were more inclined to select partners who exhibited higher levels of warmth/trustworthiness over higher levels of vitality/attractiveness and status/resources. This finding is consistent with the notion that highly anxious individuals' chronic need for validation and strong yearning to have their attachment needs met may lead them to more favorably evaluate mates who possess more warmth/trustworthiness over mates who possess more vitality/attractiveness and status/resources. Moreover, the emphasis placed on warmth/trustworthiness is consistent with evolutionary perspectives, which claim that attachment anxiety may be calibrated to maximize partner commitment (Del Giudice, 2018) in order to facilitate a long-term mating strategy.

Highly avoidant individuals, in comparison, were more inclined to favorably evaluate and select partners who possessed greater vitality/attractiveness and status/resources over those who displayed more warmth/trustworthiness. These findings suggest that highly avoidant individuals may devalue warmth/trustworthiness, perhaps due to their discomfort with closeness (Karantzas et al., 2010). In addition, they appear to judge more favorably partners who demonstrate qualities typically associated with a short-term mating strategy (Del Giudice, 2018).

¹We also conducted a CFA in which both attachment anxiety and avoidance were simultaneously included as predictors. The results were similar; thus, we reported the separate CFAs for ease of interpretation.

3 | STUDY 2

The goal of Study 2 was to determine whether attachment orientations predict placing greater emphasis in evaluations of current romantic partners on specific ideal dimensions as measured by ideal-partner discrepancies. Given that greater ideal-partner discrepancies strongly predict more negative relationship evaluations (Campbell et al., 2001; Lackenbauer & Campbell, 2012; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006), we also investigated whether they mediated the link between attachment orientations and relationship quality. As shown in Table 1, we predicted that highly anxious individuals would tend to evaluate partners who fall short on the ideal dimensions of warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources more negatively. Thus, attachment anxiety should be positively associated with perceiving larger warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources ideal-partner discrepancies on average. Larger discrepancies, in turn, should be associated with lower relationship quality. In contrast, we predicted that highly avoidant individuals should evaluate partners as falling short on the ideal dimensions of vitality/attractiveness and status/resources. If so, attachment avoidance should be positively associated with larger vitality/attractiveness and status/resources ideal-partner discrepancies. These larger discrepancies, in turn, should predict lower relationship quality.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

A total of 772 participants were recruited across Australia and New Zealand (224 men, 548 women). The Australian sample ($n = 572$) was recruited through university lectures, posters, and online noticeboards at Deakin University. The New Zealand sample ($n = 200$) came from an existing dataset reported in Overall et al. (2006) in which participants were recruited through university classes or poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury.

Participants comprising the Australian sample were adults (mean age = 28.48 years, $SD = 12.92$ years), and all were in a current heterosexual relationship (mean relationship length = 7.26 years, range: 3 months to 50 years). Within the sample, 53% were in a steady dating relationship but not living with their partner, 23% were cohabiting, and 24% were married. Participants constituting the New Zealand sample ranged from 18 to 51 years of age, with a mean age of 23.22 years ($SD = 6.10$). Within the sample, 26% of participants were living with their partner, and 15% were married. Of the remaining participants, 39% reported their relationship as serious, 18% as steady, and 2% as casual. The mean length of relationships was 33.81 months ($SD = 47.83$). Across both samples 85% were of Anglo-Saxon background.

3.1.2 | Materials and procedure

For the Australian sample, the data were collected using an anonymous online survey accessed via the URL listed on the study advertisements. For the New Zealand sample, participants completed hard copies of the questionnaires individually or in groups of two to three people (independently). Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether the data collection method (i.e., anonymous online survey vs. anonymous hardcopy survey) yielded any significant differences. There were none on any of the variables (all $ps > .05$).

Participants completed the same sociodemographic questions administered in Study 1. The AAO (Simpson et al., 1996) assessed attachment orientations (Study 1). Ideal standards were measured using the partner subscales of the Ideal Standards Scale-Short Form (ISS-SF; Fletcher et al., 1999).

The ISS-SF consists of 18 traits that assess the three partner ideal standards (warmth/trustworthiness [6 items], vitality/attractiveness [6 items], and status/resources [6 items]). The 18 traits were rated twice. First, participants rated the importance of each trait in relation to their *ideal partner* on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very unimportant*) to 7 (*very important*). Second, participants rated the extent to which each of the 18 traits was characteristic of their *current partner*, using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like my partner*) to 7 (*very much like my partner*). Across both ideal importance and partner perception ratings, all ideal standards subscales had good internal reliabilities (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$ to $.86$ across the subscales; see also Fletcher et al., 1999). The ideal importance and partner perception ratings were then used to derive measures of ideal-partner discrepancies. Specifically, residual scores were calculated for all three partner discrepancies by regressing participants' perceptions of their partner for a given ideal onto their ideal importance ratings.² This approach to deriving discrepancies has been used in past research on ideal standards (Fletcher et al., 1999; Overall et al., 2006).

Relationship quality was assessed using the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (PRQC; Fletcher et al., 2000). The PRQC contains 18 items that measure six relationship quality domains: satisfaction, commitment, trust, intimacy, passion, and love. These domains load onto a higher-order factor representing overall perceived relationship quality ($\alpha = .92$). The items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Analysis overview

To test the associations between attachment orientations and ideal-partner discrepancies and to determine the extent to which discrepancies mediated the link between the attachment orientations and relationship quality, we conducted a series of specific indirect effects tests by bootstrapping the sample to 1,000 replications and estimating the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (MacKinnon, 2008). We controlled partner perceptions (as a mediator) for each of the specific indirect effects analyses in order to provide more stringent tests of (a) the predicted direct associations between attachment orientations and ideal-partner discrepancies and (b) the mediating role of ideal-partner discrepancies between attachment orientations and relationship quality. We calculated power to detect a moderate effect size ($r = 0.30$) using G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) and found our study to have high power (0.99).

