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Bringing the Partner Into Attachment Theory and Research

In this commentary, we discuss the significant role that relationship partners assume in the everyday lives of individuals. As Shaver and Mikulincer's excellent review indicates, the partner seems to be missing from large sections of attachment theory and research. This is problematic because partners are often the most salient and important feature in an individual's daily environment. We discuss why partners are ''missing,'' why their inclusion in research is essential, and how bringing the partner more directly into attachment theory and research will provide novel and important insights into romantic relationships. We highlight these points by discussing research that has examined the impact of partners on relationships in the context of Simpson and Rholes's (2012) attachment diathesis-stress process model.

In their feature article, Shaver and Mikulincer (2012) provide an excellent overview of attachment theory and research, including what attachment theory can offer to family scholars. As they articulate, attachment theory provides a remarkably detailed and comprehensive account of personality, social development, and relationships ''from the cradle to the grave'' (Bowlby, 1979, p. 129). Perhaps no single theory in the psychological sciences has generated more

empirical research during the past 30 years than attachment theory. Bringing this grand theory and its robust body of empirical findings to the closer attention of family researchers is an important mission.

However, when one steps back and reviews both attachment theory and the extensive body of research it has generated, a vital piece of the interpersonal puzzle seems to be missing: Where is the *partner*—often the individual's primary attachment figure—in attachment theory and research? In most relationships, partners constitute the most salient and important part of an individual's daily environment. Especially in close and long-standing relationships, partners facilitate, alter, or impede the most cherished plans and goals that individuals have, regardless of whether individuals have a secure, an avoidant, or an anxious attachment orientation.

For example, a highly secure individual who wants to be nurturing and supportive of his or her romantic partner is likely to find this goal easier to accomplish if the partner also has a secure attachment orientation (and is open to receiving nurturance and support) than if the partner has an avoidant orientation (and dislikes receiving these behaviors). The ability of secure individuals to express and ''act on'' their positive working models should be greater when their daily environment contains a secure partner. In contrast, a highly avoidant individual who yearns to maintain emotional independence from his or her romantic partner ought to find this goal much more difficult to accomplish if the partner is anxiously attached (and wants to receive constant reassurance and support) than

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if the partner is also avoidantly attached. Thus, the ability of insecurely attached individuals to act on their negative working models should depend on who their partner is and the specific needs, expectations, and behaviors that those individuals express.

WHERE IS THE PARTNER IN ATTACHMENT THEORY AND RESEARCH?

In some ways, the partner is present in the attachment literature. Self-report attachment measures ask questions about partners or close others, and attachment-relevant situations often make reference to, and sometimes include, the partner. Thus, individuals' mental representations of their partners are alive and well in attachment research. However, the number of attachment studies that include actual partner variables (e.g., the partner's actual attachment orientation scores; his or her actual thoughts, feelings, or behaviors) is surprisingly few. By incorporating the partner more directly into our thinking and modeling, we can ask and answer a host of novel questions, such as ''What is it like to be involved with an anxiously attached or an avoidantly attached partner across time?'' and ''Are certain combinations of attachment orientations more versus less conducive to relationship stability and quality?''

So why have partners not assumed a more central role in attachment theory and research? There are several possible reasons. First, when developing attachment theory, Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) discussed and derived predictions for actor effects (e.g., how an individual's attachment orientation should predict his or her own behavior), but not partner effects (e.g., how the partner's attachment orientation should predict the individual's behavior). Consequently, attachment theory does not explicitly anticipate the situations in which partner effects should and should not emerge and which specific patterns ought to emerge. Second, there has been a tendency in the social and behavioral sciences to develop and test individual-centered theories, models, and hypotheses. Third, dyadic data are difficult to collect and analyze. Only in the past 20 years have researchers had access to good, easy-to-use dyadic or group data-analytic programs such as the social relations model (Kenny & LaVoie, 1984) and the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Fourth, in

a surprising number of ''relationship'' studies, especially standard lab experiments, data are collected on only one dyad member (the focal individual), and little if anything is often known about that individual's partner. Fifth, actor effects often may be greater or more numerous than partner effects in many interpersonal contexts.

