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Perspective-taking induction mitigates the effect of partner attachment avoidance on self–partner overlap

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Abstract

Adult attachment avoidance has long been associated with relationship turmoil and dissatisfaction, and some research has highlighted the clinical potential of perspective-taking (PT) training for ameliorating attachment avoidance-related relationship difficulties. Prior research also suggests that prosocial sequelae of PT are mediated by increased self–other overlap. This study examined how a brief PT induction preceding an unresolved conflict discussion interacted with individual differences in attachment avoidance to influence postconflict ratings of self–partner overlap. The authors found that the PT induction buffered the effect of *partner*—but not one's own—avoidance on self–partner overlap. Main effects of PT condition and both actor and partner avoidance were also detected, and results remained unchanged when controlling for indirect intracouple overlap and relevant individual and couple characteristics.

Research over the past three decades has consistently demonstrated an inverse relation between romantic attachment avoidance (i.e., the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable with closeness, interdependence, and emotional intimacy) and relationship quality (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, 1990; Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004), which, in turn, is a robust predictor of physical (e.g., Wright & Loving, 2011) and mental (e.g., Williams, 2003) health. In an effort to explain this association—and hence promote development of informed intervention and prevention programs—some researchers have pointed to decreased perspective taking (PT) between avoidant partners. Indeed, studies have reliably shown that PT facilitates relationship functioning (for a review, see Myers & Hodges, 2012) and that attachment avoidance predicts decreased PT (e.g., Joireman, Needham, & Cummings, 2001; Simpson et al., 2011; for an exception, see Britton & Fuendeling, 2005). Thus, finding ways to mitigate this tendency by increasing avoidant partners' PT holds promise for improving couples' relationship functioning and overall health.

A number of studies demonstrate inverse avoidance–PT associations. Joireman et al. (2001) found that individual differences in discomfort with closeness predicted PT capabilities across two different samples of college students. In another study with married couples, Simpson et al. (2011) found that individuals high in attachment avoidance were less empathically accurate (i.e., less able to infer their partner's private thoughts and feelings) during a conflict discussion than were their less

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avoidant counterparts. The authors interpreted these results as indicating that individuals higher in avoidance—who are motivated to keep their attachment systems deactivated during interpersonal conflict by dismissing, ignoring, or withdrawing from threats and/or suppressing threat-related thoughts (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Simpson et al., 2011)—are "less likely to get into the heads of their romantic partners during relationship-threatening interactions" (Simpson et al., 2011, p. 247). This is perhaps unsurprising, as "one of the most efficient ways to limit, control, and curtail information that might activate the attachment system is to simply stay out of the partner's head" (Simpson et al., 2011, p. 243).

Other researchers have demonstrated analogous links between attachment avoidance and empathy—the affective counterpart to the cognition-focused PT. For example, in their aforementioned study, Joireman et al. (2001) found that romantic avoidance was negatively associated with not only PT but also empathic concern. Likewise, in their sample of counseling students, Trusty, Ng, and Watts (2005) found a significant inverse relation between the "relationships as secondary" aspect of attachment avoidance and emotional empathy. Third and consistent with the idea that avoidantly attached individuals resist becoming emotionally invested in others and tend to withdraw from people in distress (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), researchers have found that attachment avoidance is inversely associated with empathic reactions to others' suffering (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005), and with both volunteerism and the "other-regarding" values that motivate volunteerism (Gillath et al., 2005).

PT as a point of intervention

In one study that examined associations between attachment avoidance, trait PT, and relationship functioning (in this case, operationalized as the use of conflict resolution strategies that reflect a concern for self and partner), Corcoran and Mallinckrodt (2000) found that participants' social competencies (a latent construct composed of both PT and social self-efficacy) mediated an inverse relation between attachment avoidance and usage of mutually focused conflict resolution strategies. Corcoran and Mallinckrodt proposed that in sharp contrast to avoidantly attached adults, securely attached adults, "like the securely attached infants who freely explored the novel situation in Ainsworth's laboratory studies of attachment (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971) … seem better able to explore the perspectives of their partners and possibilities for novel solutions to the conflict" (p. 480).