3.2.2 | Descriptive statistics

Overall, the sample reported moderate levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance and placed high importance on the warmth/trustworthiness ideal dimension and moderate importance on the vitality/attractiveness and status/resources dimensions (Table 3). On average, participants also reported that their current partner matched their ideal standards fairly well and evaluated the quality of their relationships as very good.

²Preliminary analyses of ideal-partner discrepancies were conducted using two alternative methods. The first method involved estimating the residual score for each partner ideal as described in the article. The second method estimated each ideal-partner discrepancy as a latent difference score (LDS, McArdle, 2009). The LDS method yielded associations between the attachment orientations and ideal-partner discrepancies consistent with the residual scores method. Given these consistencies and the parsimony of the residual score approach, we report the residual estimation method findings in the article.

Variable	Mean	SD	Scale range
Attachment anxiety	3.12	1.13	1–7
Attachment avoidance	3.21	1.06	1–7
W/T importance	6.19	0.68	1–7
V/A importance	4.78	0.89	1–7
S/R importance	4.18	1.16	1–7
W/T ideal-partner discrepancy	0.00	1.00	–4.71–2.68
V/A ideal-partner discrepancy	0.00	1.00	–3.95–2.72
S/R ideal-partner discrepancy	0.00	1.00	–3.38–2.65
Relationship quality	6.00	0.79	1–7

TABLE 3 Means and SDs: Study 2 variables

Abbreviations: S/R, status/resources; V/A, vitality/attractiveness; W/T, warmth/trustworthiness.

3.2.3 | Associations between attachment orientations, ideal-partner discrepancies, partner perceptions, and relationship quality

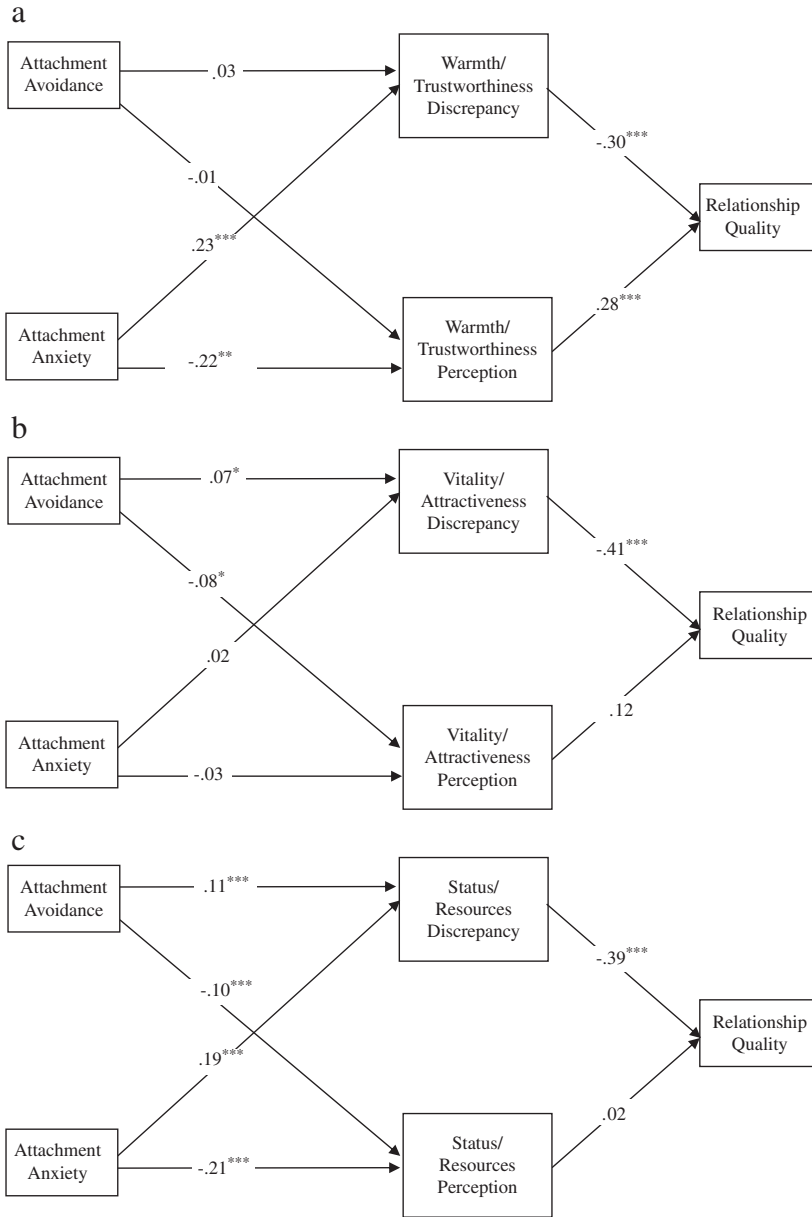
We conducted a series of specific indirect-effects tests (MacKinnon, 2008) in which ideal-partner discrepancies (i.e., residual scores) and partner perceptions for each of the three ideal standards were imputed as mediating variables. Correlations between discrepancies and perceptions for each of the three ideals was high ($r_s \geq 0.90$, $p < .001$).

Collectively, attachment orientations, ideal-partner discrepancies, and partner perceptions significantly predicted relationship quality ($R = 0.69$, $R^2 = 0.48$, $F[8,763] = 87.51$, $p < .001$). As shown in Figure 1a–c, in terms of the warmth/trustworthiness ideal, attachment anxiety, but not attachment avoidance, was positively associated with ideal-partner discrepancies and negatively associated with partner perceptions on this dimension. In relation to the vitality/attractiveness ideal, attachment avoidance, but not attachment anxiety, was positively associated with ideal-partner discrepancies and negatively associated with perceptions. In terms of the status/resources ideal, both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were positively associated with ideal-partner discrepancies and negatively associated with partner perceptions.^{3,4} In addition, ideal-partner discrepancies across all three dimensions were negatively associated with relationship quality, whereas only partner perceptions of warmth/trustworthiness predicted relationship quality (Figure 1a–c).