To be fair to the attachment literature, Shaver and Mikulincer (2012) do highlight the importance of understanding dyadic interaction patterns (see their section titled ''Family of Origin and the Development of Adult Attachment Orientations''). Much of this research, however, has not been part of mainstream work on attachment processes. There are, of course, glimmerings of partner effects, even among the predominantly individual-centered studies that Shaver and Mikulincer review. They include research showing connections between attachment orientations and partner violence in abusive relationships (e.g., Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994), studies examining parent–child interactions in distressing situations (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2000; Edelstein et al., 2004) and work focusing on family interactions (e.g., Paley et al., 2005). These more ''dyadic'' studies, however, tend to be the exception in the attachment literature rather than the rule.

THE ATTACHMENT DIATHESIS-STRESS PROCESS MODEL

There have been some recent attempts to bring the partner more squarely into attachment theory and research. One example is the attachment diathesis-stress process model (Simpson & Rholes, 2012; see Figure 1). As Shaver and Mikulincer (2012) discuss, attachment theory has both a normative component that explains species-typical patterns of behavior (e.g., how individuals form attachment bonds) and an individual-difference component that explains why people differ in how they think, feel, and behave in certain situations (i.e., attachment orientations). Simpson and Rholes's (2012) model can be understood from both viewpoints.

From a normative perspective, three kinds of negative events activate the attachment system: (1) negative external events (e.g., dangerous situations, threatening events), (2) negative relational events (e.g., relationship conflict, separation from attachment figures, abandonment), and
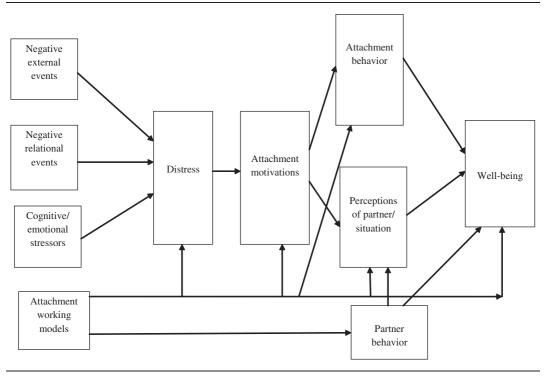
FIGURE 1. THE ATTACHMENT DIATHESIS-STRESS PROCESS MODEL.

Source: Simpson and Rholes (2012).

(3) cognitive or emotional stressors (e.g., imagined negative events that could occur). These events evoke distress in all people, including those who are motivated to deactivate or suppress feelings of distress and vulnerability (i.e., avoidant individuals). Once it is aroused, distress automatically triggers the core (species-typical) attachment motivations to seek proximity, support, and reassurance from attachment figures in virtually all people, even if those motivations are not consciously experienced or directly acted on. These attachment motivations, in turn, elicit attachment behaviors designed to lower and regulate distress (and ideally to deactivate the attachment system), and they influence perceptions and interpretations of both the partner and the current situation. Perceptions of the partner and situation are also determined by who the partner is (i.e., his or her attachment orientation) and how the partner behaves (i.e., what he or she says or does in the situation). However, the attachment behaviors that individuals enact and the partner and relationship perceptions they have also depend on their own attachment histories and working models. These

enacted behaviors and perceptions, in turn, affect the personal and relational well-being that individuals feel, report, or display in (or after) the stressful situation. In other words, when the attachment system is activated, a series of interpersonal exchanges are set in motion between the two relationship partners, all of which can be influenced by their respective attachment orientations and underlying working models.

From a normative standpoint, attachment orientations and working models can affect all stages of this diathesis-stress process model, as indicated by the lines going from attachment working models leading into each stage of the model in Figure 1. For example, working models can influence how distressed individuals feel (or acknowledge feeling) in response to negative or stressful events, and they govern the specific types of attachment motivations that are evoked when those individuals experience distress. Working models can also affect the types of attachment behaviors that individuals display once attachment motivations are elicited, how they perceive their partners in the situation, and how their partners behave in turn. Each

pathway can influence the quality of personal and relational well-being both during and following the stressful event, as indexed by variables such as relationship satisfaction, relationship quality, depression, and other outcomes. In certain instances, working models may exert a direct effect on well-being, independent of what else occurs during a stressful situation.

From an individual difference perspective, the diathesis-stress process model also showcases the different pathways that avoidant, anxious, and secure individuals are likely to follow when they experience certain types of distressing situations (see Figure 1), and it specifies some of the points at which partners can influence the situation as it unfolds. (For the sake of parsimony, the model does not include all possible partner pathways.)

