

# THE ROLE OF ATTACHMENT STYLE AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS OF THE PERCEIVER IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF ROMANTIC PARTNER

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ABSTRACT

Intimate relationships can influence interpersonal perception because they are characterized by emotional involvement and close attachment between the members of the dyad; thus, attachment theory and research may shed light on interpersonal perception within intimate relationships. In this study, a probability sample of 179 men and 198 women who were married or involved in a committed dating relationship, was examined to test the hypothesis that attachment style and degree of public commitment to the relationship (i.e. marital status) would predict perceptions of partners. Secure individuals had positive appraisals of their partner regardless of marital status, suggesting that secure individuals do not need concrete indicators of commitment to feel positively towards their partners. For insecure attachment styles, perception of partner was associated with the degree of public commitment as well as sex and attachment style of the perceiver. These findings highlight the need for more studies recognizing how differences in sex and marital status affect the association between attachment styles and perceptions of partners.

KEY WORDS ● attachment ● marital status ● perception of partner ● relationship awareness

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Intimate romantic relationships provide a unique context for the perception of others. Because partners of intimate relationships have consider-

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able emotional investment in the relationship, it is arguable that members of intimate dyads should have more distinctive appraisals of the other than members of non-intimate dyads. Yet few researchers have capitalized on personal relationships as a unique and valuable context to study the influence of attachment on perception of partners.

In this study we explore attachment style and the appraisals one makes about the other, utilizing intimate relationships as a context in which distinctive perceptions of others occur. Not only do we examine internal cognitive structures of the other that evolve out of previous experiences with early attachment figures, but we also examine the extent to which the association between attachment style and perceptions of the partner differ according to relationship contexts. Specifically, we examine the implications of public commitment of relationships (i.e. marital status) for attachment and perception of partners in a probability sample survey of unmarried and married couples. We predict that perceptions of romantic partners differ as a function of both attachment style and marital status.

Researchers have primarily conceptualized attachment behaviors as a function of cognitive structures concerning self, other and the relationship between the two that develop out of early relationships with caregivers. Bowlby (1973) theorized that through early experiences with caretakers, children develop 'internal working models' of themselves and significant others that provide mechanisms for continuity in attachment style. The child develops beliefs about self regarding whether one is worthy of care and attention as well as beliefs about whether significant others are dependable, responsive and trustworthy. These working models are then used to guide expectations, perceptions and behavior in future relationships, and appear to be responsible for individuals displaying particular styles of attachment behaviors that remain consistent across the lifespan (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Hazan & Shaver (1987) were the first to empirically examine attachment styles in adult intimate relationships. They found that there are unique beliefs and emotion constellations for the secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment types. Individuals with secure attachment styles describe their relationships as happy and their partners as trustworthy. Furthermore, secure individuals have friendships with their partners as well as romantic relationships. On the other hand, individuals with the anxious/ambivalent attachment type experience extreme emotional highs and lows within their romantic relationships, and have obsessive pre-occupations with their partners. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style are characterized by a fear of intimacy and a lack of acceptance of the partners faults. Since Hazan & Shaver's study, adult attachment research has expanded in multiple directions, including the study of attachment and the expression of emotions (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), unconscious defenses (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995) current relationship perceptions (Feeney & Noller, 1991), behaviors (Kunce & Shaver, 1994), and functioning (Senchak & Leonard, 1992).