Specific indirect effects demonstrated that both ideal-partner discrepancies and partner perceptions of warmth/trustworthiness mediated the link between attachment anxiety and relationship quality (Table 4), whereas ideal-partner discrepancies but not perceptions of vitality/attractiveness mediated the link between attachment avoidance and relationship quality (Table 4). Finally, ideal-partner discrepancies, but not partner perceptions of status/resources, mediated the association between both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety with relationship quality (Table 4). In conducting the specific indirect tests, we also ran alternative mediation models in which attachment orientations were treated as mediators. That is, ideal-partner discrepancies predicted increases in

³The focus of this research was not on the associations between attachment orientations and the importance placed on each ideal because attachment orientations are unlikely to be associated with importance. We nevertheless examined these associations as part of preliminary analyses to address this possibility. As expected, across Studies 2 and 3, attachment orientations were not significantly associated with importance ratings ($r_s = 0.003$ – 0.16 , $p_s > .05$).

⁴Analyses were also conducted to test whether gender moderated associations between the attachment orientations and the ideal-partner discrepancies. Gender did not moderate any of these associations ($B_s = -0.03$ to -0.01 , $p_s > .05$).



* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

FIGURE 1 Attachment orientations predicting partner perceptions, ideal-partner discrepancies, and—in turn—relationship quality. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

attachment insecurity, which in turn, predicted reductions in relationship quality. These mediation models showed nonsignificant specific indirect effects. These nonsignificant findings strengthen the case for ideal-partner discrepancies mediating the association between attachment orientations and relationship quality.

TABLE 4 Significant indirect effects: Study 2

	Coefficient	SE	95% CI lower-bound	95% CI upper-bound
Anx → W/T discrepancy → RQ	−0.13**	0.016	−0.18	−0.09
Anx → W/T perception → RQ	−0.10**	0.019	−0.15	−0.06
Av → V/A discrepancy → RQ	−0.04*	0.021	−0.08	−0.002
Anx → S/R discrepancy → RQ	−0.04*	0.010	−0.06	−0.01
Av → S/R discrepancy → RQ	−0.06*	0.009	−0.09	−0.03

Abbreviations: Anx, attachment anxiety; Av, attachment avoidance; CI, confidence interval; RQ, relationship quality; S/R, status/resources; V/A, vitality/attractiveness; W/T, warmth/trustworthiness.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

3.3 | Discussion

Predicted associations between the two attachment dimensions and specific ideal-partner discrepancies were observed, even when controlling for perceptions of the current partner. In particular, attachment anxiety was associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies on warmth/trustworthiness. Attachment avoidance, on the other hand, was associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies on status/resources. In addition, both anxiety and avoidance were associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies on status/resources.

Viewed together, these results indicate that anxiety and avoidance predict the degree to which partners are evaluated as falling short on specific ideal dimensions. Highly anxious individuals evaluate partners more harshly on warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources, whereas highly avoidant individuals evaluate partners more harshly on vitality/attractiveness and status/resources. Moreover, these evaluations mediate the connection between both anxiety and relationship quality, as well as avoidance and relationship quality. Greater ideal-partner discrepancies on all three ideal dimensions were negatively related to relationship quality. Finally, specific ideal-partner discrepancies mediated the associations between each attachment orientation and perceived relationship quality.

4 | STUDY 3

In Study 3, we adopted a dyadic design to examine associations between attachment orientations and evaluations of partners in relation to ideal standards. We tested the associations investigated in Study 2 but did so by testing the extent to which couple members' attachment orientations were related to their own and their partner's ideal-partner discrepancies across the three partner ideals. Study 3, therefore, was designed to replicate and extend the associations found in Study 2. As before, we hypothesized that attachment anxiety would be associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies for warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources, which in turn would be negatively associated with relationship quality (Table 1). We also hypothesized that attachment avoidance would be positively associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies for vitality/attractiveness and status/resources, which in turn should be negatively associated with relationship quality.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants

A total of 149 heterosexual couples took part in the study. The couples resided in either Melbourne, Australia; Auckland, New Zealand; or Ontario, Canada. The Australian sample ($n = 20$ couples) was composed of participants recruited through poster advertisements and online noticeboards at Deakin University. The New Zealand sample ($n = 62$ couples) came from an existing dataset reported in Overall et al. (2006) in which participants were recruited via poster advertisements at the University of Canterbury. The Canadian sample ($n = 67$ couples) was recruited at a university in Southern Ontario through campus newspaper advertisements. Participants were adults (mean age: men = 27.39 years, $SD = 9.93$; women = 25.96 years, $SD = 8.75$) who had been in their current relationship for an average of 4.05 years (range: 3 months to 33 years). Approximately 45% were in a steady dating relationship but not living with their partner, 17% were cohabiting, and 31% were married (7% did not report on their relationship status).

4.1.2 | Materials and procedure

Data across all samples were collected from couples by having both partners independently complete a questionnaire booklet. Each partner completed the same questionnaires used in Study 2 (Study 2). For the Australian sample, couples were mailed copies of the questionnaire to complete without consulting their partner. They then mailed back their responses using a prepaid reply envelope supplied by the researchers. For the New Zealand sample, partners completed their questionnaire booklets in separate rooms as part of a larger study (Overall et al., 2006). For the Canadian sample, small groups of couples completed the questionnaire booklet while attending the research laboratory on campus—the men and women completed their surveys in separate rooms. Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether the data collection method yielded any significant differences. No significant differences were found for any of the variables (all $ps > .05$).

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Analysis overview

To test associations between the attachment dimensions, ideal-partner discrepancies, and relationship quality (simultaneously controlling for perceptions of the current partner, as in Study 2), we applied a hybrid dyadic model (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012) in which men's and women's attachment scores were the predictor variables, and ideal-partner discrepancies, partner perceptions, and relationship quality were modeled as common fate variables (represented as latent variables). In common fate modeling, common fate variables reflect couple-level variables in which men's and women's scores on a given variable (e.g., ideal-partner discrepancies, partner perceptions, relationship quality) are modeled to load on a single latent variable reflecting the construct (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). In this approach, the emphasis is not on distinguishing between actor and partner effects (as is the case when modeling men's and women's scores as separate variables, such as attachment anxiety and avoidance) but on determining the *additive* contributions of both partners to an underlying couple construct.

