

A DYADIC ANALYSIS OF ATTACHMENT INSECURITIES AND ROMANTIC DISENGAGEMENT AMONG COUPLES SEEKING RELATIONSHIP THERAPY

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This study sought to assess the role of attachment insecurities on romantic disengagement among couples seeking relationship therapy. Dyadic associations were examined between attachment insecurities and romantic disengagement, accounting for depression, relationship satisfaction, and commitment, using a sample of 171 couples. Partners completed the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale and the Romantic Disengagement Scale. Path analysis revealed that attachment-related avoidance, but not anxiety, was associated with romantic disengagement. Men's attachment-related anxiety was related to greater disengagement in their partner. The combination of men's attachment-related avoidance and women's attachment-related anxiety was also significantly associated with women's romantic disengagement. Although attachment insecurities were associated with romantic disengagement, contextual and intrapersonal factors also contributed to our understanding of disengagement. Findings are discussed in light of clinical interventions for couple therapy.

Romantic disengagement refers to the process of emotional uncoupling, commonly referred to as growing apart from one's partner, or feeling indifferent toward them (Barry, Lawrence & Langer, 2008). Emotional uncoupling is among the most frequent reasons couples give when explaining relationship distress and dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003) and among the most common difficulty presenting in relationship therapy (Boisvert, Wright, Tremblay, & McDuff, 2011; Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). Although it would be prevalent in couples seeking therapy, therapists find that treating couples who are emotionally disengaged, such as those who report a lack of loving feelings, is challenging (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997).

Despite studies suggesting a high prevalence of romantic disengagement among distressed couples and a marked difficulty to treat this problem, research on disengagement has important limitations. Past studies have measured disengagement retrospectively in disengaged or separated individuals, utilized community samples, and focused on individuals instead of couples (Kersten,

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1990; Sailor, 2013). Results from studies using community samples or separated partners may not accurately reflect the experience of disengagement in couples experiencing significant relational difficulties who seek therapy to improve their relationship. Moreover, although some authors have highlighted the association between disengagement and relationship dissolution (e.g., Kersten, 1990), few studies have sought to identify its predictors. As a result, researchers and clinicians have a relatively poor understanding of the individual and dyadic factors associated with romantic disengagement, limiting therapists' ability to treat disengagement among distressed couples. Given that attachment theory has become one of the main frameworks for understanding intimate relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), attachment insecurities may reflect an important contributing factor in our understanding of romantic disengagement. In an attempt to better understand romantic disengagement among clinically distressed couples, we examined the role of attachment insecurities as predictors of romantic disengagement in both partners of couples seeking relationship therapy.

Romantic Disengagement

Although some studies have attempted to uncover factors contributing to partners emotional uncoupling (e.g., Kersten, 1990; Sailor, 2013), research on romantic disengagement is limited. Barry et al. (2008) highlight that a poor conceptualization of the variable contributes to a lack of available studies. Despite a general consensus that romantic disengagement encompasses affective components, as well as cognitive and behavioral distancing strategies, other aspects of the construct were not unanimous (Barry et al., 2008). In order to clarify the construct, Barry et al. (2008) conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the items from the existing measures of romantic disengagement and related constructs. Analyses yielded a single factor encompassing the following three core facets: (a) emotional indifference (i.e., no strong positive (e.g., love), nor negative emotion (e.g., anger), (b) cognitive distancing strategies (e.g., ignoring one's partner), and (c) behavioral distancing strategies (e.g., spending less time with one's partner), paralleling the consensus on the construct's defining features. Barry et al. (2008) then created a measure reflecting their clarified conceptualization of disengagement, the Romantic Disengagement Scale (RDS), providing an empirically validated tool that allows researchers to more confidently examine etiological factors and outcomes of disengagement (Barry et al., 2008).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory provides an explanation for why individuals form and maintain close relationships (Bowlby, 1969). The first attachment bonds develop in the early years of life. The quality and consistency of care provided by early attachment figures (i.e., parents) set the stage for the way individuals form relationships later on in life. Attachment relationships by which the needs of the child are consistently met encourage trust, self-worth, and lovability, fostering the development of a secure attachment. In contrast, insecure attachment develops when there is a lack of consistent and reliable attention and emotional support (Bowlby, 1969). Children progressively internalize a negative working model of themselves or others, perceiving themselves as being unlovable and others as unreliable, or even dangerous. Early attachment representations are consolidated over time as individuals form additional relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Hazan and Shaver (1987) stressed the importance of adult attachment, particularly in romantic relationships, whereby partners become each other's primary attachment figure. In adulthood, attachment insecurities are conceptualized using two orthogonal dimensions. Attachment-related anxiety captures sensitivity to rejection and abandonment (i.e., negative model of self), whereas attachment-related avoidance captures discomfort and aversion of closeness and intimacy (i.e., negative model of others; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Attachment insecurities and romantic disengagement. Attachment theory appears useful for conceptualizing the disengagement process (Barry & Lawrence, 2013), but to date, there is no research examining whether attachment insecurities are related to disengagement. However, some indirect evidence supports this association. Attachment insecurities are related to factors associated with disengagement, such as low relationship satisfaction in couples seeking therapy (Mondor, McDuff, Lussier, & Wright, 2011), as well as with disengagement characteristics (i.e., distancing behaviors) during observed couple interactions (e.g., partner does not help find

alternatives to disagreements, denies problems, changes subject), suggesting that attachment may be a potential predictor of romantic disengagement (Barry & Lawrence, 2013).