The underlying assumption in work on attachment is that attachment

behaviors are based on internal cognitive structures developed as a result of early attachment relationships and are not affected by current relationship dynamics. But as Hazan & Shaver (1987) have noted, it is easy to over-emphasize attachment as a personality distinction and to under-emphasize the contextual forces that encourage different types of attachment behaviors. While attachment styles are based within the individual, and thus transcend particular relationships, it is important to recognize that they have evolved from the individual's relation to another and will always be relational in nature. In fact, Sroufe & Fleeson (1986) have argued that attachment can be viewed as a descriptor of relationship types as well as a descriptor of individuals' styles. According to Sroufe & Fleeson, attachment behavior between infant and caregiver represents a behavioral organization of the relationship between the two. From this relationship emerges a second attachment organization that exists within the self. Although this second attachment organization is located within the individual, it continues to be relational in nature. It is composed of the individual's perception of self in relation to others and is used as the starting point for future attachment relationships. While the organization of attachment within the self is responsible for the continuity of attachment styles across relationships, the fact that it is about the process of relating to significant others means that it is also influenced by current relationships. According to this line of thinking, attachment behaviors can be explained by working models internal to the individual as well as relationship processes that are external.

*Attachment and perception of self and other.* Guided by Bowlby's claim that working models of self and other play an integral role in the attachment process, researchers have explored how individuals with different attachment styles have distinct views about themselves and their significant others. Collins & Read (1990) found that individuals with a secure attachment style have positive beliefs about themselves (e.g. self-worth, social competence, sense of control) and positive beliefs about others (e.g. view others as trustworthy, dependable and altruistic), whereas individuals with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style have negative beliefs about themselves but positive views of others, and individuals with an avoidant attachment style have a positive view of themselves but a negative view of others. Likewise, Feeney & Noller (1990) found that avoidant individuals, in contrast to secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals, were more likely to feel mistrustful of others.

Feeney & Noller (1991) were able to discriminate between dating college students with secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles with one discriminate function that measured the idealization of romantic partner. Individuals with an anxious/ambivalent attachment type were most likely to idealize their partner, followed by individuals with a secure attachment type, whereas individuals with an avoidant attachment type were least likely to idealize their partner. These findings suggest that attachment styles may play a significant role in how individuals view their partners.

*The present study.* The aims of the present study were (i) to explore the relationship between appraisals of partner and attachment style, and (ii) to examine how marital status moderates the association between attachment style and partner appraisal.

*Hypothesis 1:* Individuals with secure and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles will have a more positive view of their partner than individuals with avoidant attachment styles. This hypothesis is based on previous studies that indicate that secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals are more likely than avoidant individuals to give positive appraisals of their partners (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990).

*Hypothesis 2:* Relationship status moderates the association between perception of partner and attachment style. Because the dynamics of the current romantic partnership should have implications for attachment behaviors, the degree of commitment between partners should have implications for perception of partner. Marriage is one way for each partner to demonstrate their overt commitment to each other, which provides a concrete indicator to each partner about the other's level of commitment. However, we propose that overt displays of commitment work in conjunction with internal working models of other (i.e. attachment style). Both secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals may rate their partners positively; however, the factors related to positive appraisals may differ for secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals. Secure individuals may view their partner positively because of their previous positive experiences with their caretakers; however, anxious/ambivalent individuals may be motivated to view others favorably because of their own feelings of low self-esteem.

Previous research suggests that individuals with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style are uncertain about their own worth yet optimistic about the worth and abilities of significant others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). We argue that a positive view of a partner because of one's own lack of self-esteem, places unrealistic expectations on one's partner. Since anxious/ambivalent individuals are idealistic about their partners (Feeney & Noller, 1991), they are more likely to become disillusioned about them as the relationship progresses and they learn more about the partners' actual attributes. Since the act of getting married is one indicator that the relationship has progressed, married individuals, in contrast to dating individuals, are more likely to base their assessment of their partner on actual experiences and less on what they want their partners to be. Thus, among the dating couples, we predict that anxious/ambivalent and secure individuals will rate their partners higher than individuals with avoidant attachment styles (prediction 1); however, among the married couples, the anxious/ambivalent individuals will have a lower appraisal of their partners than the two other attachment types (prediction 2). Using the same logic, we expect also that among the individuals with anxious/ambivalent attachment styles, married respondents will have a lower appraisal of their partner than dating respondents (prediction 3). For the secure individuals, we expect that there will be no difference between married and unmarried

couples because secure individuals have a consistently positive, yet realistic, appraisal of partner.

