Much Ado About Your Thing: Conflict Structure Moderates the Effect of Attachment Anxiety on Postconflict Perceived Self-Partner Overlap

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Romantic attachment anxiety—the chronic tendency to seek approval from and fear abandonment by romantic partners—is a strong negative predictor of relationship quality, which is in turn a multifaceted construct that includes perceived self-partner overlap (i.e., individuals' sense of "oneness" with their partner). Potentially, discussing an issue of conflict within a relationship could be particularly threatening for individuals higher in romantic attachment anxiety, while at the same time presenting an opportunity for renewed closeness. To understand how and when attachment anxiety contributes to poor relationship outcomes, it is important to characterize the conflict conditions under which attachment anxiety predicts greater versus diminished self-partner overlap. The present study ($n = 75$ heterosexual couples) tested the hypothesis that the structure of an unresolved conflict discussion (i.e., whether the topic was self- or partner-nominated) would moderate the association between attachment anxiety and postconflict self-partner overlap. We found that increased attachment anxiety predicted increased self-partner overlap after discussing one's own topic but did not predict less overlap after discussing one's partner's topic. Implications for research and clinical practice are discussed.

Keywords: romantic attachment, attachment anxiety, self-other overlap, conflict structure, romantic partner conflict

Relationship conflict is a critically important determinant of relationship quality (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), which in turn is one of the strongest predictors of physical (Wright & Loving, 2011) and mental health (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Williams, 2003). Conflict may be particularly threatening for partners who experience higher levels of attachment anxiety (i.e., the chronic tendency to seek approval from and fear abandonment and rejection by romantic

partners; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), yet it may also present an opportunity for renewed closeness. It is therefore important to understand the effects of attachment anxiety on relationship conflict outcomes in varying conflict contexts so as to identify when conflict discussions are more versus less constructive for a given relationship. The current study addresses this topic by examining whether conflict structure (i.e., who is requesting change from whom) moderates the way in which romantic attachment anxiety impacts people's perceptions of closeness with their significant other following conflict, as measured by self-partner overlap—a potent predictor of prosociality, positive relationship functioning, and relationship satisfaction (Aron & Fraley, 1999; Myers & Hodges, 2012).

Conflict Structure

One of the most well used paradigms for studying couple conflict involves a dyadic conflict task, in which couples are observed while discussing an unresolved conflict (Ben-Naim,

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Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Mikulincer, 2013; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Gunlicks-Stoessel & Powers, 2009; Laurent & Powers, 2007). Although studies using this paradigm have contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the psychological, behavioral, and physiological dynamics involved in intracouple conflict, direct comparisons across studies may be compromised when researchers fail to consider the context of the conflict, including the conflict structure—that is, which partner's conflict topic is being discussed.[1]

Studies that do consider origin of the conflict topic find that it plays an important role in both conflict dynamics and their effects on relationship outcomes (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Laurent, Kim, & Capaldi, 2008; Verhofstadt, Buysse, De Clercq, & Goodwin, 2005; Vogel & Karney, 2002). A number of studies have shown that when conflict topics were selected by wives, a pattern of wife demand/husband withdrawal emerged more often than a pattern of husband demand/wife withdrawal, but during discussions of husband-selected problems, both of these patterns were equally likely (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Vogel & Karney, 2002). In research addressing differential outcomes by conflict topic, Laurent et al. (2008) followed 47 young at-risk heterosexual couples across four time points over 7 years. The authors found that men's and women's psychological aggression during their partners' (but not their own) problem discussions predicted lower relationship satisfaction for women over time. In explaining these effects, the authors argued that partners who broach a problem expect their feelings about it to be acknowledged, and expect from their partner a willingness to change. In part, this is because those raising a problem often have strong feelings about the issue, and the problem typically involves an area in which they would like to see change in their partner's behavior. Thus, a certain degree of forcefulness on the part of the partner demanding change is to be expected (and should not necessarily be harmful), whereas facing aggression from the partner receiving the demand may be especially hurtful. Together, such research reminds us that conflict structure as defined here is an important moderator of couple conflict dynamics. The nature and implications of conflict may in turn be especially important for partners high in attachment anxiety.