The attachment avoidance dimension seems especially promising in identifying whether certain individuals are at greater risk of disengaging. Individuals with high avoidance employ deactivating strategies, which minimize their attachment needs and reduce their feelings of vulnerability and reliance on others for comfort and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These individuals tend to avoid intimacy and dependence in relationships all the while maximizing cognitive, emotional, and physical distance from their partner. Research shows that they are less likely to commit to their partner (Etcheverry, Le, Wu, & Wei, 2013), which may make them less likely to work on maintaining and protecting their relationship. These characteristics would make avoidant individuals more susceptible to higher disengagement, especially when faced with relationship distress. In this sense, disengaging from the relationship could help avoidant individuals protect themselves from potential relational hurt. It is worth noting, however, that romantic disengagement and attachment-related avoidance differ in important ways, despite conceptual similarities. Disengagement is conceptualized as a transient state that can change as a function of the relationship. In contrast, avoidance represents an internal working model that tends to be more stable across relationships and time (Fraley, Vicary, Brumbaugh, & Roisman, 2011; Pincus, Annett, & Annett, 2013). Although changes in attachment can occur, often due to significant negative or positive life and relationship events (Hudson, Fraley, Chopik, & Heffernan, 2015; Pincus et al., 2013), drastic and rapid fluctuations in attachment are less likely. Hence, variations in disengagement based on the state of the relationship are expected, even in individuals high on avoidance who may have a higher baseline propensity to disengage.

In contrast, the role of attachment-related anxiety in predicting disengagement is unclear. It is possible that a negative association exists between anxiety and disengagement. Individuals who score high on attachment anxiety tend to employ hyper-activating strategies when they perceive a relationship threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), including repeated efforts to obtain the partner's attention and support by means of clinging and controlling behaviors (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). This tendency would suggest that such individuals may be less likely to disengage. In support of this, individuals high on anxiety have been found to be highly invested in their relationships and persist in unfulfilling relationships despite high relational distress and dissatisfaction (Etcheverry et al., 2013). Contrarily, Treboux et al. (2004) found that individuals high on anxiety were less invested in their relationship, compared to those with lower anxiety. Feeney (2003) found that they also use some distancing strategies to protect themselves from rejection. As such, greater anxiety may also be associated with greater disengagement.

Attachment insecurities and partner disengagement. Whether individuals experience positive or negative feelings in their relationships depends not only on their own expectations, beliefs, and behaviors, but on those of their partner as well. This reflects the interdependence pertaining to partners in romantic relationships. As such, an individual whose partner scores high on attachment-related avoidance may report greater romantic disengagement. Individuals higher on avoidance are less responsive, tend to provide less support to their partners, and show heightened distancing behaviors during times of relationship distress (Feeney & Collins, 2001). As a result, their partners report less relationship satisfaction and commitment (Givertz, Woszidlo, Segrin & Knutson, 2013; Mondor et al., 2011). Hence, when the relationship is threatened, as is often the case in couples seeking therapy, individuals whose partner is high on avoidance may be less likely to invest energy into restoring the relationship. Instead, they may be more inclined to give up on the relationship and become increasingly disengaged, in part due to their perception of their partner's increased disengaging behaviors. Indirect support for this hypothesis comes from a study of newlywed couples, which found that wives with husbands higher on avoidance showed more disengaging behaviors during observed conflict interactions than wives whose husbands were lower on avoidance (Barry & Lawrence, 2013). Such behaviors have been moderately associated with disengagement (Barry et al., 2008). Together, results suggest that an individual whose partner is high on attachment avoidance may be more likely to disengage.

We may also presume that a person paired with an anxiously attached partner would report higher disengagement. In couples experiencing high relationship distress, the general relational characteristics of anxious individuals (i.e., demandingness, relational hypervigilance, dependency)

may increase their partner's likelihood of pulling away and disengaging from the relationship. Supporting this, individuals high on anxiety are perceived as using more coercive behaviors and less supportive behaviors by their partners (Guerrero, Farinelli, & McEwan, 2009) and their partners tend to report lower relationship satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008).

Interactive effects. Beyond considering both partners' attachment style individually, investigating the interaction between partners' attachment style may provide additional insight into the couple's relationship dynamic. Although researchers have stressed the importance of a systemic approach to understanding relationship functioning (e.g., Feeney, 2003), relatively few studies have assessed how attachment pairings affect relationship outcomes. For instance, couples whereby one partner is high on attachment-related avoidance and the other high on attachment-related anxiety report greater relationship dissatisfaction (Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, & Frazier, 2011). Similarly, couples whereby both partners report high anxiety experience more relationship difficulties (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These findings suggest that the configuration of partners' attachment insecurities is important to consider for understanding relationship functioning. However, whether partners' attachment insecurities interact to explain their disengagement is unknown, particularly among distressed couples.