Based on such findings, Joireman et al. (2001) postulated that individuals high in attachment avoidance might experience "an improvement in their relationships if they can be trained to experience greater perspective taking" (p. 77). Likewise, Corcoran and Mallinckrodt (2000) suggested that clinicians may effectively promote avoidant clients' use of constructive conflict resolution strategies—and, in turn, bolster their relationship functioning—via PT skills training. Given that attachment style can be resistant to change, they argue that training in PT skills may offer "hope that clients can still be helped to learn more effective methods of conflict resolution" (p. 482).

While mediation models such as Corcoran and Mallinckrodt's (2000) have been very useful in describing the directional pathways and processes underlying the associations between attachment avoidance, trait PT, and relationship functioning, no study to date has examined whether a brief PT *induction* can help mitigate the impact of avoidant attachment on relationship quality. If decreased PT accounts for much of the association between attachment avoidance and poor relationship functioning, we might expect that interventions designed to promote PT should help avoidantly attached individuals think and behave more like their nonavoidant counterparts. In other words, a PT induction may buffer the negative impact of attachment avoidance on relationship outcomes such as self–other overlap.

The role of self–other overlap

The positive inter- and intrapersonal consequences of PT are well documented (see

Myers & Hodges, 2012, for a review), and one promising explanatory mechanism underlying these associations is self–other overlap (Aron & Aron, 1996, 1997)—a concept that originated in the close-relationships literature and subsequently gained popularity within the PT and altruism literatures (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005; Myers & Hodges, 2012). Aron and his colleagues (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003) described self–other overlap as lessened self–other distinction, and the inclusion of resources, perspectives, and characteristics of others into the self. In the PT literature, Cialdini and colleagues (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) defined self–other overlap as a sense of oneness and "shared or interconnected identities with others" (Cialdini et al., 1997, p. 483). Davis, Conklin, Smith, and Luce (1996) defined it in more strictly cognitive terms as the extent of overlapping mental constructs of self and others, and Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997) proposed that self–other overlap represents psychological indistinguishability.

In line with the multiple definitions of self–other overlap, researchers have operationalized the construct in a number of ways. The most common measurement tool is the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron et al., 1992), which contains seven pairs of circles (with one circle representing the self and the other circle representing another person) that vary in the extent to which they overlap with each other, from no overlap to almost complete overlap. Davis et al. (1996) have alternatively operationalized self–other overlap as the percentage of adjectives from a checklist of traits that participants select to describe both themselves and another target individual. Similarly, Batson et al. (1997) operationalized self–other overlap as the mean absolute difference in ratings of the self and the target person on several personality attributes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is evidence that these different measures tap into somewhat different aspects of self–other overlap. Myers and Hodges (2012) found that though IOS scores were weakly but significantly related to absolute attribute differences, they loaded onto different factors in a principal components factor analysis, with IOS loading onto a "perceived closeness" factor and the latter two measures loading onto an "attribute overlap" factor. Myers and colleagues described these two main facets of self–other overlap as "direct" self–other overlap (i.e., consciously endorsed perceptions of overlap and closeness) and "indirect" self–other overlap, involving the extent to which people describe the self and other using similar attributes (Laurent & Myers, 2011; Myers, Laurent, & Hodges, 2014). Of particular interest, Myers and Hodges (2012) found that state PT inductions do not influence all aspects of self–other overlap equally. While PT inductions do not affect the absolute difference between ratings of self and partner personality attributes, they do influence perceived closeness as measured by the IOS—the most reliable predictor of positive relationship outcomes. In particular, Aron et al. (1992) found that scores on the IOS can predict whether a relationship will remain intact 3 months later, and Myers and Hodges (2012) found that the perceived closeness factor of self–other overlap was most strongly positively associated with several markers of relationship quality.