Attachment Anxiety

Adult attachment researchers (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1994; Feeney, 2008; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) describe two primary dimensions of attachment related to individuals' working models of self, romantic partners, and relationships: attachment avoidance (i.e., the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable with closeness, interdependence, and emotional intimacy) and attachment anxiety (i.e., the chronic tendency to seek approval from and fear abandonment and rejection by romantic partners). While both dimensions of attachment are at least conceptually relevant to the construct of self-partner overlap, attachment avoidance is associated with chronic disengagement from a relationship (Simpson et al., 2011), so we would not expect conflict structure to moderate the association between avoidance and overlap. Thus, in the current paper, we focus on attachment anxiety.

In general, people higher in attachment anxiety express a strong desire for intimacy and responsiveness from their partner (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and rely heavily on others to confirm their self-worth (Brennan & Morns, 1997). They are also more jealous and hypersensitive to relationship threat, hypervigilant about partners' availability, desire more reassurance, and ruminate more about perceived rejections (Mikulincer, 1998; Shaver & Hazan, 1993; Simpson et al., 2011). Behaviorally, they attempt to secure their partner's love by clinging, controlling, and/or coercing (Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993; Mikulincer, 1998). It is therefore unsurprising that attachment anxiety is positively related to relationship dissatisfaction, more intense emotional

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[1] Although conflict structure can be understood in multiple ways, in this case, we are referring to which partner is nominating a conflict topic to discuss, and therefore is potentially asking for change from the other partner. Importantly, there are other meaningful aspects of conflict context, including the environmental context (i.e., whether the conflict occurs at home, in public, in a laboratory, or elsewhere), social context (i.e., is the couple alone or are others present/watching), and developmental context (i.e., whether the conflict discussion started spontaneously, via a laboratory induction, or otherwise) that are outside the scope of the current investigation but also undoubtedly warrant further investigation.

highs and lows, marital discord, partner verbal and physical aggression, and relationship distress and breakdown (Collins & Read, 1990; Henderson, Bartholomew, Trinke, & Kwong, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990; Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004). One marker of relationship quality that may help to explain some of these broader outcomes is the degree of closeness or overlap anxious individuals feel with their partners.

Attachment Anxiety and Self-Other Overlap

Self-other overlap—defined as a sense of "oneness" or lessened self-other distinction and the inclusion of resources, perspectives, and characteristics of others into the self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003)—has emerged within the field of social psychology as an important predictor of relationship closeness and satisfaction, prosociality, and positive interpersonal functioning (Aron & Fraley, 1999; Myers & Hodges, 2012). Aron et al. (1992) also established that self-other overlap can predict whether a given relationship will remain intact 3 months later.

The link between attachment anxiety and an individual's *ideal* degree of self-partner overlap is seemingly straightforward: individuals high in attachment anxiety feel insecure about their importance to romantic partners and seek a great deal of closeness with their partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). As such, they should desire more overlap with their partners than those who are lower in attachment anxiety. A study by Aron et al. (1997) lends some support to this idea, although their sample consisted of strangers and not romantic partners. After pairing unfamiliar classmates according to attachment style, dyads engaged in self-disclosure and relationship-building tasks that gradually escalated in intensity. Consistent with the idea that preoccupied (i.e., anxiously attached) individuals wish for more closeness (i.e., have higher *ideal* overlap), the authors found that both desired overlap and the discrepancy between actual and desired postinteraction overlap was greatest among those with a preoccupied attachment style.