When individuals with secure attachment histories encounter distressing situations (few of which should be caused by cognitive or emotional stressors), they should realize that they are upset and may need assistance from their attachment figures, depending on both the nature of the stressor and the skills they possess to address it effectively. Given the positive nature of their working models, secure people should be motivated to manage distress by turning to their partners for assistance with the problem or issue, which ought to increase closeness and intimacy (Mikulincer, 1998). This tendency should be facilitated by their use of problem-focused coping strategies, which allow secure people to resolve the problem (the primary source of their distress) constructively, quickly, and completely, and to benefit from their partner's helpful actions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). The attachment behaviors that secure individuals enact should involve requesting and/or seeking proximity, comfort, and support from their attachment figures, which should help them dissipate distress so they can resume other important life tasks. Because of their positive working models and relationship-centered coping strategies, the partners of secure individuals should also behave in more positive and constructive ways when secure individuals request comfort, care, or support from them (unless, of course, their partners are insecurely attached), and partners should also feel that their supportive efforts are more effective. In addition, secure individuals should perceive their partner's intentions, motives, and actions in the situation as more benevolent. These positive perceptions of

the partner and the situation should result in better personal and relational well-being following most stressful situations, which should further reinforce positive interactions between partners.

The model pathways are different and divergent for the two types of insecurely attached people. When anxiously attached individuals encounter stressful situations (more of which should be generated by cognitive or emotional stressors, given these individuals' tendency to ruminate over negative outcomes), they should be aware that they are upset and should want immediate, direct, and unqualified care and reassurance from their attachment figures. Considering the ambivalent and conflicted nature of their working models, anxious individuals should be motivated to reduce distress by doing whatever it takes to increase their flagging sense of felt insecurity (Mikulincer, 1998). This process ought to be exacerbated by their tendency to use emotion-focused or hyperactivating coping strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), which direct their attention to the source of distress, trigger further rumination about worst-case outcomes, and divert their attention away from how to constructively remove the stressor(s) that initially activated their attachment systems. As a result, the attachment behaviors that anxious individuals exhibit should take the form of intense and obsessive proximity, support, and reassurance seeking from their attachment figures (emotional clinginess), which do not abate their distress. Because anxiously attached individuals are less able to reap the rewards of their partner's supportive efforts, the partners of anxiously attached individuals should grow weary of having to provide constant and underappreciated reassurance and support, which anxious individuals may construe as rejection. Anxious individuals should also perceive a partner's intentions, motives, and actions in less benevolent terms during the stressful situation, thus underestimating the amount of care and support their partners have provided (or are willing to provide) in the future. These negative perceptions of the partner and situation should, in turn, generate less personal and relational well-being following most stressful situations. Thus, when one individual in a relationship is highly anxious, a social interaction pattern that fosters more negative behavioral displays in both relationship partners may emerge.

When dealing with stressful events (few of which should be caused by cognitive or

emotional stressors), avoidant individuals may not be fully aware of (or may not acknowledge) that they are upset. They should also neither want nor seek help from their attachment figures. Given the negative and cynical nature of their working models, avoidant individuals should be motivated to reduce and contain distress by being self-reliant, which allows them to reestablish a sense of independence, autonomy, and personal control (Mikulincer, 1998). This process should be facilitated by their use of avoidant and deactivating coping strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), which suppress awareness of their distress, attachment needs, and attachment behaviors, at least in the short run. As a result, avoidant individuals engage in attachment behaviors that permit some contact with their attachment figures but at a safe and emotionally comfortable distance and on terms dictated by avoidant individuals. In view of these negative working models and avoidant and deactivating coping tactics, the partners of avoidant individuals should typically offer them less reassurance and less support, which avoidant individuals should prefer but still may interpret as rejection. Avoidant individuals should also perceive their partner's intentions, motives, and behaviors in the stressful situation in less benevolent ways, thus underestimating the amount of care and support that their partners are willing to provide (or have already given them). These negative partner and situation perceptions should, in turn, lead to less personal and relational well-being in the wake of most stressful situations.

FOCUSING ON THE PARTNER

Past attachment research has documented that individual differences in attachment predict different expectations and behaviors when secure, anxious, and avoidant people think about or sometimes interact with partners in attachment-relevant situations (see Shaver and Mikulincer, 2012). However, we know relatively little about how an individual's patterns of thoughts, feelings, and especially behavior vary in relation to the characteristics and behavior of his or her current relationship partner. Let's consider some examples of the significant role that partners may assume in how secure and insecure individuals think, feel, and behave during stressful situations at different points of Simpson and Rholes's (2012) process model.