Pulling together these lines of research on attachment avoidance, relationship quality, and self–other overlap, it seems likely that, in general, greater attachment avoidance should be associated with decreased self–other overlap, indicating poorer relationship quality. However, a PT induction—which has been shown in experimental work to affect measures of direct, but not indirect, overlap—should not only work to increase direct overlap (i.e., IOS scores) overall but may also beneficially buffer the impact of attachment avoidance on this same measure.

The current study

The above review demonstrates (a) negative relations between attachment avoidance and relationship functioning and positive relations between PT and relationship functioning, (b) a link between attachment avoidance and trait PT (and recommendations that PT training

be used in clinical work with individuals high in attachment avoidance), (c) the construct of self–other overlap as a predictor of healthy relationship functioning, and (d) the effectiveness of brief PT inductions in increasing perceived self–other overlap. Informed by these findings, we predicted that a brief PT intervention should buffer the negative impact of attachment avoidance on relationship outcomes, with self–other overlap serving as an important proximal index for relationship satisfaction.

To test our hypotheses, we examined how a brief PT induction preceding romantic partners' discussion of an unresolved conflict interacted with individual differences in attachment avoidance (measured in a separate session approximately 1 week earlier) to influence postconflict ratings of self–partner overlap. In addition to a main effect of a brief preconflict PT intervention increasing overall rates of postconflict perceived overlap (Hypothesis 1), we expected to find that a predicted inverse relation between attachment avoidance and postconflict overlap (Hypothesis 2) would be attenuated for individuals exposed to the PT induction relative to those in a control or mindfulness condition (Hypothesis 3). We also expected that *partner* attachment avoidance would negatively influence self–other overlap (Hypothesis 4), as perceptions of self–partner overlap depend on both members of a couple, and that the partner avoidance effect could also be attenuated by the PT induction (Hypothesis 5).

Although previous work has shown that perceived closeness is a more reliable predictor of relationship functioning than attribute overlap, and unlike attribute overlap is susceptible to intervention, we wanted to examine whether our predictions would hold independent of actual overlap or baseline perceptions of closeness. We hypothesized that even after controlling for baseline intracouple personality differences and perceptions of dyadic consensus, the preconflict PT induction would continue to moderate the impact of attachment avoidance on self–other overlap (Hypothesis 6). Finally, we tested whether the above intervention effects (if detected) would hold after controlling for relevant individual (i.e., trait PT) and couple (i.e., relationship length) characteristics (Hypothesis 7).

Method

Participants

Heterosexual couples ($n = 114$) were recruited through an online student research participant pool and community flyers to participate in a two-part study of romantic relationships (see below). To be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old ($M = 21.31$, $SD = 6.12$) and in a romantic relationship for at least 2 months ($M = 26.7$ months). The majority of couples (93%) reported that they were in an exclusive committed relationship. On average, partners reported spending 58 hr per week together (range = 5–168) and were moderately satisfied with the relationship ($M = 106.3$, $SD = 19.4$ on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale). Reflective of the region from which the sample was drawn, the majority of participants (83%) were Caucasian. The current study is based on the subset of participants ($n = 102$ couples) who participated in both sessions and completed all of the measures described below.

Procedures

Couples completed questionnaire measures of trait or trait-like constructs (including attachment avoidance, personality, and trait-level PT) and relationship characteristics (including dyadic consensus and relationship length) during an initial hour-long lab session. During the second session, scheduled approximately 1 week later and lasting 1.75 hr, couples completed a 15-min conflict discussion task and then completed questionnaire measures assessing intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being, including self–other overlap. Except for during the conflict discussion task, partners were placed in separate rooms. A coin toss determined which partner's nominated conflict topic would be discussed.[1]

1. Though conflict context (i.e., whose topic was chosen for discussion) has been found to moderate the influence of attachment anxiety on postconflict self–partner overlap (Bernstein, Laurent, & Laurent, 2015), the same is not true for attachment avoidance. This variable was therefore not included in the current analyses.