Common fate models assume that romantic partners are similar to each other due to a shared underlying variable (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). For example, couple members may have similar perceptions of their relationship quality because of shared appraisals or actions by both partners (van

TABLE 5 Means and SDs: Study 3 variables

Variable	Men		Women		Scale range
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Attachment anxiety	2.75	0.93	2.71	1.19	1–7
Attachment avoidance	2.73	0.99	2.62	1.12	1–7
W/T importance	5.96	0.63	6.24	0.59	1–7
V/A importance	5.15	0.80	4.70	0.88	1–7
S/R importance	4.20	1.16	4.71	1.15	1–7
W/T partner perception	5.71	0.82	5.80	0.97	1–7
V/A partner perception	5.33	0.93	5.26	0.96	1–7
S/R partner perception	5.21	1.06	4.91	1.04	1–7
W/T ideal-partner discrepancy	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	–4.29–1.57
V/A ideal-partner discrepancy	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	–3.99–2.21
S/R ideal-partner discrepancy	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	–2.54–2.28
Relationship quality	5.93	0.74	6.04	0.83	1–7

Abbreviations: Anx, attachment anxiety; Av, attachment avoidance; S/R, status/resources; V/A, vitality/attractiveness; W/T, warmth/trustworthiness.

Lange & Rusbult, 2011). Research has modeled relationship outcomes such as relationship quality and satisfaction as common fate variables (Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010). Likewise, partner perceptions and ideal-partner discrepancies are evaluative judgments that not only involve a person's perception of his or her partner but also encompass (a) the extent to which a partner behaves in ways that reflect a person's particular ideal standards and (b) the partner's tendency to display particular ideal characteristics, which may be influenced by a person's appraisal of whether his or her relationship partner meets certain ideals. According to Fletcher and Simpson (2000), ideals are knowledge structures that contain information about the self, the partner, and the relationship. For this reason, ideal-partner discrepancies may be best conceptualized as common fate phenomena. From a methodological standpoint, particular phenomena are modeled as common fate variables when partners provide responses on measures that ask the same questions (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). That is, both partners report on measures that include “common” questions. Furthermore, the association between partners on such measures should be correlated ≥ 0.30 (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). In the current study, ideal-partner discrepancies entail having both partners report on common items (i.e., importance ratings of ideals). Thus, on both conceptual and methodological grounds, it is appropriate to model ideal-partner discrepancies as a common fate variable.

In Study 3, we developed a series of dyadic models that incorporated common fate variables and modeled attachment orientations at the individual level (i.e., both men's and women's attachment anxiety and avoidance, modeled as separate observed variables). This facilitated the estimation of actor and partner effects for attachment anxiety and avoidance. Ideal-partner discrepancies and current partner perceptions (for each of the three ideal standards) along with relationship quality were modeled as common fate variables. Similar to Study 2, the discrepancies were calculated as residual scores by regressing each participant's current perceptions of his or her partner on a given ideal dimension onto his or her importance ratings of that ideal dimension. In modeling ideal-partner discrepancies as a common fate variable, both men's and women's perceptions were loaded onto a single latent variable representing evaluations of partners on each ideal dimension. The same approach was

used to model partner perceptions. Finally, both men's and women's relationship quality were loaded onto a single latent variable indexing dyadic relationship quality.

Given the dyadic nature of the data, mediation was conducted following recommendations proposed by Ledermann, Macho, and Kenny (2011) for testing specific dyadic indirect effects. Similar to Study 2, the sample was bootstrapped to 1,000 replications, and the specific indirect effects were estimated. The specific indirect effects were then partitioned into those associated with each attachment orientation (anxiety and avoidance) for men and women.