When a secure individual is distressed and his or her core attachment motivations (i.e., to directly seek comfort and support from his or her partner) are activated, the way in which she or he perceives the partner and situation, how she or he behaves, and the outcome of the situation should depend on whether the partner has a secure versus insecure attachment orientation and how the partner behaves in the situation. When distressed, a secure individual who has a secure partner is likely to perceive the partner as more willing and able to provide good care and comfort, to view the situation as more manageable, and to turn to his or her partner to alleviate distress than if the secure individual has an insecurely attached partner. This should result in greater subjective well-being, both immediately and perhaps across time (see Figure 1). If, however, a secure individual has an avoidant partner, the secure individual should perceive the partner as less willing and perhaps less capable of giving sufficient support, view the situation as intractable, and either self-soothe or rely on other people (nonattachment figures) to reduce distress. This should result in lower levels of subjective well-being.

Let's flip the roles. When an anxious individual is distressed and his or her core attachment motivations (i.e., to cling to his or her partner to increase felt security) are evoked, the way in which the anxious individual perceives the partner and situation, how she or he behaves, and the eventual outcome should also depend on who the partner is. An anxious individual who has a secure partner should perceive the partner as more willing and able to provide good support, view the situation as somewhat more manageable, and rely on his or her partner to alleviate distress, thus resulting in improved well-being. But if an anxious individual has an avoidant partner, more negative perceptions, behaviors, and outcomes should result. In fact, when anxious partners need or expect support and their avoidant partners fail to give it (or, worse yet, behave in a dismissive or condescending manner), relationships should become particularly difficult and unstable.

ILLUSTRATIVE RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF PARTNERS

Recently, our lab and others have derived and tested predictions that involve either

partner effects or actor–partner interaction effects in a series of behavioral observation studies with romantic couples. In these studies, romantic couples have been exposed to different types of attachment-relevant stressors (e.g., capitalization situations, conflict resolution discussions, support provision discussions), and many of the constructs depicted in Figure 1 have been measured. We now discuss some examples of this partner-focused research.

Capitalization interactions are those in which an individual discloses a positive event to his or her partner, and the partner's enthusiastic response allows the individual to experience a secondary boost from—to further capitalize on—the positive event. Successful capitalization interactions—those in which a partner is highly responsive—are associated with more positive relationship outcomes, such as increased intimacy and elevated relationship satisfaction (e.g., Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). In a recent study, we tested how attachment orientations are related to perceptions of responsiveness during capitalization discussions (Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, & Frazier, 2011). Dating couples engaged in two videotaped discussions in which each individual disclosed a very positive event to his or her partner. Following each discussion, each individual reported his or her perceptions of the partner's amount of responsiveness (when in the disclosing role) or his or her own level of responsiveness (when in the responding role). Trained observers also rated the quality of each partner's responsiveness. Romantic attachment orientations were measured using the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Avoidant responders rated themselves and were observed to be less responsive to their disclosing partners, reflecting a standard actor effect. However, actor–partner statistical interactions involving attachment orientations also emerged. For example, the actor effects for avoidant responders were stronger when their disclosing partners were anxiously attached. In addition, when anxious responders were dating avoidant disclosing partners, anxious responders underestimated (underreported) their own responsiveness. These findings reveal how the opposing attachment motives of anxious partners (to achieve greater closeness and felt security) and avoidant partners (to limit closeness and intimacy) play out in capitalization situations, and they suggest that certain attachment pairings can produce particularly caustic discussions that result in very low subjective well-being.

Conflict represents another powerful situation in which partners can strongly affect each other's outcomes and attachment concerns are frequently activated. Tran and Simpson (2009) investigated emotional and behavioral reactions to threatening accommodation situations in married couples. They asked married couples to discuss difficult issues that required major concessions by one or both partners. The discussions were videotaped and then coded by trained observers. Although self-reported anxious attachment hindered each partner's tendency to behave constructively during these taxing discussions, higher relationship commitment buffered anxious partners from their insecurities. For example, individuals who were highly anxious but also highly committed to their partners or relationships felt less rejection from their partners, perceived greater acceptance from them, and displayed more constructive accommodation behaviors. Importantly, anxious individuals behaved in a more constructive and accommodative fashion especially if their partners reported being more committed to them and the relationship. Partner commitment, in other words, appears to buffer anxiously attached people from acting on their insecurities.