Before the conflict discussion, participants were instructed (using both written material and an audio-guided exercise) to approach the conflict task in one of three ways: by taking the perspective of their partner (PT condition), by attending mindfully to whatever arose without judgment (mindfulness condition), or by focusing on their own thoughts and feelings about the issue (control condition). Instruction condition varied between couples, but not within couples, such that both partners of a given couple received the same instructions. Assignments were made sequentially, such that the first participating couple was assigned to the PT condition, the second to the mindfulness condition, the third to the control condition, the fourth to the PT condition, and so on. We chose to use "imagine-self" instructions (i.e., asking participants imagine themselves "as" their partners, experiencing the conflict from their partners' psychological position), as there is evidence that these instructions are more effective in promoting self–other overlap than "imagine-target" instructions (i.e., asking participants to think about how another person feels given their current situation; Myers et al., 2014). Participants were compensated either with course credit or with $20 for their time.

Session 1 measures

Attachment avoidance

The Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR–R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 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 agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Avoidance scores were calculated by averaging responses to all 19 avoidance items. Reliability for this subscale was very good ($\alpha = .90$).

Indirect self–other overlap

Indirect self–partner overlap was measured in two different ways: as the summed absolute difference between partners on each of the five subscales (i.e., Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) of the 44-item Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991), and as self-reported dyadic consensus as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976).[2] Absolute discrepancy across a series of traits is a commonly used index of overall intracouple personality (dis)similarity (see Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Griffin, Murray, & Gonzalez, 1999; Luo et al., 2008). The continuous sum score has an intuitive meaning, which represents overall personality divergence (with high scores associated with relatively different endorsement of traits across partners, and low scores associated with similar personality profiles across partners). Dyadic consensus represents the extent to which a partner views her- or himself as sharing the same beliefs, values, and preferences (including religion, sex, life philosophy, and recreation) as her or his partner. Consensus scores were calculated as the sum of endorsements on all 13 items. Internal reliability for dyadic consensus was excellent ($\alpha = .92$).

Trait PT

The six-item Perspective Taking subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples (IRIC; Péloquin & LaFontaine, 2010) assesses PT within the context of a romantic relationship. Participants rate their level of agreement with each item on a scale of 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 5 (*describes me very well*). All six items were averaged to create the trait PT index. Internal reliability was good ($\alpha = .83$).

2. Although these measures of indirect–attribute overlap are different from those used by Davis et al. (1996) or Batson et al. (1997), they are highly meaningful. Unlike methods that involve one person reporting on both the self and other, summed absolute personality difference scores are derived from data collected from both members of each couple. Thus, they may more cleanly capture *actual* trait overlap independent of *perceived* overlap. Dyadic consensus, on the other hand, represents a baseline level of perceived self–partner overlap independent of the effects of a conflict conversation (wherein partners are primed to think of areas of disagreement). Thus, both measures are important controls to bear in mind when considering the effects of a PT induction on perceived postconflict self–other overlap.

Table 1. *Means and distributions by induction condition*

	PT ($n = 66$)		Other ($n = 138$)		Total ($n = 204$)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Self-other overlap	6.14	0.93	5.78	1.49	5.89	1.34
Attachment avoidance	2.21	0.93	1.91	0.65	2.01	0.76
Personality differences	3.82	1.30	3.79	1.50	3.80	1.43
Dyadic consensus	46.58	10.25	47.83	9.88	47.42	9.99
Relationship length (log-transformed)	1.09	0.44	1.20	0.49	1.16	0.47
Trait perspective taking	2.82	0.79	3.15	0.97	2.73	0.71

Note. PT = perspective taking.

Table 2. *Correlations*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. IOS	—					
2. Attachment avoidance	−.36**	—				
3. Partner avoidance	−.27**	.48**	—			
4. Personality differences	−.02	−.04	−.04	—		
5. Dyadic consensus	.13†	−.25**	−.16*	.08	—	
6. Relationship length	.12†	−.35**	−.33**	−.05	.10	—
7. Trait perspective taking	.16*	−.27**	−.05	−.08	.25**	.02

Note. IOS = Inclusion of Other in the Self scale.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Session 2 measures

Direct self–other overlap

The single-item IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992) contains seven pairs of circles 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 = *no overlap* and 7 = *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

All variables were examined for normality, and relationship length in months was log-transformed to correct for significant positive skew. All continuous variables were mean centered, and traditional dummy coding was used to represent experimental condition. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1, and intercorrelations of focal variables are presented in Table 2.