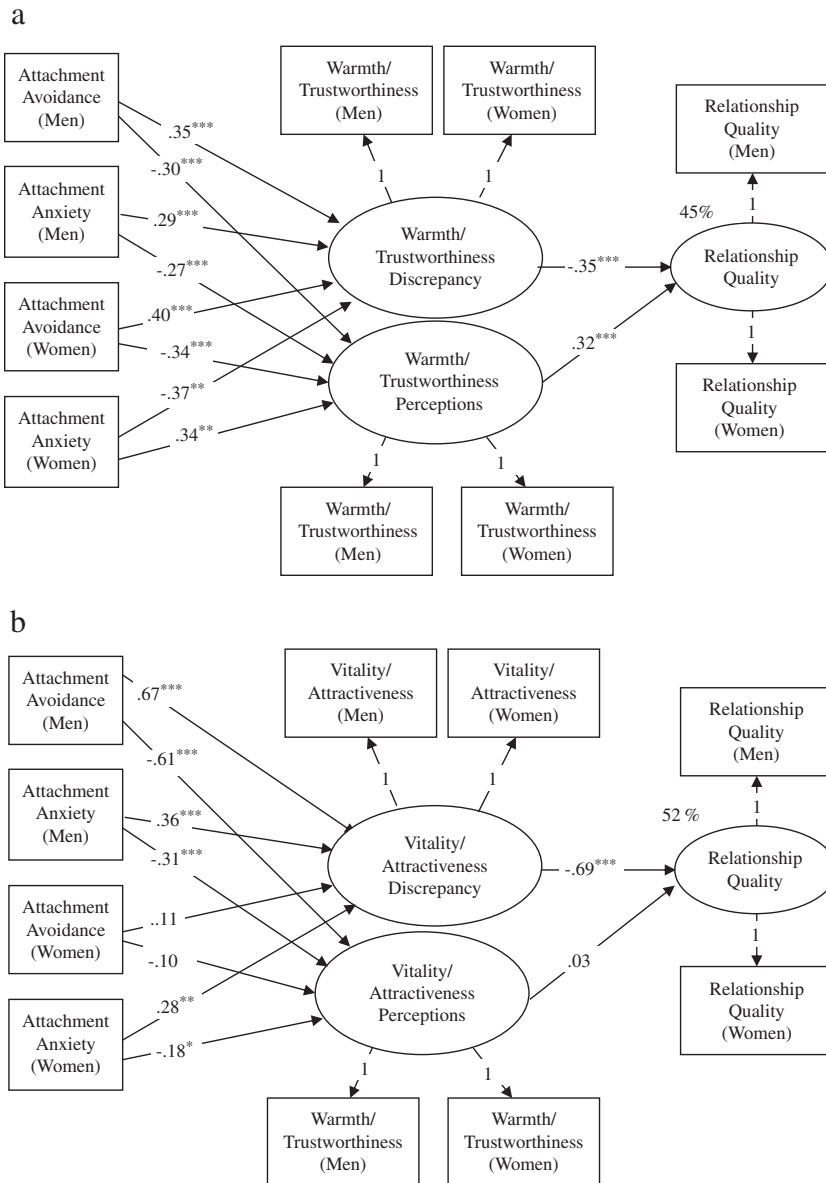


FIGURE 2 Hybrid dyadic models: Attachment orientations predicting partner perceptions, ideal-partner discrepancies, and—in turn—relationship quality. *Note:* Error covariances are omitted from models for ease of interpretation. To achieve model identification when using common fate variables, latent variables with two indicators are constrained to 1 (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

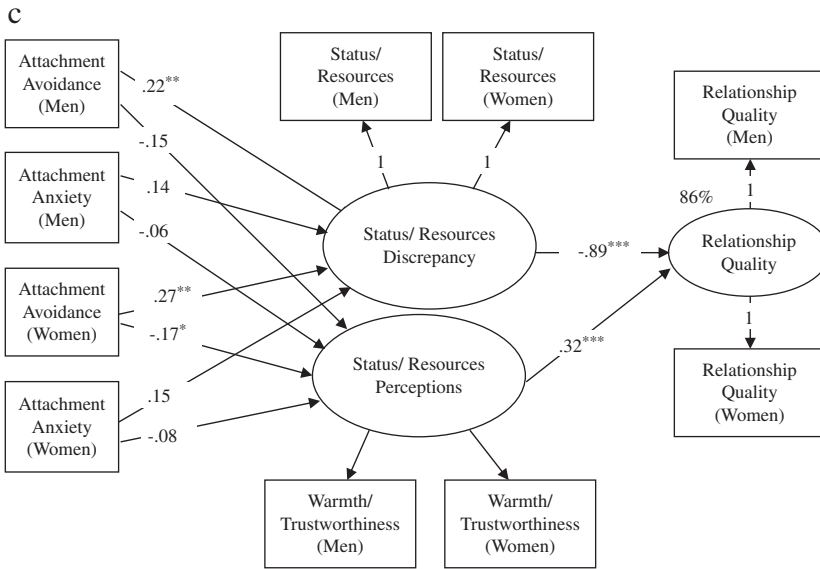


FIGURE 2 (Continued)

TABLE 6 Significant specific indirect effects: Study 3

	Coefficient	SE	95% CI lower-bound	95% CI upper-bound
Anx(M) → W/T discrepancy → RQ	-0.16***	0.040	-0.30	-0.04
Anx(W) → W/T discrepancy → RQ	-0.22***	0.040	-0.38	-0.05
Av(M) → W/T perception → RQ	-0.20***	0.076	-0.34	-0.05
Av(M) → V/A discrepancy → RQ	-0.19**	0.068	-0.28	-0.09
Av(W) → V/A discrepancy → RQ	-0.17	0.078	-0.26	-0.07
Av(M) → S/R discrepancy → RQ	-0.22*	0.085	-0.40	-0.06
Av(W) → S/R discrepancy → RQ	-0.25*	0.097	-0.44	-0.08

Abbreviations: Anx, attachment anxiety; Av, attachment avoidance; CI, confidence interval; (M), men; (W), women; RQ, relationship quality; S/R, status/resources; V/A, vitality/attractiveness; W/T, warmth/trustworthiness.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.; *** $p < .001$.

The complexity of the dyadic modeling of specific indirect effects meant that we tested three models—one for each ideal dimension. Specifically, each model included ideal-partner discrepancies and perceptions of the current partner for a given ideal standard as mediators (i.e., warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources). We used the same method as Study 2 to calculate power. Our power to detect an association of $r = 0.30$ was 0.81.

4.2.2 | Descriptive statistics

Participants reported low-to-moderate levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance and placed high ideal importance on warmth/trustworthiness and moderate-to-high importance on vitality/attractiveness and

status/resources. Participants also perceived their partners positively on each ideal dimension, and ideal-partner discrepancy scores indicated that partners were evaluated as matching ideals fairly well. Participants also reported high relationship quality (Table 5). The associations between partner reports on variables included in the common fate modeling of all ideal-partner discrepancies, partner perceptions, and relationship quality were all above 0.30.⁵

4.2.3 | The association between attachment orientations, ideal-partner discrepancies, partner perceptions, and relationship quality

As shown in Figure 2, attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies and more negative perceptions of warmth/trustworthiness for both men and women (Figure 2a). Attachment avoidance and anxiety for men and attachment anxiety for women were associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies and more negative perceptions of vitality/attractiveness (Figure 2b). Attachment avoidance (but not attachment anxiety) was also associated with larger ideal-partner discrepancies and more negative partner perceptions of status/resources for both men and women (Figure 2c). Furthermore, ideal-partner discrepancies on all three dimensions were negatively associated with relationship quality, whereas only warmth/trustworthiness and status/resources partner perceptions were associated with relationship quality (Figure 2a–c). Across the three hybrid models, the attachment dimensions, ideal-partner discrepancies, and partner perceptions explained 45–86% of the variance in relationship quality.^{6,7}

The estimation of specific indirect effects showed that ideal-partner discrepancies involving warmth/trustworthiness mediated the link between men's and women's attachment anxiety and relationship quality, whereas partner perceptions mediated the link between men's attachment avoidance and relationship quality (Table 6). Ideal-partner discrepancies (but not partner perceptions) of vitality/attractiveness mediated the connection between men's and women's attachment avoidance and relationship quality (Table 6). Finally, ideal-partner discrepancies (but not partner perceptions) of status/resources mediated the association between men's and women's attachment avoidance and relationship quality (Table 6).⁸

⁵The correlations between partner reports on ideal-partner discrepancies were: $r = 0.39$ warmth/trustworthiness, $r = 0.31$ vitality/attractiveness, and $r = 0.35$ status/resources. The correlations between partner reports on ideal partner perceptions were: $r = 0.40$ warmth/trustworthiness, $r = 0.34$ vitality/attractiveness, and $r = 0.33$ status/resources. The correlation between partner reports on relationship quality was $r = 0.52$.