We also expect there to be a complex relationship between attachment style, relationship status and appraisal of partners for individuals with avoidant attachment styles. Previous research indicates that individuals with avoidant attachment styles do not view others as trustworthy, dependable or altruistic (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990). Theoretically, these views of other are based on negative experiences of one's caretaker being unavailable and unresponsive. Because attachment types are working models based on previous experiences of self and other, avoidant individuals may have an overly negative view of the partner's trustworthiness and dependability. We argue that because avoidant individuals are more skeptical about their partners, they are likely to undervalue them. However, as the relationship progresses and individuals with avoidant attachment styles become more secure in their relationships, we expect that they will view their partners more positively. Therefore, we predict that married individuals with avoidant attachment styles will have a more positive view of their partner than avoidant individuals in unmarried romantic relationships (prediction 4).

### **Method**

The data were collected by professional interviewers from the Survey Research Center at the Institute for Social Research. Interviewers screened 2319 households in the tri-county Detroit metropolitan area to obtain an area probability sample of 238 couples. To avoid the complications of studying remarriage, only couples who had never been married or were in their first marriage were eligible to participate in this study. An unmarried couple would be eligible if both partners had never been married and if they had been in the relationship for 6 months or more. Married couples were eligible if both partners were in their first marriage and had been married 25 years or less. Overall, there was a 70 percent response rate, meaning that 70 percent of those who were eligible agreed to participate in this study. Respondents were paid \$30 for their participation. For a detailed description of how this sample was obtained, see Acitelli (1997).

The sample used in this study was composed of 130 unmarried respondents in a dating relationship (65 couples) and 212 married respondents (106 couples). Only individuals who clearly fell into one of the three attachment types were included in the analyses (110 married and 69 unmarried men, 123 married and 75 unmarried women). Student's *t*-tests were conducted to insure that respondents who could not be classified into one of the three groups were not different from those who could. There were no significant differences in marital status, perception of partner, and length of relationship between these two groups.

For unmarried couples, the average length of time in the relationship was 3 years. The ages of respondents in dating relationships ranged from 18 to 48 years old. Their mean age was 26 years. For personal income, 54 percent of dating respondents' income was below \$15,000, and 46 percent was at or above \$15,000. For household income, counting everyone living in the household, 50

percent of the household had income below \$40,000 and 50 percent had incomes at or above \$40,000. The average educational level was 1 year of post-secondary education. Their ethnic background was 61.1 percent White, 37.9 percent Black, 1 percent American-Indian or Alaskan Native.

The average length of time in the relationship for the married couples was 14 years. Married respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 59 years old. Their mean age was 36. For personal income, 46 percent of married respondents' income was below \$25,000 and 54 percent was at or above \$25,000. For household income, counting everyone living in the household, 27 percent of the household had income below \$40,000 and 73 percent had incomes at or above \$40,000. The average educational level was 2 years of post-secondary education. Their ethnic background was 82.8 percent White, 14.3 percent Black, 0.5 percent American-Indian or Alaskan Native, 2.4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander.

Standardized face-to-face interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes. Both partners of each couple participated individually in 90-minute interviews, out of hearing range of one another. Respondents were asked a number of questions about their lives together as a couple. The present study analyzes responses to a portion of questions asked in the individual interviews.

Respondents were asked to rate their partner on various descriptors. For our purpose we chose four personality descriptors that assessed traits that are clearly socially desirable in Western society (cooperative, mature, friendly, caring about others. Anderson, 1968). These items were pilot tested on an earlier study (Acitelli, unpublished data) and also pretested in another large project, *Self-portraits*, headed by Hazel Markus and Regula Herzog (Markus, 1994). They derived these items from focus group discussions on how people define themselves. We chose socially desirable items so that a stronger endorsement of the item would indicate a favorable rating. The descriptor list was introduced to the respondent as follows: 'Now I'd like you to tell me how well the following terms describe the way you think about your (husband/wife/partner)'. Responses ranged from 1 = not at all well, to 5 = extremely well.