We tested our primary hypotheses (1–5) using the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), using the APIM with Distinguishable Dyads Macro for SPSS written by Kenny (2010). This analytic strategy accounts for interdependence between partners while allowing tests of between-person variance. The initial model included PT induction condition (coded 1, other conditions coded 0), attachment avoidance, and partner's attachment avoidance. Each of these variables was significant, showing that being in the PT induction condition, relative to the other two conditions, was associated with greater overlap, $b = 0.61$, $SE_b = 0.21$, $t(101.60) = 2.89$, $p = .01$, and that greater actor avoidance, $b = -.58$, $SE_b = 0.12$, $t(194.12) = -4.85$, $p < .001$, and partner avoidance, $b = -.27$,

Table 3. *Actor–partner interdependence model estimates of fixed effects for perceived postconflict discussion self–partner overlap*

Variable	Estimate	*SE*	*df*	*t*	*p*
PT condition	.61	.21	101.60	2.89	.01*
Actor attachment avoidance	−.58	.12	194.12	−4.85	.01*
Partner attachment avoidance (PA)	−.27	.12	194.14	−2.23	.03*
PT Condition × PA	.67	.23	189.07	2.91	.01*

Note. Perspective taking (PT) intervention is coded 1; other conditions are coded 0.
*$p < .05$.

$SE_b = 0.12$, $t(194.14) = -2.23$, $p = .03$, were associated with less overlap. Next, all 3 two-way interactions and the three-way interaction were added to the model.[3] The only significant interaction was between partner avoidance and induction condition, $b = 0.64$, $SE_b = .24$, $t(190.59) = 2.68$, $p = .01$. The three-way ($p = .75$), Condition × Actor Avoidance ($p = .25$), and Actor × Partner Avoidance ($p = .46$) interactions were not significant and were therefore removed from the model. The Condition × Partner Avoidance term remained significant, $b = 0.67$, $SE_b = .23$, $t(189.07) = 2.91$, $p = .004$, after removing these terms. Conditional main effect analyses showed that when couples were exposed to the control or mindfulness induction, higher partner attachment avoidance significantly predicted lower self–partner overlap, $b = -.61$, $SE_b = .17$, $t(198.97) = -3.66$, $p < .001$. However, when couples were in the PT condition, partner avoidance no longer predicted overlap, $b = .06$, $SE_b = .16$, $t(199.00) = 0.37$, $p = .71$. See Table 3 for the full results from this model.

Next, we examined whether this four-predictor model would remain significant after controlling for absolute intracouple personality dissimilarity and baseline perceived dyadic consensus (Hypothesis 6). These two variables did not alter the pattern of results reported above, and an inspection of the individual parameter estimates revealed that neither personality dissimilarity, $b = .00$, $SE_b = .06$, $t(184.08) = -0.00$, $p = .99$, nor dyadic consensus, $b = .00$, $SE_b = .01$, $t(168.55) = -1.00$, $p = .32$, predicted postconflict self–other overlap. Thus, these variables were removed from the model.

Finally, we tested whether this four-predictor model would remain significant after controlling for relationship length and trait PT (Hypothesis 7). Examination of individual parameter estimates across these two models revealed that neither (log-transformed) relationship length, $b = -.28$, $SE_b = .19$, $t(191.79) = -1.47$, $p = .14$, nor trait PT, $b = -.10$, $SE_b = .11$, $t(170.90) = -0.90$, $p = .37$, predicted self–other overlap, nor did they diminish the significance of the focal predictors.