Relational and Personal Factors

Although attachment insecurities appear to provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding disengagement, it is essential to acknowledge that disengagement is likely multifactorial and influenced by both relational and personal factors. Beyond attachment insecurities, it is very likely that disengagement arises as a result of more proximal factors pertaining to the state of the relationship and/or the individual partners. Qualitative studies have shown that disengagement is a process that often develops following an accumulation of unresolved problems in the relationship (Kersten, 1990; Sailor, 2013). Barry et al. (2008) also found that disengagement was moderately correlated with both relationship satisfaction and commitment. As such, individuals who experienced less relationship satisfaction and lower commitment reported higher disengagement toward their partner. Personal well-being may also play a role in individuals' likelihood of disengaging when facing relationship problems. Individuals who are depressed are more likely to show decreased relationship functioning including withdrawal from working on conflict and from loved ones (Whisman & Baucom, 2012) and could more easily disengage when problems occur with their partners because of limited personal resources to regulate emotions and deal with relationship difficulties. A true test of the role of attachment insecurities in disengagement thus needs to consider these contextual and personal factors that could also contribute to romantic disengagement in some individuals.

Goal and Hypotheses

Most studies on romantic disengagement have used community samples. A lack of relationship distress may alter findings, given that the regulatory strategies typically employed by individuals high on attachment insecurity are primarily activated when relational difficulties threaten the relationship quality or stability (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Couples who seek relationship therapy typically experience important problems, resulting in high levels of relational and personal distress. Thus, it is unsurprising that partners' affectionate feelings for each other may eventually come to fade away. It is thus crucial to assess disengagement within the context of relational distress and examine how both individual and relationship characteristics, in addition to dispositional vulnerabilities, impact disengagement in relationally distressed couples. The present study assessed the dyadic associations among attachment insecurities and disengagement in relationally distressed couples seeking relationship therapy, while also considering partners' levels of depression, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. With respect to attachment insecurities, individuals with greater attachment-related avoidance were expected to report greater disengagement (actor effect). Given the contradictory findings regarding the association between attachment-related anxiety and disengagement, we tested this association, but did not propose hypotheses. We also hypothesized that individuals whose partner scores high on avoidance or anxiety would report greater romantic disengagement (partner effects). Finally, we explored whether the association between an individual's own attachment insecurities and disengagement would be moderated by their

partner's attachment insecurities. Given that personal and relationship factors likely influence relationship functioning, including disengagement, we examined depression, relationship satisfaction, and relational commitment as other potential predictors of disengagement. We expected that higher depression, lower relationship satisfaction, and lower commitment would be associated with higher disengagement. Gender differences in these effects (actor, partner, interactive) were also assessed.

METHOD

Participants

This study was part of a larger investigation examining factors associated with successful couple therapy. The sample consisted of 171 mixed-sex (male/female) couples seeking relationship therapy in a private practice located near Montreal, Québec between 2015 and 2017. Most participants were French speaking (93% of men and 89% of women) and Caucasian (96% of men and 95% of women). Participants' mean age was 42 years (range: 23–70, $SD = 9.5$) for women and 45 years (range: 27–73, $SD = 9.5$) for men. Couples reported an average relationship duration of 13 years (ranging from less than a year to 49 years, $SD = 10$), whereby 40% of couples were married, 52% were cohabitating without being married, and 8% were neither married nor cohabitating. The majority of couples had at least one child (83%). Couples reported experiencing relationship difficulties for a median of 2 years (ranging from less than 1 month to 40 years). Men's ($M = 95.15$; $SD = 15.56$) and women's ($M = 91.34$; $SD = 19.45$) mean dyadic adjustment scores (assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale) were below the clinical cutoff of 100, indicating relationship distress (Spanier, 1976). Half of the men earned CAN \$90,000 or more, whereas 50% of women earned CAN \$60,000 or more. Most of the sample had university education with 71% of men and 66% of women having at least a bachelor's degree.

Measures

Demographic information. Sociodemographic data were collected. Questions related to age, ethnicity and income were included in addition to inquiries pertaining to relationship duration and length of relationship difficulties.

Romantic disengagement. The Romantic Disengagement Scale (RDS; Barry et al., 2008) assesses disengagement using 18 items representing emotional indifference, cognitive distancing, and behavioral distancing. Items are rated on a 7-point scale and summed to create a total score ranging from 18 to 126. Higher scores reflect greater relationship disengagement. The measure has good conceptual and empirical validity, and excellent reliability, as assessed in dating relationships, married couples, and physically victimized women. Alpha coefficients ranged from .95 to .97 across all validated subgroups (Barry et al., 2008). The RDS was translated and validated in French, yielding similar alpha coefficients for both men (.95) and women (.94). A comparison between couples recruited for this study (men: $M = 54.15$, $SD = 18.61$; women: $M = 55.58$, $SD = 19.91$) and a community sample of long-term couples recruited in our laboratory (men: $M = 40.36$, $SD = 14.38$; women: $M = 36.80$, $SD = 12.82$) also suggests that relationally distressed couples report higher levels of disengagement than couples from the general population, $t(312.03) = 7.44$, $p < .001$ for men; $t(293.89) = 10.14$, $p < .001$ for women.