Attachment style was assessed with a 6-item measure method similar to an 11-item measure used by Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman (1992). This attachment measure uses separate statements that are drawn from the three-paragraph measure used by Hazan & Shaver (1987), which includes secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles. By using separate statements drawn from the paragraphs, respondents are able to endorse some aspects of the attachment style and not others, which is probably a better indicator of their actual beliefs than what is obtained when they are required to endorse the entire attachment style. Survey methodologists would agree that presenting different beliefs related to the same construct as separate items is superior to presenting several beliefs as one item (Converse & Presser, 1986).

The attachment items were introduced by the interviewer saying, 'I am going to read some statements that describe how people feel about relationships. Please tell me how true you think each statement is as it applies to you (extremely true, very true, somewhat true, not very true or not at all true)?' Responses ranged from 1, not at all true, to 5, extremely true. The secure attachment style was based on a mean of two items, 'I am comfortable depending on others' and 'I am comfortable having others depend on me', the anxious/ambivalent attachment style was based on the mean of two items, 'I want to be close to others emotionally, but I often find that others do not want

to get as close as I would like' and 'I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them', and the avoidant attachment style was based on the mean of two items, 'I want close relationships, but I am somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others', and 'I am comfortable without close relationships'. A categorical variable was created by assigning respondents to the attachment type that they scored the highest on. For example, if the respondent scored higher on the secure attachment variable than on the two other attachment styles, he or she was assigned to the secure attachment category.

## Results

Initial analyses indicated that married and dating individuals differed on length of relationship, age, income and education level. In order to rule out confounding effects of these variables, the variance explained by these variables was removed from the ANOVA equation prior to entering independent variables. Analyses were run separately for men and women.

*Hypothesis 1:* Individuals with secure and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles will have a more positive view of their partners than individuals with an avoidant attachment style. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed for secure men and women. Secure women ( $M = 4.25$ ) were significantly higher on their appraisals of partners than avoidant women ( $M = 4.09$ ),  $F(2,195) = 7.57, p < .001$ . Secure men ( $M = 4.28$ ) were also significantly higher on their appraisals of partners than avoidant men ( $M = 4.13$ ),  $F(2,176) = 5.00, p < .01$ . Unexpectedly, appraisals by anxious/ambivalent men (3.94) and women (3.90) were lower than the appraisals made by secure and avoidant individuals.

*Hypothesis 2:* Relationship status moderates the association between perception of partner and attachment style. The two-way interaction between marital status and attachment style in predicting appraisals of partners was significant for men,  $F(2,176) = 3.54, p < .05$ , but not for women (see Table 1). MANOVAs were conducted to determine which groups (marital status  $\times$  attachment style) were significantly different from the others. While the interaction term of the ANOVA was not significant for the women, the MANOVAs indicated that there were differences between the groups for both men and women. Findings from the MANOVA are presented in order of the four predictions for Hypothesis 2.

*Prediction 1:* Among the dating respondents, secure and anxious/ambivalent individuals will rate their partners higher than avoidant individuals. Findings were in the expected direction for men, but they were not significant for men or women. For dating men, respondents with secure ( $M = 4.18$ ) and anxious/ambivalent ( $M = 4.11$ ) attachment styles rated their partners higher than avoidant respondents ( $M = 3.98$ ), although the results were not statistically significant. For dating women, respondents with secure ( $M = 4.19$ ) and anxious/ambivalent ( $M = 3.98$ ) did not rate their partners higher than avoidant respondents ( $M = 4.26$ ).