Discussion

This study examined how a brief PT induction preceding romantic partners' discussion of an unresolved conflict might mitigate the negative effect of romantic attachment avoidance on participants' postconflict perceptions of self–partner overlap. Consistent with our

3. Initial analyses also included a second dummy-coded variable testing whether the mindfulness and control conditions differed from one another. Because (a) results did not differ when this variable was included or excluded, (b) this comparison was not significant, and (c) the dummy code did not interact with attachment avoidance, we omitted this variable from subsequent analyses and focused on the hypothesized interaction of Avoidance × PT Condition (contrasted against the combined mindfulness and control conditions). In addition, while our focus is on attachment avoidance, preliminary analyses also tested the main effect of attachment anxiety, the PT Condition × Anxiety interaction, and the Avoidance × Anxiety interaction (as there is evidence that the two dimensions work in tandem to affect related constructs, such as empathy; e.g., Trusty et al., 2005). All three were nonsignificant and were dropped from the model. Finally, initial analyses also examined main and moderated effects for partner gender; because none of these effects were significant, gender was also excluded from subsequent models.

hypotheses, we found main effects for all three variables; being exposed to the PT induction, and lower levels of both actor and partner attachment avoidance were all predictive of greater postconflict self–partner overlap. Counter to our hypothesis, we did not find that the inverse relation between *actor* attachment avoidance and postconflict overlap was attenuated by the preconflict PT intervention. We did, however, find that the inverse relation between *partner* attachment avoidance and own postconflict overlap was attenuated for members of couples exposed to the PT intervention. These findings remained significant when controlling for baseline levels of perceived and actual overlap, and trait PT abilities and relationship length.

Our findings provide initial empirical support for predictions made by both Corcoran and Mallinckrodt (2000) and Joireman et al. (2001) that PT interventions might reduce attachment avoidance-related relationship difficulties. However, the mechanisms at play appear to be more nuanced than originally predicted: The mitigating effect of the PT intervention was not tied to one's *own* level of avoidance, but instead to one's *partner*'s avoidance. Specifically, a brief PT intervention (provided to both members of a couple) appeared to buffer the negative effect of partner attachment avoidance, but not actor avoidance, on an individual's perception of postconflict self–partner overlap. To understand why this may be, it is helpful to recall that individuals high in attachment avoidance tend to use "frontline" (i.e., preemptive) regulatory strategies during conflict situations so as to keep their attachment system deactivated (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Simpson et al., 1992, 2011). Thus, we should expect that these individuals may typically refrain from trying to read their partners' thoughts and feelings (particularly during relationship-threatening discussions; Simpson et al., 2011) and that they may behave in ways that serve to distance the partner (i.e., withdrawal from conflict). This helps to elucidate why higher *partner* avoidance would lead to a decreased sense of overlap with the partner during conflict. However, the current findings suggest that when in the PT condition, a partner's avoidance no longer leads to this decreased sense of closeness. Turning back to a focus on intervention, it follows that if this subconscious defensive strategy and associated behaviors could be disrupted by explicit instructions to take the perspective of their partner, romantic partners who are higher in attachment avoidance may start to think and behave more like their less avoidant counterparts. This then results in individuals feeling less distanced from their romantic partner.

Alternatively, or in addition, the PT intervention may cause *actors* to be more understanding of their avoidant partner's behavior—perhaps by sympathizing with and acknowledging how some of the difficulties in the partner are also present in the self, which allows a greater sense of overlap (or at least a diminished sense of distancing). In other words, it might be that for individuals with avoidant partners (who tend to withdraw during conflict), the PT induction buffers them from the distancing effect of their partner's avoidance by allowing them to understand the partner's desire to withdraw. This, in turn, may improve the quality of conflict engagement by making the actor *him- or herself* less likely to also withdraw or to become more demanding as they might ordinarily in response to their partner's withdrawal.

Implications

Although we knew prior to this study that brief PT inductions reliably enhance self–other overlap (e.g., Myers et al., 2014), this study is the first to demonstrate its effectiveness in mitigating the impact of partner attachment avoidance on self–partner overlap in the context of romantic partner conflict. The clinical implications for this research are potentially substantial. We know that poor relationship quality is a potent predictor of diminished physical health (for a review, see Wright & Loving, 2011) and decreased psychological well-being—a robust finding that has been replicated in a wide range of populations, including married men and women (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996; Williams, 2003) and nonmarried adolescents, even after controlling for gender, social status,

and quality of the best friendship relationship (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). As we have reviewed above, we also know that romantic attachment avoidance is negatively associated with relationship quality (e.g., Treboux et al., 2004) and that self–partner overlap is associated with multiple indices of positive relationship functioning (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron & Fraley, 1999; Myers & Hodges, 2012). Thus, a brief intervention that can effectively buffer the impact of partner's attachment avoidance on postconflict self–other overlap holds promise for improving couples' relationship functioning and, in turn, the physical and psychological well-being of both partners.