The association between *actual* perceived overlap and attachment anxiety is less intuitive. In one study focusing on the related but somewhat distinct concept of attribute overlap (sometimes called "indirect self-other overlap,"[2] which reflects the extent to which people describe the self and other using similar attributes; Laurent & Myers, 2011; Myers, Laurent, & Hodges, 2014), Mikulincer, Orbach, and Iavnieli (1998) found that students who self-identified as having a preoccupied attachment style reported significantly higher self-ingroup attribute overlap than did secure students, who, in turn, reported higher self-ingroup attribute overlap than avoidant students. This finding may suggest that individuals higher in attachment anxiety experience themselves as having more *actual* overlap with others, at least at a baseline level. However, in another study of perceived self-other overlap—this time with a best friend—Myers (2009) found no association between attachment anxiety and baseline levels of either direct self-other overlap (i.e., perceived closeness) or indirect self-other overlap (i.e., attribute overlap). Together, these mixed findings suggest that the association between attachment anxiety and experienced self-other overlap varies as a function of the referent under consideration (e.g., self-ingroup vs. self-friend overlap). Given that neither study examined overlap with a romantic partner, the association between attachment anxiety and baseline self-partner overlap remains untested. Moreover, both of these studies examined these relations at baseline and not in the context of interpersonal conflict.

A diary study by Pietromonaco and Barrett (1997) sheds some light on how attachment may influence self/other perceptions during conflict, though the authors did not directly examine self-partner overlap. In summary, the authors found that individuals who self-identified as having a preoccupied attachment style responded more favorably (or less unfavorably) to high-conflict interactions relative to those who self-identified as secure or dismissing-avoidant. In particular, preoccupied individuals reported greater intimacy, self-disclosure, satisfaction, and partner disclosure (all of which are conceptually related to the idea of self-other overlap) at higher levels of interpersonal conflict than did those in the other groups, who showed either no

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[2] In contrast to "direct" self-other overlap (i.e., consciously endorsed perceptions of overlap and closeness).

association or a negative association between level of conflict and their reports on these variables. In addition, preoccupied individuals showed less of a decline in esteem for self and partner, more positive emotion, and greater perceived partner positive emotion at higher levels of conflict than did individuals in the other attachment classification groups. These findings suggest those with higher levels of attachment anxiety may be able to use interpersonal conflict as a way to increase feelings of closeness. In contrast to these findings, the current authors have previously demonstrated no association between attachment anxiety and postconflict self-other overlap among romantic partners (Bernstein, Laurent, Nelson, & Laurent, 2015). Importantly, both we and Pietromonaco and Barrett (1997) failed to consider the nature of these conflict discussions. This is an important omission, given that the effect of attachment anxiety on perceived self-partner overlap may vary as a function of situational factors such as—as highlighted above—the context or structure of such conflict.

Individuals higher in attachment anxiety may perceive self-initiated versus partner-initiated conflict in different ways. Some such individuals might initiate an argument with their partner to engage with and feel more connected to them. In fact, one of the items on the attachment anxiety subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) is "my partner only seems to notice me when I'm angry." This type of self-initiated conflict with a romantic partner may provide greater intimacy and closeness via the increased attentiveness, responsiveness, and disclosure that occurs during conflict (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997), and/or through postconflict repair. Thus, self-initiated conflict may especially *enhance* perceived self-partner overlap for individuals high in attachment anxiety. While their study focused on overlap between individuals meeting for the first time rather than between romantic partners, some support for this idea comes from work by Fraley and Aron (2004), who found that individuals higher in attachment anxiety were more able to take advantage of an intimacy-promoting interaction task (in their case, a humorous activity with a stranger), resulting in more felt closeness (operationalized in their case as a composite indicator of closeness and attraction to their activity partner) fol-

lowing the interaction. In contrast, being confronted with a partner's complaint may have a different effect on perceived self-partner overlap for those higher in attachment anxiety—that is, they may be reminded of current problems their partner has with the relationship. This may activate the anxious partner's fears about not being "close enough" to their partner, resulting in less self-partner overlap after the conflict discussion.