Attachment insecurities. The 12-item Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR-12; Lafontaine et al., 2016) is an abbreviated version of the 36-item scale (Brennan et al., 1998) that comprises two 6-item subscales assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance. Items are scored on a 7-point scale. Scores range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater levels of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. The scale has high reliability and validity (Lafontaine et al., 2016). Internal consistency was high in the current study for both anxiety ($\alpha = .83$ for men; $\alpha = .82$ for women) and avoidance dimensions ($\alpha = .83$ for women; $\alpha = .89$ for men).

Relationship satisfaction. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale is a 32-item measure assessing relationship satisfaction (Spanier, 1976). Items are scored on 6- or 7-point scales and summed to calculate a total score (ranging from 0 to 151). Scores below 100 reflect clinically significant relationship distress. The scale has excellent psychometric properties and accurately distinguishes distressed

from non-distressed couples (Spanier, 1976). Internal consistency in this study was excellent ($\alpha = .91$ for women; $.90$ for men).

Relationship commitment. The optimal commitment scale (9 items) of the Multimodal Couple Commitment Questionnaire (Brault-Labbé, Brassard, & Gasparetto, 2017) was used to assess relationship commitment. Each item is rated on a 9-point Likert scale and a mean score is calculated to determine the global score for optimal commitment. Global scores range from 0 to 9 with higher scores reflecting greater commitment. The optimal commitment scale has previously shown good internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$). Good internal consistency was found for both men ($\alpha = .88$) and women ($\alpha = .83$) in this study.

Depression. The depression scale (10 items) of the Psychiatric Symptoms Index (PSI; Ilfeld, 1976) was used to measure depressive symptoms. Items are scored on a 4-point scale from 0 to 3. Total scores are computed by creating a mean score and rescaled to form scores ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicative of higher depression. The scale has good psychometric properties. Results from our study indicate good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$ for men and $.87$ for women).

Procedure

Couples were invited to participate by their clinician during the initial therapy session. Following informed consent, each partner was sent a link via e-mail to complete a series of online questionnaires on Qualtrics Research Suites, a secure online platform. Partners were asked to complete the questionnaires individually in one sitting (approximately 1 hr) prior to their next therapy session. Participation was voluntary, and no monetary compensation was offered. However, results were provided to the therapist and used as a therapeutic tool during the evaluation process. The study received ethics approval by the university's review board.

RESULTS

We computed preliminary correlations, *t*-tests, and repeated-measures ANOVAs to identify potential control variables among sociodemographic data. Analyses yielded non-significant associations with all sociodemographic variables (including relationship duration and length of relationship difficulties), with the exception of having a child which was associated with higher female disengagement. Having a child, however, was removed from the final model, as it was no longer significant in the overall path model (described below).

Preliminary correlations between the main variables (see Table S1 in Supplementary Files) revealed moderate correlations between men and women's attachment-related avoidance, but not anxiety, and their own disengagement. We found positive correlations between their attachment insecurities and their partner's disengagement with the exception of men's attachment-related avoidance, which was not significantly associated with women's disengagement. Depression was positively associated with disengagement for both men and women. Relationship satisfaction and commitment were negatively associated with disengagement for both and women, respectively.

Path analyses in Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2004) were used to test the proposed models based on the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This approach treats the couple as a single unit of analysis and allowed us to examine actor effects (i.e., the effect of an individual's insecure attachment on their own disengagement) and partner effects (the effect of an individual's insecure attachment on their partner's disengagement) within a single analysis. Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML). We first tested a base model that included each partner's attachment insecurities, depression, relationship satisfaction, and commitment scores as predictors of romantic disengagement (see Figure 1). To test the effect of attachment couple pairings on disengagement, we created four interaction terms based on men's and women's attachment insecurities (Women's Avoidance \times Men's Anxiety; Men's Avoidance \times Women's Anxiety; Women's Anxiety \times Men's Anxiety; and Women's Avoidance \times Men's Avoidance). We then ran four additional models in which we added one of the four interaction terms. We tested for gender differences in actor and partner effects using a chi-square difference test, comparing a model in which all parameters were free to vary and a model in which the effect was constrained to be equal between men and women. Model fit was assessed using