Partners' ability to recover from conflict should help them avoid the negative repercussions of conflict spillover (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). In a recent longitudinal study in which one relationship partner had been studied since birth, we examined how romantic partners emotionally recovered immediately following a conflict discussion during a videotaped cooldown discussion (Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, & Collins, 2011). Secure attachment, which was assessed when longitudinal participants were infants in Ainsworth's Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), predicted better observer-rated conflict recovery in both the longitudinal participants and their romantic partners at age 20–23. Moreover, having a partner who recovered better was associated with both more positive relationship emotions and higher relationship quality. Of particular interest, the longitudinal participants' attachment early security and their romantic partners' ability to recover from conflict statistically interacted to predict relationship stability 2 years later. Longitudinal participants who were insecure as infants and involved with partners

who showed poorer conflict recovery were significantly more likely to have broken up 2 years later than were other people in the sample.

In other research, we have examined the uses of and responses to different types of humor between romantic partners. For example, Winterheld, Simpson, and Orina (in press) videotaped couples while they were having a conflict discussion. Attachment orientations predicted different observer-rated uses of and responses to different forms of humor depending on partners' attachment orientations. People who reported being more avoidantly attached used more aggressive humor (humor that is manipulative, offensive, or disparaging) and less affiliative humor (humor that enhances cohesiveness and reduces tension) than did secure people. Anxiously attached individuals, in contrast, displayed more self-defeating humor (e.g., making self-disparaging humorous comments or jokes at one's own expense). Importantly, however, the partner's behavior significantly altered what happened during these discussions; both anxious and avoidant individuals reacted more negatively when their partners displayed the type of humor that they themselves most often used. Avoidant individuals, for example, reacted more negatively when their partners directed more aggressive and less affiliative humor at them. These forms of humor are relevant to attachment concerns. For instance, a partner's display of affiliative humor may draw attention to closeness and intimacy in the relationship, setting off alarm bells in avoidantly attached individuals, who may then respond with aggressive humor to reestablish their independence. Differences in the way in which avoidant and anxious people enact and react to different forms of humor dovetail with the specific attachment motives and concerns they possess.

Similar findings have been found in another humor study conducted in a support-provision context. Individuals were observed providing emotional support (e.g., reassurance) and practical support (e.g., advice or offers to help) to their romantic partners (Howland & Simpson, 2012). Depending on both the type of humor used (aggressive or affiliative) and the attachment orientation of the recipient, humor either facilitated or hindered each couple's support exchange. When they were randomly assigned to disclose a personal goal (i.e., when in a support-receiving role), anxious individuals reacted more

negatively to their partner's use of aggressive humor, most likely because of their chronic concerns about receiving deficient support from their partner. In contrast, less anxious (more secure) individuals reacted more positively when their partners displayed aggressive humor, most likely because they viewed it in jest. These findings further demonstrate the importance of considering the partner and his or her behavior in predicting the behavioral and emotional impact of attachment orientations in specific situations. They also suggest that individuals may adjust their behavior and expectations on the basis of their partner's attachment orientation or their partner's prior behavioral reactions, including the amount of practical or emotional support their partners offer or request.

Other labs have also documented noteworthy partner effects. In a social interaction study of caregiving in dating couples, Collins and Feeney (2000) found that the more stressful a support-recipient believed an issue was, the more she or he displayed support-seeking behaviors and received support from his or her partner in return. If the care was rated by observers as more responsive, recipients reported better outcomes by the end of the discussion. Self-reported attachment security significantly affected the effectiveness of these exchanges, however. Anxious support providers offered comparatively less responsive care to their partners, especially when their partners did not exhibit support-seeking behaviors. Avoidance also interfered with support seeking in that avoidant individuals were less likely to display support-seeking cues. Thus, in both cases, the attachment orientation of one partner statistically interacted with the behavior of the other partner to affect support outcomes.

CONCLUSION

These research examples confirm that partners really matter. Attachment orientations, whether in infancy or adulthood, do not develop and are not expressed in a social vacuum, and their powerful influences are not confined to actor effects. Rather, the working models that underlie attachment orientations in both children and adults are related to patterns of behavior that are contingent on who the current attachment figures is and how she or he thinks, feels, and behaves in specific attachment-relevant situations. Features of the partner may reinforce,

maintain, or sometimes challenge or contradict the working models that individuals bring into their relationships.

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