The Current Study

The current study—part of a larger study of factors determining romantic partners' responses to conflict—was designed to investigate the proposal outlined above that conflict structure would moderate the impact of attachment anxiety on romantic partners' perceived self-other overlap following discussion of conflict. In particular, we tested the hypotheses that (a) discussing one's own nominated conflict topic will prompt individuals higher in attachment anxiety to feel closer to their partner (i.e., to report greater overlap), and that (b) having to discuss their romantic partner's complaint with the relationship should prompt individuals higher in attachment anxiety to perceive less closeness to their partner (i.e., to report lower overlap). As outlined above, we did not expect the inverse relationship between attachment avoidance on self-partner overlap (Authors, 2015) to vary as a function of conflict structure. However, because there is evidence that individuals high in attachment anxiety and low in avoidance (i.e., "preoccupied") qualitatively differ from those who are high on both dimensions (i.e., "fearful"; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997), we also tested the effect of this two-way interaction and the three-way interaction between attachment anxiety, avoidance, and conflict structure. All hypotheses were tested using Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), which accounts for the interdependence between partners that is inherent within dyadic samples.

Method

The current study represents one aspect of a larger study designed to examine the associa-

tions between romantic partners' dispositional and experimentally induced emotion regulation strategies, psychophysiological response to relationship conflict, and psychological well-being (Bernstein et al., 2015; Laurent, Laurent, Hertz, Egan-Wright, & Granger, 2013).

Participants

Romantically involved couples ($n = 114$) were recruited through an online student research participant pool and community flyers to participate in a two-part study (see below). To be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old ($M = 21.31$, $SD = 6.11$) and in a romantic relationship for at least 2 months ($M = 26.7$ months, $SD = 58.14$, range: 2–564). The vast majority of participants were current students (86.8% were in their first 4 years of college; 5.2% were pursing a postbaccalaureate or graduate degree). The majority of participants (93%) reported that they and their partner were in an exclusive committed relationship,[3] with the remaining participants describing their relationship as "casual dating" (4.8%) or "an open relationship" (2.2%). On average, partners reported spending 58.5 hr per week together ($SD = 40.12$; range: 5–168) and were moderately satisfied with the relationship ($M = 106.3$, $SD = 19.4$ on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976). Reflective of the region from which the sample was drawn, the majority of participants were Caucasian (83.8%) and self-identified as Christian (71.9%). Because the current analyses focused on the moderating influence of conflict structure, only those couples who nominated different problem topics to discuss were included in analyses.[4] Excluding the 27 couples who nominated the same topic and one same-sex couple, our final sample included 75 couples with complete data.

Procedures

Couples completed questionnaire measures of trait or trait-like constructs (including attachment anxiety and avoidance) during an initial hour-long lab session. During a second session, scheduled approximately 1 week later and lasting 1.75 hr, couples participated in a 15-min conflict discussion task and then completed posttask questionnaire measures, including a measure of self-other overlap. Other than during the conflict discussion itself, partners remained

in separate rooms. At the beginning of this second session, each member of the couple was asked to write on a notecard an unresolved issue that had caused an argument or fight recently. Participants were then exposed to one of three inductions (a perspective taking induction, a mindfulness induction, or an induction prompting them to focus on their own thoughts and feelings during the discussion)[5] before being reunited with their partner, before being brought together and instructed to use the allotted 15 min to discuss and attempt to resolve one partner's conflict topic. Topics were selected randomly by a coin toss and read aloud to the couple by a research assistant. Example nominated topics (which varied widely across and within couples) included "my unemployment," "politics," "the fact we have not been on a date for a month," "how we spend money," "what church to go to," "(he/she) won't talk to me about things bothering (him/her)," "my jealousy," "how serious our relationship is," and "(forgetting to) shut the fridge." Participants were compensated for their time with their choice of course credit or $20.

Measures

Romantic attachment.   The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (Fraley et al., 2000) is a 38-item instrument that measures attachment anxiety (e.g., "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them") and avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners") in romantic relationships. Participants rate their level of

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[3] More specifically, 59.6% chose the description "exclusively dating" to describe their relationship, 20.2% chose "living together," 3.5% chose "engaged," and 9.6% chose "married."