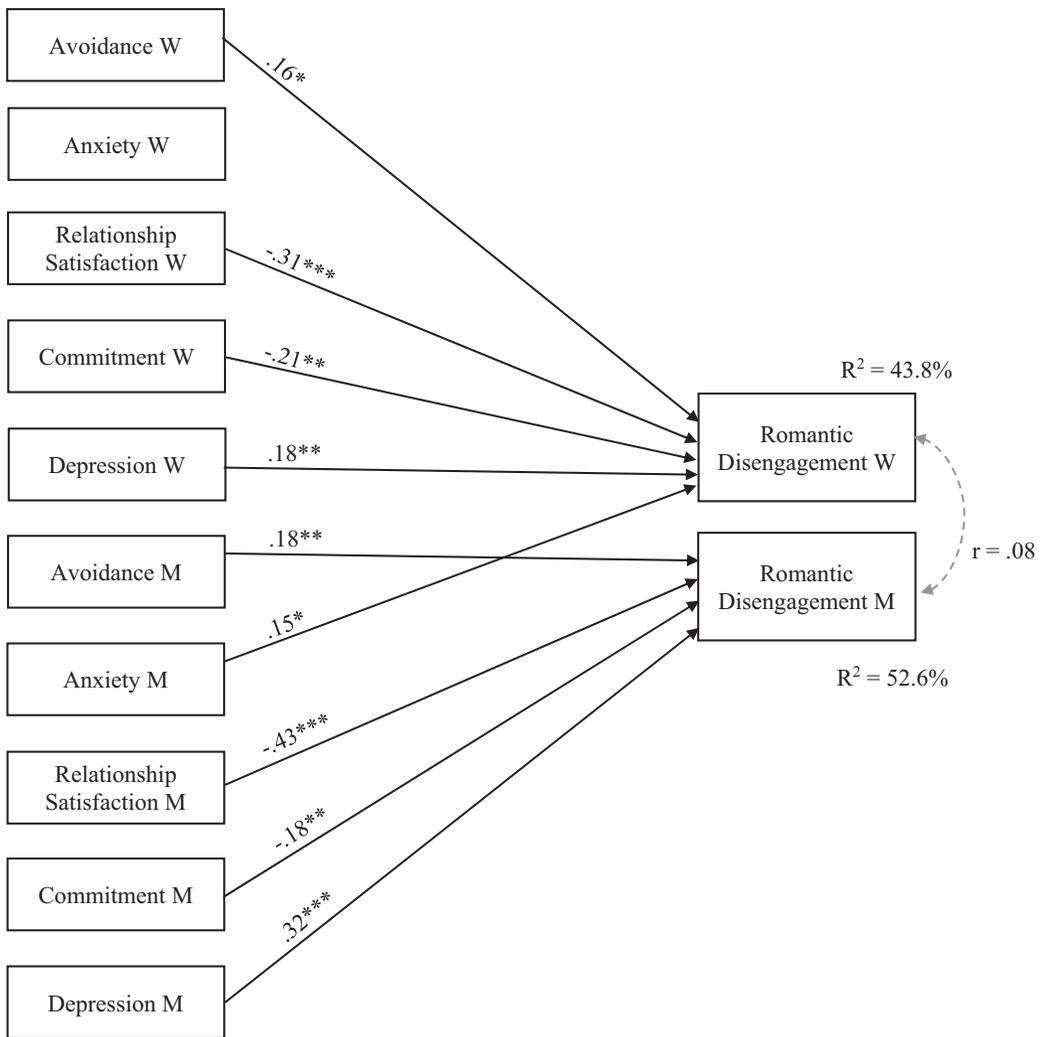


Figure 1. Path analyses showing romantic attachment, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and depression predicting romantic disengagement ($N = 171$ couples). All possible direct paths between attachment variables and disengagement were tested. Only significant standardized path coefficients are shown. Dashed line = non-significant path. Correlations between exogenous variables were tested but not shown in the figure. M = Men; W = Women. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

several fit indices (Kline, 2015): a non-significant chi-square, the comparative fit index (CFI; values greater than .90 suggest a good fit), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; values of 0.08 or less suggest a model that fits well) and its 90% confidence interval. The fit of the final model was deemed adequate: $\chi^2(30) = 37.291, p = .169, CFI = 0.963, RMSEA = 0.038, 90\% CI [0.000, 0.073]$.

Results indicated that both men's and women's higher avoidance, but not anxiety, predicted their own higher disengagement (actor effects). Men's higher anxiety predicted their female partner's higher disengagement (partner effect), but women's anxiety was unrelated to their partner's disengagement. This gender difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 4.70, p = .030$. Avoidance was not associated with the partner's disengagement. With respect to couple pairings, there were no significant associations between any of the attachment interaction terms and men's disengagement. Only one of the four interactions predicted women's disengagement. More specifically, women's anxiety was negatively related to their own disengagement when their male partner

reported high levels of avoidance ($b = -2.12, p = .046$), but not when they reported low ($b = 1.68, p = .135$) or moderate ($b = -0.22, p = .795$) levels of avoidance (see Figure S1 in Supplementary file). Results also revealed that individuals with more depressive symptoms and lower relationship satisfaction and commitment were also more disengaged. We also tested the relative strength of these associations to disengagement using a chi-square difference test. In women, relationship satisfaction and commitment explained more variance in disengagement compared to avoidance and depression. In men, relationship satisfaction and depression explained more variance in disengagement compared to avoidance and commitment.