⁶To test whether any of the associations between the attachment orientations and ideals (both ideal-partner discrepancies and partner perceptions) were moderated by gender, invariance testing was conducted by constraining actor paths for both men and women to equality. These constrained models were then compared to models in which the paths were freely estimated (unconstrained) using a chi-square difference test. Gender invariance testing showed no differences between men and women in the associations between attachment orientations and ideal-partner discrepancies (APIM only, $\Delta\chi^2[6] = 9.17, p > .05$) or partner perceptions in the hybrid model ($\Delta\chi^2[2] = 4.20, p > .05$).

⁷Model fit is not reported when using SEM to model dyadic data within an APIM or CFM framework because fit statistics can be misleading as models are close to saturation when accounting for the covariation between the scores of both couple members (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

⁸As with Study 2, we conducted a series of alternative mediation analyses in which attachment orientations were treated as mediators. These mediation analyses showed nonsignificant indirect effects. Therefore, attachment orientations do not mediate the association between ideal-partner discrepancies and relationship quality.

4.3 | Discussion

Study 3 largely replicated and confirmed the findings of Study 2. Both attachment orientations were associated with viewing partners as falling short of their ideals on specific ideal dimensions, even when controlling for perceptions of the current partner. Moreover, ideal-partner discrepancies mediated the associations between both attachment anxiety and avoidance and relationship quality. These results, along with those of Study 2, suggest that harsher evaluations of partners on specific ideal dimensions may play a key role in accounting for why attachment insecurity is associated with negative relationship outcomes such as lower satisfaction and poorer relationship quality (Givertz, Woszidlo, Segrin, & Knutson, 2013). The Study 3 findings also show that modeling ideal-partner discrepancies and relationship quality as common fate variables explains a considerable amount of variance in relationship quality.

5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

These three studies are the first to systematically investigate associations between attachment orientations and partner evaluations on the three ideal dimensions known to underpin judgments of hypothetical and actual mates. In doing so, they integrate two broad theoretical frameworks in a way that provides new, important insights into how adult attachment orientations operate as “evaluative lenses” through which people assess hypothetical and current relationship partners. The documented associations between attachment insecurity and partner evaluations are consistent with prior research showing that insecure attachment orientations predict a variety of negative romantic partner appraisals, including lack of trust, poor support, lower intimacy, and maladaptive partner attributions (see Feeney, 2016; Gillath et al., 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for reviews). However, the results also illustrate that attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with evaluating partners as typically falling short on *specific* partner characteristics related to different mating strategies (i.e., long-term vs. short-term), strategies theorized to be systematically tied to specific attachment orientations (Del Giudice, 2018).

Table 1 summarizes the results across all three studies. It demonstrates that, even when different methods are used, specific attachment orientations continue to be associated with specific ideal standards. In particular, we find that attachment anxiety is reliably associated with the evaluation of hypothetical and actual partners on the warmth/trustworthiness (Studies 1, 2, and 3) and status/resources (Studies 2 and 3) ideal dimensions and that attachment avoidance is associated with partner evaluations (hypothetical and actual) on the vitality/attractiveness and status/resources (Studies 1, 2, and 3) dimensions.

With respect to attachment anxiety, warmth/trustworthiness appears to be the critical ideal dimension when evaluating both potential and current romantic partners. Highly anxious individuals harbor chronic, deep concerns about whether their partners truly love them, will support them over time, and can be trusted (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Hence, it is not surprising that the partner ideal of warmth/trustworthiness figures prominently in their routine evaluation of romantic partners (hypothetical or actual); finding and retaining a partner who is warm and trusting should allay many of the worries and concerns that highly anxious individuals harbor, especially as it is tied to a long-term mating strategy (Del Giudice, 2018). From this vantage point, highly anxious individuals really should place emphasis on evaluating partners according to their level of warmth/trustworthiness. With respect to hypothetical partners, these evaluations are likely to manifest in selecting partners who possess characteristics indicative of greater warmth/trustworthiness. With respect to actual

(current) partners, the emphasis on warmth/trustworthiness may be manifested in habitually judging partners as falling short on this ideal dimension, with anxiously attached individuals judging current partners more harshly on warmth/trustworthiness.

With respect to attachment avoidance, partner vitality/attractiveness assumed a more salient role in partner evaluations (see Table 1 and Studies 2 and 3). Although prior research indicates that attachment insecurity (both attachment avoidance and anxiety) is associated with harboring more negative perceptions of close others (Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999), the current findings highlight that negative evaluations of partners on vitality/attractiveness are unique to highly avoidant people. Evaluating current partners more harshly on this dimension may arise because avoidance entails the enactment of a short-term mating strategy and, to a broader degree, a fast life strategy (i.e., greater risk taking and faster sexual maturation to take advantage of opportunities for reproduction in response to difficult familial and/or social environments; Del Giudice, 2018; Simpson & Belsky, 2016). Highly avoidant individuals should, therefore, scrutinize partners more critically for the degree to which they (partners) possess sufficient vitality/attractiveness—qualities that may be indicators of a mate's "good genes," perhaps facilitating shorter-term reproduction.