[4] Participants who nominated a different problem topic than their partner ($n = 152$) did not differ from those who did nominate the same topic ($n = 54$) on any demographic or individual difference variable, including age ($t(59.34) = 1.63$, $p = .11$); relationship length ($t(54.54) = 1.45$, $p = .15$); hours per week spent together ($t(203) = 0.96$, $p = .34$); relationship satisfaction ($t(204) = -1.00$, $p = .32$; or attachment anxiety ($t(204) = 0.92$, $p = .36$).

[5] More specifically, participants were instructed (using both written material and an audio-guided exercise) to approach the conflict task by (a) taking the perspective of their partner (perspective taking condition), (b) attending mindfully to whatever arose without judgment (mindfulness condition), or (c) focusing on their own thoughts and feelings about the issue (control condition).

agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Anxiety and avoidance scores were calculated by averaging responses to each subscale's 19 items. Reliability for both the anxiety ($\alpha = .88$) and avoidance subscales ($\alpha = .90$) was good.

Postconflict self-partner overlap. The pictorial, single-item Inclusion of Other into Self (IOS) scale (Aron et al., 1992) is the most common method for measuring self-other overlap (Myers & Hodges, 2012). The IOS contains seven pairs of circles (with one circle representing the self and the second representing one's partner) that vary in the extent to which they overlap with each other. Participants are asked to indicate which of the seven Venn-like diagrams (where 1 depicts no overlap and 7 depicts almost complete overlap) best represents their relationship with their partner. As a measure of self-romantic partner overlap, the IOS has been found to have good alternate-form reliability ($\alpha = .95$) and good test–retest reliability over a period of 2 weeks ($r = .85$; Aron et al., 1992).

Results

Before analysis, measures of attachment anxiety and avoidance were grand mean centered (Aiken & West, 1991), both gender and conflict structure were dummy coded (female $= 0$, male $= 1$; partner's topic $= 0$, own topic $= 1$), and all variables were examined for normality. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Preliminary Analyses

Across the sample as a whole, we found that IOS scores were moderately negatively correlated with attachment avoidance, $r = -.34$, $p < .001$ but not anxiety, $r = -.08$, $p = .36$, *ns*. Attachment avoidance and anxiety were also moderately correlated with each other, $r = .34$, $p < .001$). Relationship length was not correlated with attachment anxiety, $r = .13$, $p = .13$, *ns*, attachment avoidance, $r = -.15$, $p = .07$, *ns*, or self-partner overlap, $r = -.12$, $p = .16$, *ns*.

Within couples, we found that male and female partners' self-partner overlap, $r = .48$, $p < .001$ and attachment avoidance scores were strongly intercorrelated, $r = .53$, $p < .001$, but that partners' attachment anxiety scores were not related, $r = .12$, $p = .30$, *ns*. Further examination of self-partner overlap scores revealed that both members of 33 couples (44%) chose the same IOS numerical rating, and another 27 couples (36%) had an IOS difference score of 1. Just seven couples (9%) had an overlap difference score equal to or greater than 3. This intracouple overlap difference score was not correlated to relationship length ($p = .88$, *ns*), attachment anxiety ($p = .94$, *ns*), or attachment avoidance ($p = .57$, *ns*).

Primary Hypotheses

Next, primary hypotheses were tested with APIM (Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny et al., 2006), using the APIM with Distinguishable Dyads Macro for SPSS written by David A. Kenny (2010). This analytic strategy accounts for interdependence between partners while allowing tests of between-person variance, and as such is an appropriate analytic strategy for use in dyadic data sets such as this one.

An initial model included main effects of conflict structure, gender, attachment anxiety,

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics Across Gender

Variables	Females (n = 75)		Males (n = 75)		Total (n = 150)		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p*
ECR-R (means)							
Anxiety	2.90	0.99	3.06	1.04	2.98	1.01	.35
Avoidance	1.84	0.63	2.11	0.86	1.98	0.76	.03*
IOS	5.80	1.50	6.03	1.20	5.91	1.36	.31

Note. ECR-R is experiences in close relationships-revised (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) and IOS is inclusion of other into self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).
* $p < .05$.

and attachment avoidance.[6] Gender and avoidance were significant, such that controlling for the other variables, being male was associated with less overlap ($b = -0.36$, $SE_b = 0.17$, $t(75.12) = -2.15$, $p = .04$), and greater attachment avoidance was associated with less overlap ($b = -0.59$, $SE_b = 0.14$, $t(105.31) = -4.36$, $p < .001$). Neither conflict structure ($p = .78$) nor attachment anxiety ($p = .34$) significantly predicted self-partner overlap.