DISCUSSION

Romantic disengagement is among the most common reasons couples seek therapy (Boisvert et al., 2011; Doss et al., 2004), and would be considered difficult for therapists to treat (Whisman et al., 1997). Yet, little is known about the predictors of disengagement, especially in relationally distressed couples. Addressing this gap, this dyadic study examined the associations between attachment insecurities (avoidance and anxiety) and romantic disengagement in a large clinical sample of couples seeking relationship therapy. To account for intrapersonal and relationship factors that may also play a role in our understanding of romantic disengagement, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and depression were also included in the study. Overall, our results demonstrate that attachment insecurities are associated with disengagement from both an individual and couple perspective, beyond the effect of more contextual personal and relationship factors. However, although attachment insecurities are associated with higher levels of romantic disengagement, other intrapersonal (depression symptoms) and relational variables (relationship satisfaction and commitment) also appear to be important in understanding romantic disengagement and should be considered when treating disengagement in therapy.

Attachment Insecurities Predicting One's Own Romantic Disengagement

Results suggest that attachment-related avoidance plays a role in romantic disengagement among couples seeking relationship therapy. Consistent with our hypothesis, our findings suggest that men and women with greater attachment-related avoidance appear to have greater romantic disengagement, even when analyses account for their levels of depression, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. These individuals tend to avoid intimacy and dependence in relationships all the while maximizing cognitive, emotional, and physical distance from others (Brennan et al., 1998). As such, results are consistent with theoretical conceptualizations and studies assessing relationship outcomes, showing that attachment-related avoidance is associated with negative relationship outcomes (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). When facing major relationship difficulties to the point of needing couple therapy, avoidant individuals may be even more likely to exert distancing behaviors and to disengage from their partners as a way of protecting themselves from facing relationship issues and connecting with their pain, which would likely be too distressing for them to deal with (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). In this sense, the emotional indifference that emerges through the disengaging process could therefore be a defensive reaction aimed at dismissing attachment-related cues and needs. Consistent with this, avoidant individuals have been found to end their relationships prematurely (Feeney, 2008) and to report less emotional distress following relationship break up (Simpson, 1990).

Attachment-related anxiety was not associated with an individual's own romantic disengagement. This lack of association may reflect these individuals' ambivalent stance toward their relationship, whereby they fluctuate between proximity-seeking behaviors to have their needs met and distancing strategies used to protect themselves from rejection (Feeney, 2003). Future research should consider contextual moderators that could reveal a significant association between attachment-related anxiety and disengagement. In a daily diary study conducted with a community sample of dating couples, Campbell et al. (2005) found that individuals high on anxiety expected greater future happiness and reported greater relationship stability on days when they perceived greater support from their partner. As such, disengagement may vary in these individuals as a function of specific relational events (e.g., partner support vs. conflict).

Attachment Insecurities Predicting Romantic Disengagement in the Partner

Partially supporting our hypothesis, our results showed that only attachment-related anxiety, not avoidance, was associated with greater partner disengagement and this, while accounting for the partner's depressive symptoms, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. Specifically, greater anxiety in men was associated with greater disengagement in their female partner. Guerrero et al. (2009) found that the highest level of relationship dissatisfaction was reported by participants whose partners had an anxious attachment style and who reported expressing anger in a destructive manner. As our sample consisted of distressed couples, it is likely that they experience more relationship conflict and express anger in a more destructive manner compared to couples from the general community (Gottman, 1994). As such, women paired with highly anxious men may experience high relationship dissatisfaction, which could explain their greater level of disengagement. Our results are also congruent with the finding that women report a sense of burden in caring for their spouse when their male partner is high on anxiety (Feeney, 2003). It is possible that the characteristic behaviors of individuals high on anxiety (i.e., excessive proximity-seeking behaviors) go against the stereotypical image of masculinity whereby men are discouraged from showing vulnerabilities and dependency, and less likely to openly express feelings such as fear and disappointment (Jansz, 2000). As such, in clinically distressed couples, it is possible that women are more likely to disengage from their partner when he behaves in an overbearing, clingy, or dependent manner. This is also consistent with results from a study showing that couples formed by anxious men and avoidant women evidenced the highest breakup rates over time (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). In contrast, our findings suggest that attachment-related anxiety in women was not associated with their partner's disengagement. Perhaps, the stereotypical image of femininity allows for greater expression of vulnerabilities and feelings, potentially making men more tolerant and accepting of the overbearing nature and preoccupation women high on anxiety may exhibit (Jansz, 2000), which may explain why female anxiety was not related to their partner's level of disengagement.

It is important to note that the directionality between attachment-related anxiety and disengagement cannot be ascertained from our correlational data. It is possible that women's disengagement may increase men's anxiety about being rejected and abandoned by their partner, especially in couples with enduring relationship problems. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify how attachment and disengagement interrelate and evolve over time in distressed couples.

The lack of association between attachment-related avoidance and partner disengagement was surprising, as we expected partners of individuals high on avoidance to report greater disengagement. In the context of relational distress, it may be the more overt behaviors, such as demandingness, criticalness, or aggressiveness—more often associated with attachment-related anxiety—that increase the likelihood of partner disengagement instead of the passive or withdrawal behaviors that are more characteristic of attachment-related avoidance.