Both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were associated with placing emphasis on evaluating hypothetical and current partners in terms of their status/resources (with the exception of anxiety in Study 3). The reasons behind these associations, however, are likely to differ for these two types of insecure people. For highly avoidant individuals, greater emphasis may be placed on evaluating partners on status/resources because they judge these characteristics as more valuable in helping them achieve goals and interests outside the relationship. Highly avoidant individuals tend to view close relationships as secondary to achievements in other life domains (Karantzas et al., 2010), so judging a partner as having the capacity to provide practical or instrumental support, tangible resources, or the status to help one ascend social hierarchies should be evaluated quite favorably (Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007). For highly anxious individuals, in contrast, evaluative emphasis on status and resources could translate into experiencing more partner validation, approval, and/or commitment. That is, a partner who is evaluated as being able to invest/share tangible resources or elevate one's social standing may also be perceived as more able to invest in, and perhaps commit to, the relationship. Consistent with this premise, positive associations have been found between attachment anxiety and appreciating the receipt of goods and resources in relationships (e.g., Bartz & Lydon, 2008; Nguyen & Munch, 2011). In a recent study, Brumbaugh, Baren, and Agishtein (2014) found that anxiously attached women were attracted to mates who exhibited status. Thus, even though highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals both emphasize evaluations of romantic partners on the status/resources dimension, they probably do so for different reasons. Thus, even though highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals both emphasize evaluations of romantic partners on the status/resources dimension, they probably do so for different reasons.

It is important to highlight that, with regard to evaluating the *current* partner, attachment orientations were associated with ideal-partner discrepancies in the hypothesized directions (Studies 2 and 3), even when controlling for perceptions of the current partner. Furthermore, specific indirect effects showed that ideal-partner discrepancies largely mediated the associations between attachment orientations and relationship quality. Controlling for partner perceptions in these analyses, in fact, demonstrated little support for the mediating role of partner perceptions. These findings provide further

support for the central role that ideal-partner discrepancies—above and beyond merely partner perceptions—play in the evaluations of romantic partners.

Ideal-partner discrepancies reflect an important sociocognitive mechanism that can help to explain the associations between attachment orientations, mate evaluations, and relationship outcomes such as relationship quality. According to the ISM, ideal-partner discrepancies can yield important, diagnostic information regarding the suitability of a mate (Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Simpson et al., 2001). This is because these discrepancies can help an individual recognize the extent to which a specific partner meets (or falls short of) his or her mate criteria to achieve a good, satisfying relationship. In contrast, perceptions by themselves cannot provide an assessment of whether a specific partner matches a given ideal standard.

5.1 | Limitations and future directions

Although this research provides new, important insights into systematic ties between attachment orientations and ideal standards, it has some limitations. First, our studies are cross-sectional, meaning that causation cannot be inferred. That being said, attachment orientations start developing early in life, and individual differences in adult attachment may often precede the setting and calibration of ideals for most people, which explains why our mediation models assumed a specific temporal sequence. It is important to note that alternative mediation analyses in which attachment orientations were treated as mediators showed smaller and nonsignificant effect sizes, strengthening the case for ideal-partner discrepancies being the critical mediator (Supporting Information). Nevertheless, future research should use longitudinal designs to pinpoint causal associations between these variables and whether there are reciprocal associations between attachment orientations and partner ideals. Second, the Study 2 sample had an uneven number of men and women. Despite this fact, the large sample in Study 2 provides confidence in additional moderation tests, which indicated no gender difference in the degree to which attachment orientations were related to ideal-partner discrepancies. Third, across all studies, our samples included participants who identified themselves as heterosexual or were currently in a heterosexual relationship. We limited our research to heterosexual participants as this was the first investigation to examine the association between attachment orientations in the ISM. The ISM is grounded in an evolutionary perspective of mate evaluation that focuses on heterosexual mate preferences. However, future research should extend the current studies to include nonheterosexual relationships to test the generalizability of our findings.

Finally, although the findings across Studies 2 and 3 speak to how attachment orientations are associated with evaluations of current partners on ideal dimensions, we are unable to determine whether insecurely attached individuals' harsher evaluations of romantic partners are solely reflective of the negative cognitive biases associated with attachment insecurity (Gillath et al., 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In order to confirm their negative views of relationship partners, insecurely attached individuals may become involved with partners who fall short on these ideals. Drawing on self-consistency theory (Snyder & Swann Jr, 1978; Swann Jr & Read, 1981), Gillath et al. (2016) suggests that the desire to maintain a predictable social reality may motivate insecurely attached individuals to interact with others who fit their existing knowledge structures. Therefore, future research could extend the present work by not only focusing on partner evaluations but by investigating a mate's own self-evaluations on the ideal dimensions or gathering informant ratings from close others, such as family members or peers.

5.2 | Conclusion

The current research integrates two major approaches to the study of romantic relationships—attachment theory and the ISM—to provide novel and important insights regarding how attachment orientations are associated with evaluations of partners on core ideal standard dimensions. The findings indicate that attachment orientations are systematically associated with evaluations of both hypothetical and actual romantic partners on specific ideal dimensions that are aligned with the sexual strategies that highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals are likely to pursue. Specifically, insecurely attached individuals not only scrutinize hypothetical romantic partners for the extent to which they display qualities that align with their attachment needs and sexual strategies, they also judge actual (current) partners more harshly (i.e., have larger ideal-partner discrepancies) on theoretically meaningful ideal dimensions. These discrepancies, in turn, appear to serve as an important psychological mechanism in explaining why insecurely attached people tend to experience poorer relationship quality.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are available and can be obtained via email at gery.karantzas@deakin.edu.au. The materials used in the research are available and can be obtained at https://osf.io/bz5t6/?view_only=f3e0869b2de04289873d456434356234.