*Prediction 2:* Among the married individuals, anxious/ambivalent individuals will have a lower appraisal of their partners than individuals with other attachment types. Prediction 2 was supported for men and partially supported for women. For married men, anxious/ambivalent respondents ( $M = 3.75$ ) were significantly lower in their appraisals of their partners than secure ( $M = 4.33, p < .0001$ ) and avoidant ( $M = 4.24, p < .01$ ) respondents. For married

**TABLE 1**  
**Mean scores for men's appraisal of partner as a function of relationship types and attachment styles**

Attachment style	Relationship status	
	Unmarried (69)	Married (110)
Secure	4.18 (33)	4.33 <sup>a</sup> (72)
Anxious/ambivalent*	4.11 (21)	3.75 <sup>b</sup> (18)
Avoidant	3.98 (15)	4.24 <sup>a</sup> (20)

*Note:* \* Indicates that there is a significant difference between unmarried and married respondents within attachment group. Means with <sup>a</sup> and <sup>b</sup> superscripts are significantly different from each other (within marital status).

**TABLE 2**  
**Mean scores for women's appraisal of partner as a function of relationship types and attachment styles**

Attachment style	Relationship status	
	Unmarried (75)	Married (123)
Secure	4.19 (29)	4.26 <sup>a</sup> (86)
Anxious/ambivalent	3.98 (31)	3.81 <sup>b</sup> (27)
Avoidant	4.23 (15)	3.88 <sup>b</sup> (10)

*Note:* Means with <sup>a</sup> and <sup>b</sup> superscripts are significantly different from each other (within marital status).

women, secure respondents ( $M = 4.26$ ) were significantly higher in their appraisals of their partners than anxious/ambivalent ( $M = 3.81, p < .001$ ) and avoidant ( $M = 3.88, p < .05$ ) respondents.

*Prediction 3:* For individuals with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style, married respondents will have a lower appraisal of their partners than dating respondents. Prediction 3 was supported for men but not women. For anxious/ambivalent men, married respondents ( $M = 3.75$ ) had significantly lower appraisals of their partners than did dating respondents ( $M = 4.11, p < .05$ ). For anxious/ambivalent women, the results were in the expected direction, although the difference in partner appraisals for married respondents ( $M = 3.81$ ) and dating respondents ( $M = 3.98$ ) was not significant.

*Prediction 4:* For individuals with avoidant attachment styles, married respondents will have a more positive view of their partner than dating respondents. For avoidant men, results were in the expected direction but



married men ( $M = 4.24$ ) were not significantly higher in their perception of their partner than were dating men ( $M = 3.98$ ). For avoidant women, married respondents ( $M = 3.88$ ) were not significantly higher in their perception of their partner than dating respondents ( $M = 4.26$ ). Thus, prediction 4 was not supported.

In order to determine whether the partner's attachment style affected the relationship between attachment style, marital status and perception of the partner, all analyses were rerun with the partner's attachment style entered into the equations prior to the independent variables. Only two significant findings changed. For men, the two-way interaction term in the ANOVA was not significant when their partner's attachment style was avoidant. This means that when men's partners are avoidant, marital status makes no difference in the appraisals of their partner. Likewise, the difference between married men and dating men among the anxious/ambivalent respondents in the MANOVA test was not significant when an indicator of the partner's avoidant attachment style was included.

## Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that perception of partner is influenced by internal working models of other (i.e. attachment style) and degree of public commitment (i.e. marital status); however, our findings suggest that internal working models of other, generally work *in conjunction* with public commitment in determining one's perception of a romantic partner. The one exception to this interaction effect is found in individuals with secure attachment styles. For both men and women with secure attachment styles, perception of partner was not affected by outward indicators of commitment to each other. Whether married or not, individuals with secure attachment perceive their partners positively. These findings suggest that individuals with secure attachment styles may not need to rely on overt, concrete displays of commitment between the partners as an indicator of security; these individuals perceive commitment and security regardless of whether the couple has formally acknowledged a commitment.