Attachment-based Couple Pairings Predicting Romantic Disengagement

We also explored whether certain attachment-based couple pairings would be associated with partners' levels of disengagement. Of the four interaction terms tested, only one was found to be significantly associated with disengagement in women. We found that women high on anxiety reported lower disengagement when their male partner reported high avoidance, but not when he reported average or low avoidance. This is congruent with attachment theory and previous research. Couples in which one partner is high on anxiety and the other is high on avoidance are more likely to display a destructive demand-withdrawal communication pattern, whereby one individual makes repeated demands as an attempt to solicit their partner's attention and have their emotional needs met, whereas their partner responds by withdrawing, which in turn evokes more critical demands (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). As a result, these couples also tend to report greater relationship dissatisfaction (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Shallcross et al. (2011) reported that this attachment pairing may result in both partners persisting in a relationship where their needs are rarely met. It is possible that women high on anxiety are constantly trying to engage their partner and have them attend to their needs, but due to their chronic self-doubts, they never feel reassured about their withdrawing partner's love (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These women may be stuck in a pattern where they expend substantial efforts in maintaining their relationship, hoping that their behavior will provoke the desired change. These efforts may prevent them from

distancing themselves from their partner and going through the process of emotional uncoupling. This would be consistent with research showing that anxious/avoidant couples are very stable over time (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Given that couples in this study were seeking therapy, however, women in these couples may represent a subset of all anxious women, those who may be more motivated to maintain their relationship. As our analyses regarding couple-based pairings were exploratory, results will need to be replicated.

Depression, Relationship Satisfaction, and Commitment Predicting Disengagement

Although attachment theory appears to be an important framework for understanding disengagement, our results also indicate that more proximal relational and intrapersonal variables need to be considered—that is, more variance in partners' disengagement was explained by depression, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. These results suggest that individuals' current personal well-being and the immediate context of their relationship are likely to have a greater impact on their likelihood of growing apart from their partner. This is in line with studies showing a link between intrapersonal factors and decreased relationship functioning. For instance, in a meta-analysis, Whisman (2001) found a robust association between depression and lower relationship functioning for both men and women. A longitudinal study, however, found no significant differences between relationship functioning predicting depression and vice versa, suggesting a bidirectional association between relationship functioning and depressive symptoms (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009). It is possible that in couples seeking relationship therapy, the depressive symptoms may both be the cause and the consequence of disengagement—as couples tend to wait years before seeking therapeutic help. Longitudinal studies will be needed to uncover the developmental course of disengagement in distressed couples.

Our results also highlight the need to examine the contextual relationship factors to understand disengagement, with relationship satisfaction and commitment being important contributors. This is congruent with past studies. Barry et al. (2008) found that lower relationship satisfaction and commitment were associated with greater disengagement in dating and married individuals and in victimized women. The authors also found conflict behavior to be associated with romantic disengagement among their dating and married samples. As such, contextual factors within the relationship also appear to inform us about disengagement. More research is needed to understand how contextual factors eventually pave the way to disengagement.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional design prevents the inference of causal relationships between attachment, depression, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and disengagement. Nonetheless, it allowed us to test a theoretically based model linking these variables in couples who experience significant relationship distress. Future studies should evaluate how romantic disengagement changes over the course of therapy to uncover the extent to which therapy aids in reducing disengagement in light of each partner's attachment insecurities as well as intrapersonal and relational factors. Such studies could provide valuable information about the timing and effectiveness of interventions for addressing relationship disengagement. Given that contextual factors (both individual and relational) also explained romantic disengagement, it may be worth examining whether interventions should first target contextual factors as opposed to attachment insecurities that may require more extended therapeutic work. Future research should also seek to uncover mechanisms by which attachment insecurities in both partners instill a relational climate where disengagement is more likely to arise. Potential-mediating variables possibly include the presence of more conflict and the difficulty to solve the conflict constructively.

Additionally, the sample was predominantly Caucasian couples with relatively high socioeconomic status, which may limit generalizability to couples from different sociocultural backgrounds. Our sample may also reflect a limited range of disengagement, with most individuals reporting scores at the lower end of the scale. Although the scores in our sample appear higher than those reported in a community sample (Barry et al., 2008), our sample was seeking relationship therapy, implying that at least one of the two partners were minimally engaged and willing to seek help to repair the relationship. Couples in this sample may be more engaged than couples who have separated without ever seeking therapeutic help.

Implications for Couple Therapists

Our findings underline the importance of conducting a thorough assessment of attachment as partners' attachment insecurities may affect their likelihood of disengaging when faced with important relationship distress. Although clinicians could assess attachment through self-reported measures such as the brief ECR (Lafontaine et al., 2016), simply observing interactions between partners in therapy, paying particular attention for fear of abandonment and tendencies to avoid intimacy, would provide meaningful clinical information about partners' attachment style. A constant need for reassurance from the partner and demandingness and criticalness may reflect attachment-related anxiety, whereas withdrawal, minimizing behavior, and a tendency toward self-reliance may reflect attachment-related avoidance.