ORCID

Gery C. Karantzas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1503-2991>

Jeffry A. Simpson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1899-2493>

REFERENCES

- Baldwin, M. W. (1992). Relational schemas and the processing of social information. *Psychological Bulletin*, *112*, 461–484.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult romantic attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46–76). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Brumbaugh, C. C., Baren, A., & Agishtein, P. (2014). Attraction to attachment insecurity: Flattery, appearance, and status's role in mate preferences. *Personal Relationships*, *21*, 288–308.
- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychological Review*, *100*, 204–232.
- Campbell, L., Simpson, J. A., Kashy, D. A., & Fletcher, G. J. (2001). Ideal standards, the self, and flexibility of ideals in close relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 447–462.
- Del Giudice, M. (2018). Sex differences in attachment styles. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *25*, 1–5.
- Eastwick, P. W., Luchies, L. B., Finkel, E. J., & Hunt, L. L. (2014). The predictive validity of ideal partner preferences: A review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *140*, 623–665.
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Buchner, A., & Lang, A. G. (2009). Statistical power analyses using G* Power 3.1: Tests for correlation and regression analyses. *Behavior Research Methods*, *41*, 1149–1160.
- Feeney, J. A. (2016). Adult romantic attachment: Developments in the study of couple relationships. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 434–463). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

- Fletcher, G. J. O., & Simpson, J. A. (2000). Ideal standards in close relationships: Their structure and functions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9, 102–105.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., & Thomas, G. (2000). The measurement of perceived relationship quality components: A confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 340–354.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., Thomas, G., & Giles, L. (1999). Ideals in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 72–89.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Tither, J. M., O'Loughlin, C., Friesen, M., & Overall, N. (2004). Warm and homely or cold and beautiful? Sex differences in trading off traits in mate selection. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 659–672.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., & Thomas, G. (1996). Close relationship lay theories: Their structure and function. In G. J. O. Fletcher & J. Fitness (Eds.), *Knowledge structures in close relationships: A social psychological approach* (pp. 3–24). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Gangestad, S. W., & Simpson, J. A. (2000). The evolution of human mating: Trade-offs and strategic pluralism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 23, 573–587.
- Gillath, O., Karantzas, G. C., & Fraley, R. C. (2016). *Adult attachment: A concise introduction to theory and research*. London, England: Academic Press.
- Girme, Y. U., Overall, N. C., Simpson, J. A., & Fletcher, G. J. (2015). “All or nothing”: Attachment avoidance and the curvilinear effects of partner support. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 450–475.
- Givertz, M., Wozidlo, A., Segrin, C., & Knutson, K. (2013). Direct and indirect effects of attachment orientation on relationship quality and loneliness in married couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30, 1096–1120.
- Karantzas, G. C., Feeney, J. A., Goncalves, C. V., & McCabe, M. P. (2014). Towards an integrative attachment-based model of relationship functioning. *British Journal of Psychology*, 105, 413–434.
- Karantzas, G. C., Feeney, J. A., & Wilkinson, R. (2010). Is less more? Confirmatory factor analysis of the attachment style questionnaires. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27, 749–780.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2006). *Dyadic data analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford press.
- Lackenbauer, S. D., & Campbell, L. (2012). Measuring up: The unique emotional and regulatory outcomes of different perceived partner-ideal discrepancies in romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103, 472–488.
- Ledermann, T., Bodenmann, G., Rudaz, M., & Bradbury, T. N. (2010). Stress, communication, and marital quality in couples. *Family Relations*, 59, 195–206.
- Ledermann, T., & Kenny, D. A. (2012). The common fate model for dyadic data: Variations of a theoretically important but underutilized model. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26, 140–148.
- Ledermann, T., Macho, S., & Kenny, D. A. (2011). Assessing mediation in dyadic data using the actor-partner interdependence model. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 18, 595–612.
- MacKinnon, D. P. (2008). *Multivariate applications series. Introduction to statistical mediation analysis*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- McArdle, J. J. (2009). Latent variable modeling of differences and changes with longitudinal data. *Annual review of psychology*, 60, 577–605.
- Mikulincer, M., & Erev, I. (1991). Attachment style and the structure of romantic love. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 30, 273–291.
- Mikulincer, M., & Horesh, N. (1999). Adult attachment style and the perception of others: The role of projective mechanisms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 1022–1034.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2016). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Overall, N. C., Fletcher, G. J., & Simpson, J. A. (2006). Regulation processes in intimate relationships: The role of ideal standards. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 662–685.
- Schindler, I., Fagundes, C. P., & Murdock, K. W. (2010). Predictors of romantic relationship formation: Attachment style, prior relationships, and dating goals. *Personal Relationships*, 17, 97–105.
- Simpson, J. A., & Belsky, J. (2016). Attachment theory within a modern evolutionary framework. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (3rd ed., pp. 91–116). New York, NY: Guilford.

- Simpson, J. A., Fletcher, G. J. O., & Campbell, L. (2001). The structure and function of ideal standards in close relationships. In G. J. O. Fletcher & M. Clark (Eds.), *The Blackwell handbook in social psychology: Interpersonal processes* (pp. 86–106). Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., & Phillips, D. (1996). Conflict in close relationships: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*, 899–914.
- Simpson, J. A., Winterheld, H. A., Rholes, W. S., & Oriña, M. M. (2007). Working models of attachment and reactions to different forms of caregiving from romantic partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *93*, 466–477.
- Snyder, M., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (1978). Behavioral confirmation in social interaction: From social perception to social reality. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *14*, 148–162.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., & Read, S. J. (1981). Self-verification processes: How we sustain our self-conceptions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *17*, 351–372.
- van Lange, P. A. M., & Rusbult, C. E. (2011). Interdependence theory. In P. A. M. van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 251–272). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- von Eye, A. (1990). *Introduction to configural frequency analysis: The search for types and antitypes in cross-classification*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- von Eye, A. (2001). Configural frequency analysis—version 2000. A program for 32 bit windows operating systems. *Methods of Psychological Research Online*, *6*, 129–139.
- von Eye, A., & Bogat, G. A. (2005). Logistic regression and prediction Configural frequency analysis—a comparison. *Psychology Science*, *47*, 326–341.
- von Eye, A., Mair, P., & Mun, E. Y. (2010). *Advances in configural frequency analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Karantzias GC, Simpson JA, Overall NC, Campbell L. The association between attachment orientations and partner evaluations: An ideal standards perspective. *Pers Relationship*. 2019;26:628–653. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12297>