Next, all three two-way interactions were added to the model. Both the conflict structure by attachment anxiety ($b = -0.55$, $SE_b = 0.19$, $t(112.18) = -2.91$, $p < .01$) and the anxiety by avoidance ($b = 0.24$, $SE_b = 0.11$, $t(105.44) = 2.19$, $p = .03$) interactions reached significance, but the conflict structure by attachment avoidance interaction was not significant ($p = .15$). As a third step, the three-way interaction was added to the model. This term was not significant ($p = .38$) and was therefore removed from the model.

In a final model (presented in Table 2), the nonsignificant attachment avoidance by conflict structure interaction was removed, and the two other interactions remained significant. Conditional main effect analyses (presented in Figure 1) showed that when participants were asked to discuss their own conflict topic, higher attachment anxiety significantly predicted higher self-partner overlap ($b = 0.31$, $SE_b = 0.14$, $t(108.10) = 2.28$, $p = .02$). However, when individuals were asked to discuss their partner's topic, attachment anxiety no longer predicted overlap ($b = -0.15$, $SE_b = 0.13$, $t(123.00) = -1.22$, $p = .23$).

Discussion

The current study examined the association between postconflict perceptions of self-partner overlap and attachment anxiety as a function of conflict structure. Initial examination of correlations revealed that across the sample as a whole and independent of conflict structure, perceived overlap was inversely associated with attachment avoidance but not anxiety. These results suggest that while attachment avoidance exerts a negative effect on overlap independent of conflict structure, attachment anxiety does not. This is consistent with the idea that attachment avoidance involves chronic disengagement (Simpson et al., 2011), and operates independently of conflict structure.

Focal analyses tested the hypothesis that the relation between attachment anxiety and perceived self-other overlap following conflict with a romantic partner would depend on the conflict structure. In particular, we expected that for individuals who nominated and discussed their own conflict topic, greater attachment anxiety would be associated with greater overlap, whereas for individuals discussing partners' nominated topic, greater anxiety would be associated with less overlap. Consistent with the first part of our hypothesis regarding the focal interaction between attachment anxiety and conflict structure, we found that discussing one's own nominated conflict topic did prompt individuals higher in attachment anxiety to feel more self-partner overlap following a conflict discussion. However, there was no evidence that greater attachment anxiety was associated with lesser overlap for those who discussed a romantic partner's conflict topic. These findings complement prior research by Fraley and Aron (2004), which demonstrated that individuals higher in attachment anxiety were more able to take advantage of an intimacy-promoting interaction task, resulting in more felt closeness with an interaction partner following an interaction. We have found a congruous pattern of results in the context of discussing one's discontent within a relationship. Together, these results suggest that individuals higher in attachment anxiety are able to use a variety of interactions to satisfy their desire for more closeness with others.

Within the context of romantic relationships, it may be that more anxiously attached partners perceive self-initiated conflict not as a problem, but as an effective and positive way to express their needs and solicit partner support. This would be consistent with previous research showing more positive/less negative consequences of high-conflict interactions in preoccupied individuals (Pietromonaco & Barrett,

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[6] Initial analyses also included dummy-coded variables testing whether differences existed between the three experimental emotion regulation conditions (i.e., mindfulness, perspective taking, and control). Because this comparison was not significant and results did not differ when these variables were included or excluded, we omitted them from subsequent analyses.