Our results also suggest that disengagement may present differently in men and women. Whereas disengagement in men was primarily related to their own attachment insecurities (avoidance), disengagement in women was related to both their own (avoidance, anxiety when men's avoidance was high) and their partner's (anxiety) attachment insecurities. Therefore, interventions aimed at understanding the couple's attachment dynamic may help partners high in romantic disengagement re-engage in their relationship. In this respect, Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004) appears especially useful as its interventions are grounded in attachment theory and seek to create new interactional patterns that foster secure attachment in partners. Although no studies have formally assessed the effectiveness of EFT on treating disengagement, EFT has been suggested as a promising treatment option (Sailor, 2013). In this therapeutic approach, avoidant individuals are guided into a re-engagement process and encouraged to express greater internal vulnerability and to become more available emotionally to their partner's attachment needs, as opposed to being closed off to their partner (Johnson, 2004). Such corrective emotional experiences have been found to reduce attachment insecurities and increase relationship satisfaction in both partners (see Wiebe & Johnson, 2016 for a review), suggesting that EFT may reduce disengagement in couples with insecure attachment bonds.

More globally, our results also suggest that interventions targeting more proximal factors may be another effective way of reducing disengagement. In particular, depressive symptoms explained more variability in romantic disengagement (especially in men) than attachment insecurities. Addressing depression may be an easier target because attachment tends to be more reflective of an individual's enduring personality characteristics and changing attachment insecurities likely requires more extensive therapeutic work. As such, reducing depression, especially in men, may produce more immediate changes in disengagement. Treating depressive symptoms in couple therapy has been reported to significantly improve relationship functioning (Whisman & Baucom, 2012). As such, focusing treatment on depressive symptoms may lead to changes in relational factors (e.g., satisfaction and commitment), which may then contribute to potentially improving disengagement. However, whether simply reducing depressive symptoms would be enough to re-engage partners in their relationship or lead to lasting positive relationship changes is unknown. Restructuring negative relational patterns (i.e., insecure attachment) may still be necessary to repair the relationship and restore relationship satisfaction in both partners.

Nevertheless, Poitras-Wright and St-Père (2004) emphasized that therapists should not assume that all couples seek therapy to repair their relationship. This assumption is held by many couple therapists and may contribute to the reported difficulty in treating disengagement (Whisman et al., 1997)—that is, perhaps therapists report such difficulty because they are trying to get partners to re-engage instead of addressing ambivalence or considering a separation mandate. Assessing disengagement in both partners is thus an important step to treating couples in therapy as their emotional and motivational stance impacts their willingness to work on repairing their relationship (Doherty, Harris & Wilde, 2016). A thorough assessment will allow the therapist to clarify the couple's needs and direct interventions in a way that aligns with the couple's personal and relationship goals, whether to improve the relationship, address ambivalence, or work toward separation. Because partners differ in their levels of disengagement (partners' disengagement scores were uncorrelated in this study), discernment counseling may be helpful with mixed-agenda couples (i.e., one partner is unsure about pursuing the relationship and the other wants to improve the relationship). This approach helps partners gain clarity about the direction that their relationship should take through an increased understanding of each partner's contribution to the relationship

problems (Doherty et al., 2016). This may help therapists and couples decide whether therapy is worth pursuing.

Although the RDS provides a validated assessment tool to measure romantic disengagement in research contexts, it does not include a clinical cutoff score, which minimizes its utility in clinical practice. Therapists may assess disengagement through screening questions evaluating emotional connection between partners (e.g., distress from emotional distancing, desire to work on rekindling love). Asking questions related to emotional indifference and a lack of love, as well as behavioral and cognitive distancing strategies within the relationship (i.e., key facets of romantic disengagement) can provide important information about each partner's level of disengagement, inform the goal of therapy (i.e., repair the relationship or not), and potentially help decrease therapists' frustration and challenges related to treating disengagement in therapy.

CONCLUSION

Although lack of emotional affection has been reported as a frequent difficulty among couples seeking therapy (Mondor et al., 2011), more research is needed to better understand romantic disengagement and help clinicians address this problem. The present study provided a better understanding of the role that attachment insecurities play in disengagement among couples seeking therapy. Findings suggest that attachment insecurities are associated with disengagement from both an individual and couple perspective. However, attachment appears to be a better predictor of women's romantic disengagement, as men's disengagement was only related to their own avoidance. Moreover, intrapersonal and relational factors also appear to play a role in understanding disengagement and warrant consideration in couple therapy. Our findings suggest that attachment insecurities provide a piece of the puzzle to understating disengagement but fails to provide a complete picture to conceptualizing and treating disengagement.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Figure S1. Interaction between women’s attachment-related anxiety and men’s attachment-related avoidance predicting women’s romantic disengagement. * $p < .05$. ns = not statistically significant.

Table S1. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Attachment Insecurities, Depression, Relationship Satisfaction, Commitment and Romantic Disengagement among Men and Women ($N = 171$ couples).