It is unclear from our findings whether secure individuals' positive perception of partner is based on internal working models of others developed from earlier relationships or the actual characteristics of the partner in the present relationship. Previous research indicates that individuals with secure attachment styles are more likely than individuals with insecure styles to select partners who are emotionally available (Collins & Read, 1990; Senchak & Leonard, 1992), suggesting that secure individuals' positive perception of their partner is an accurate reflection of their partners. Examination of the partners' self-appraisals in our sample, however, reveals little difference in the self-description of the partners of secure respondents to the partners of insecure respondents. The partners of secure men ( $M = 4.35$ ) rated themselves more positively than did partners of anxious/avoidant men ( $M = 4.10, p < .05$ ); however, there were no differences in self-appraisals for the partners of secure men in contrast with partners of avoidant men. Furthermore, there were no differences in

the self-appraisals of partners of secure women compared with partners of insecure women. While self-appraisals can be as biased as appraisals of partners, these findings suggest that there is little difference in the self-rated characteristics of the partners, supporting the argument that secure individuals' high appraisal of their partners are based on their positive perception of their partner, rather than actual differences in the partner's characteristics.

For individuals with insecure attachment styles, our findings indicate that overt, concrete displays of commitment between the partners do play an important role in their perceptions of partners. This finding makes sense: Individuals with secure attachment styles, who have a positive internal working model of self and other, will assume the best of their partners, even when there are not concrete indicators of their partners' commitment to the relationship. On the other hand, individuals with insecure attachment styles, who do not necessarily assume that they are worthy of love and/or that their partners are trustworthy, may be more vigilant to external cues about their own worth and/or the other's trustworthiness. Thus, a formal indicator that the partner is committed to the relationship, such as the partner's willingness to get married, has greater meaning to individuals with insecure attachment styles than to individuals with secure attachment styles. For individuals with anxious/ambivalent attachment styles marriage may be an indicator that they are worthy of love, whereas for individuals with avoidant attachment styles, marriage may be an indicator that their partners are committed and can be trusted.

Marital status appeared to be particularly relevant to individuals with anxious/ambivalent attachment styles. Anxious/ambivalent married men had significantly less positive perceptions of their partners when compared with married men with other attachment styles and unmarried men with the same attachment style. We propose that underlying this process is the motive on the part of anxious/ambivalent individuals to over-evaluate, or idealize, their partners in the early stages of the relationship. Previous research (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) indicates that anxious/ambivalent individuals are more inclined than the other attachment types to think of their partners as worthy and able while discrediting their own worth and ability. Because anxious/ambivalent individuals appear to have higher expectations for their partners than individuals with other attachment styles, they may become more disappointed when they come to realize that their partners are not as perfect as they once thought. Thus, anxious/ambivalent individuals who have been involved with their partners for a considerable amount of time may feel disillusioned with their partners, as though their partners have failed to live up to their expectations. Our findings suggest that this process — idealizing one's partner followed by feeling disillusioned — is present for anxious/ambivalent men but not women.

It is important to note that when we controlled for the wife's avoidant attachment style, the difference between married and dating anxious/ambivalent men was eliminated, indicating that marital status does not

affect anxious/ambivalent men's perceptions of their avoidant partners. One possible explanation is that for anxious/ambivalent men the effects of overt, public commitment to the relationship are outweighed by their partners' lack of emotional commitment. In other words, there may be public indicators of commitment to the relationship but the men do not perceive their partners as being emotionally committed to the relationship because of their partner's avoidant interpersonal style. Therefore, anxious/ambivalent married men with avoidant partners may have an idealized perception of their partners similar to dating men with anxious/ambivalent attachment styles. Characteristic of both groups is the question of the degree of investment in the relationship on the part of their partner. For the anxious/ambivalent men married to avoidant women, the wives' lack of emotional investment may make their husbands question their partners' commitment, whereas for unmarried men, the lack of overt, concrete forms of commitment may make anxious/ambivalent men question their partners' degree of commitment. Whether due to partners' detached interpersonal styles or lack of public commitment, anxious/ambivalent men perceiving their partners as not invested in the relationship has the same effect on their perceptions of partner; these men have favorable assessments of their partners, which arguably is based on an idealization of them.