Table 2
APIM Estimates of Fixed Effects for Perceived Postconflict Discussion Self-Partner Overlap

Variable	Estimate	SE	df	t	p
Gender	−0.36	0.17	75.12	−2.15	.04*
Conflict Structure (CS)	−0.04	0.16	70.46	−.28	.78
Attachment Anxiety (Ax)	0.09	0.10	116.41	.97	.34
Attachment Avoidance (Av)	−0.60	0.14	105.31	−4.36	.00**
CS × Ax	−0.46	0.18	111.10	−2.60	.01**
Ax × Av	0.26	0.11	106.03	2.28	.02*

Note. Gender is coded: male = 1, female = 0. Conflict Structure (CS) is coded: own topic discussed = 1, partner topic discussed = 0.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

1997). Consistent with Laurent et al. (2008), we might further expect that the coercive or controlling tactics often noted in anxiously attached individuals are not as harmful to the relationship when used by the partner demanding change (i.e., during discussion of one's own conflict topic). Thus, the process revealed here may reinforce anxious partners' engagement in conflict by providing an immediate sense of closeness with few short-term negative consequences, even if longer-term consequences for the relationship may be more problematic.

These findings add to a body of literature demonstrating that who is asking for change from whom is an important but often overlooked factor contributing to conflict outcomes and relationship functioning. Accordingly, we suggest that researchers studying interpersonal conflict in romantic partners record and consider the ways in which conflict structure may exert influence, especially in experimental designs where the topic of discussion is manipulated within or between couples.
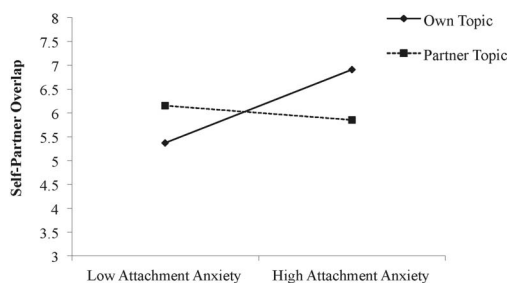

Figure 1. Conditional main effects of attachment anxiety on self-partner overlap for each condition of conflict structure.

These findings also further support previous research proposing that individuals higher in attachment anxiety may be more likely to seek out and take advantage of potential opportunities for closeness than their nonanxious counterparts. This information might be useful in couples' therapy, wherein couples may benefit from having one or both partner's propensity toward conflict reframed as (at least partially) motivated by a desire to gain closeness to their partner. Indeed, many different evidence-based approaches to couples' therapy involve highlighting the "softer," more vulnerable emotions and motivations underlying superficially "hard" and aversive behaviors. We anticipate that by helping the partners of more anxiously attached individuals understand their partners' initiations of conflict as intended to serve an intimacy-building function, couples therapists may help these individuals feel compassion for their partner, and in turn decrease defensiveness and increase patience during arguments. Likewise, this reframing may help anxiously attached partners understand and gain distance from their behaviors so that they can choose more productive alternative activities that achieve the same function.

Though it was not a focal analysis here, we also found a high degree of intracouple concordance in partners' reported postconflict overlap, indicating that partners tend to agree on the degree of closeness between them following conflict. When paired with the focal analyses discussed above, this finding suggests that not only do more anxiously attached partners feel less close to their partners when discussing their partner's topic, but their partners also feel this

distancing—thus confirming the more anxious partner's fears. Additional within-partner descriptive analyses revealed a moderate degree of correspondence within couples on attachment avoidance, but not attachment anxiety. This indicates that while partners tend to be "on the same page" when it comes to attachment avoidance (perhaps because individuals high in attachment avoidance couple with and tend to remain in longer relationships with like-minded individuals), they can be different from one another when it comes to attachment anxiety—perhaps because relationships involving two individuals high in attachment anxiety may not last (Kirkpatrick & Davies, 1994; Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study has several strengths worth highlighting. First, as we reviewed in the introduction, to our knowledge no existing study has directly examined the association between attachment anxiety and self-partner overlap following a conflict discussion as a function of conflict structure. As such, it is the first study to fill this gap in the literature. Methodological strengths include its two-visit design, which allowed us to assess attachment anxiety several weeks before a conflict conversation, thus minimizing the potentially confounding effects of mood or performance fatigue. Third, the dyadic nature of this study—where participants discussed real, personally relevant unresolved conflicts with their actual partners—makes the results more externally valid. Fourth, our use of random selection in choosing which partner's nominated conflict topic would be discussed allowed us to examine the impact of conflict structure on the association between attachment anxiety and self-partner overlap as isolated from other dyadic dynamics, including differences within couples in partner assertiveness versus passivity in steering the conversation.

Despite these strengths, this study also has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, participants were a convenience sample comprised mostly of Caucasian college undergraduates who were in relatively young romantic relationships. As a result, we cannot be sure that the findings reported would generalize to more diverse populations, to longer-established

couples, or to clinical populations. For example, it may be that the strength and/or meaning of self-partner overlap shift over the course of a romantic relationship, with diminished overlap being more indicative of relationship turmoil in long-term, well-established relationships. Therefore, replication research with more diverse, longer-established, and treatment-seeking couples will be necessary to confirm and expand on these results. Second, we did not collect a preconflict discussion IOS, so it is unclear how much of a shift in IOS scores may have occurred as a result of the conflict discussion. However, anxiety effects depended on the randomly selected conflict topic, suggesting that these results do not simply reflect dispositional correlations. Future studies should administer the IOS both before and after the conflict discussion to address this unanswered question. Likewise, future studies might measure desired self-partner overlap in addition to actual overlap to more fully elucidate whether differences between the two are also related to attachment anxiety, and whether they are differentially impacted by conflict structure.

Third, it appears that the IOS scores reported by our sample ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.36$) were relatively high compared with those reported in other studies.[7] Thus, replication with other samples with more typical IOS scores is needed to validate the current findings. Fourth, these analyses relied exclusively on self-report measures. Future studies might also examine behavioral indices of partner cohesion during and immediately following the conflict to provide important additional information on between and within-couple variations in conflict tactics, intensity of the conflict discussions, and postconflict repair. This additional observational research could also serve to clarify whether and how romantic partners higher in attachment anxiety may attempt to get closer to their partner after discussing partner-nominated topics—even though (or

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[7] For example, in an online study of 1,640 adults currently in a relationship (91.83% heterosexual; 79.10% female; M age = 35.5, SD = 10.3), participants reported an average current IOS of 4.4 (SD = 1.3; Frost & Eliason, 2014), and in a smaller study of 10 participants who identified as currently being "passionately in love" (average age = 20.3, SD = 2.9; average relationship length = 9.5 months, SD = 60), participants reported an average IOS of 5.30 (SD = 0.24; Ortigue, Patel, Bianchi-Demicheli, & Grafton, 2010).

perhaps because) they report feeling less overlap.

Fifth, although we know from previous research that self-partner overlap is related to romantic relationship stability (Aron et al., 1992), the current analyses did not examine more distal relational outcomes associated with self-other overlap. Research including additional downstream outcomes would help to validate the importance of these associations for longer-term relational health. Finally, future studies should further probe the impacts of conflict discussion framing and preparation, given that the experimental inductions used in the current study had no impact on the reported findings.

Of course, a more complete understanding of these associations will require additional studies that examine these conflict dynamics in slightly different contexts. For example, future studies might allow partners to take turns broaching their nominated conflict topic. While such a study may suffer from spill-over effects of the first discussion on subsequent discussions, it may be able to more fully address the effect of conflict structure on overlap within couples. Alternatively, a design in which partners are given more freedom in deciding how to initiate a discussion may help us better understand the way these dynamics unfold naturally in the real world.

Summary

In summary, this study has provided additional support for the idea that conflict structure plays an important role in determining romantic partners' perceptions of and responses to relationship conflict. Moreover, it is the first study to demonstrate that conflict structure moderates the effect of attachment anxiety on postconflict perceptions of self-partner overlap. These findings emphasize that conflict structure is an important variable for researchers to consider in efforts to understand and support healthy relationship processes.

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