Whereas the process of idealization of the unmarried partner followed by disillusionment of the married partner was supported by our findings for men, it was not for women. Anxious/ambivalent women, whether dating or married, had low assessments of their partners. Whereas anxious/ambivalent married women have significantly lower perceptions of their partners compared with secure married women: there was no difference between the attachment groups for the dating individuals. These findings suggest that the process of idealization–disillusionment does not occur for anxious/ambivalent women because they do not have unrealistic, overly positive views of their partner in the initial stages of the relationship; in fact, anxious/ambivalent women, whether married or dating, have negative perceptions of their partners in comparison to the other attachment styles. While these findings are in contrast to our hypotheses, they do coincide with a body of research concerning the degree of conflict in the relationship for individuals with different attachment styles.

Anxious/ambivalent individuals may be dependent upon others to feel positively about themselves; however, they have been characterized as intrusive, argumentative and over-controlling (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). In another study, Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) found that anxious/ambivalent individuals perceive themselves as friendly, but their friends characterize them as dominating. Being intrusive and argumentative, anxious/ambivalent women may create a high level of conflict in the relationship. Previous research indicates that relationships involving anxious/ambivalent women, when compared with relationships of women of other attachment types, are described more negatively by both partners (Collins & Read, 1990; Davis & Oathout, 1987). Furthermore, partners of anxious/ambivalent dating women, compared with partners of other types,

are less satisfied with the relationship, perceive greater conflict in the relationship, like their partners less, and are less likely to marry their partners in the future (Davis & Oathout, 1987). It may be that the way in which anxious/ambivalent women relate to their partners creates a hostile atmosphere, which in turn, affects both partners' appraisal of each other.

While anxious/ambivalent men may also relate to their partner in an intrusive, over-controlling and argumentative manner, it may not be perceived in the same way for men and thus does not have the same effect on the relationship as it does for women. What may be perceived as over-controlling behavior on the part of women may be perceived as interest in the relationship on the part of men, which has been found to have a positive effect on women's perceptions of their relationship. Acitelli (1992) found that marital satisfaction was related to the amount of time husbands spent talking about the relationship; however, the amount of time wives spent talking about the relationship did not affect husbands' marital happiness. Likewise, women's satisfaction with their relationships was related to their partners' communication in the relationship (Davis & Oathout, 1987) and intimacy maturity (White et al., 1986), but men's satisfaction with the relationship was not. Research on the 'demand-withdrawal' behavioral pattern in couples further corroborates the argument that similar behavior by anxious/ambivalent men and women is perceived differently. The demand-withdraw pattern has been described as one partner (typically the woman) attempting to engage in problem solving, often interpreted as being demanding, and the other partner (usually the man) trying to avoid or withdraw from the conversation (Heavey et al., 1993). While this pattern has been found to have detrimental effects to marital satisfaction for both partners when the roles are according to sex stereotypes (i.e. she is demanding, he withdraws), this pattern has no effect on marital satisfaction when the roles are reversed (Heavey et al., 1993).

A limitation of this study, as with numerous other studies on attachment, is that it assumes that attachment styles are stable across time. Fuller & Fincham (1995) have recently found that, although most individuals' attachment style remains stable across time, 35 percent of their sample changed their attachment style over a 2-year period. Thus, the relationship between attachment style, relationship status and perception of partner may be more complex than indicated by our findings. Longitudinal research that examines perception of partner and attachment over time is necessary to assess this question.

Regardless of the limitations of this study, our research does make important contributions to the understanding of perception of partner and the importance of attachment styles. Few studies before ours have recognized the importance of attachment style in understanding the appraisals that individuals make of their intimate partners. Furthermore, our study uses a probability sample of unmarried and married couples whereas most studies in this area have used a convenience sample of undergraduate dating couples. Our findings suggest that it is important to recognize sex

differences and the degree of commitment in the relationship when examining the implications of attachment styles in adult relationships, particularly when focusing on individuals with insecure attachment styles.

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