Moreover, it has been speculated that increases in PT skills may be a necessary condition for decreased attachment avoidance (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). As such, PT interventions may not only enhance relationship quality and decrease the use of destructive conflict tactics by way of buffering against the partner avoidance-related decrease in perceived postconflict self–partner overlap, but might also render avoidant individuals more receptive to attachment-focused interventions or intervene upon attachment avoidance itself. Because the PT induction used in this study was relatively short and can be administered without the help of another person, clinicians and consultants working with couples could suggest it as a readily accessible tool to use prior to or in the early stages of a conflict discussion.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study has several strengths worth highlighting. First, its two-visit design allowed us to measure attachment avoidance several weeks before the conflict conversation, and thus minimize the potentially confounding effects of mood or performance fatigue. Second, unlike previous studies that have relied on samples of individuals—many of whom are not currently in romantic relationships (e.g., Joireman et al., 2001)—all of the dyads who participated in this study were in committed relationships, making these associations relevant to a real-life interpersonal context. Third, in comparison to studies that use standardized imaginal scenarios to invoke or approximate these interpersonal dynamics within individuals, the dyadic nature of this study—where participants discussed real, unresolved conflicts with their actual partners—is more externally valid.

Notwithstanding these strengths, this study has several potential limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this study utilized a convenience sample composed mostly of Caucasian college undergraduates. Thus, we cannot be sure that these findings would generalize to more diverse populations, or, perhaps more importantly, to clinical populations. As preliminary support for the generalizability of these findings to clinical populations, we found the same pattern of results when we reran our analyses with just those 46 individuals (20.2%) who scored at or below 97 on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale—the commonly used cutoff for relationship distress. Nevertheless, replication research in treatment-seeking samples will be vital to establishing the efficacy of the PT induction as an intervention for couples.

Second, we did not collect a preconflict discussion IOS, so it is unclear how much shift in IOS scores are due to the PT induction. Future studies should administer the IOS both before and after the conflict discussion to address this unanswered question. Third, it appears that the IOS scores reported by our sample ($M = 6.14$, $SD = .93$ for the PT condition; $M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.49$ across the other two conditions; $M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.34$ overall) were relatively high overall compared to those reported in other studies.[4] Thus, replication with other samples (with perhaps more typical IOS scores) is needed to validate the current findings.

Fourth, these analyses relied on self-report measures of attachment and self–other overlap, which may be subject to the influences

4. 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* = .24; Ortigue, Patel, Bianchi-Demicheli, & Grafton, 2010).

of response biases and mood effects. Future studies might also examine behavioral indices of partner cohesion during and immediately following the conflict. Indeed, the authors are currently completing behavioral coding of these conflict discussions, which will provide important additional information on between- and within-couple variations in conflict tactics, intensity of the conflict discussions, and postconflict repair. Future studies should also ask participants to report on the thoughts they had during the conflict as an induction validity check.[5]

Fifth, although we know from previous research that self–partner overlap is related to romantic relationship stability (Aron et al., 1992) among other markers of relationship quality in best friends (Myers & Hodges, 2012), the current analyses did not examine more distal relational outcomes associated with self–other overlap. Future longitudinal research should investigate the effects of preconflict PT inductions on subsequent relationship satisfaction and quality, and the degree to which this relationship is mediated by postconflict self–partner overlap.

Finally, it is not entirely clear why the PT intervention should attenuate the effect of partner attachment avoidance on postconflict overlap, but not the effect of actor avoidance on postconflict overlap. Future research might ask additional postconflict questions of participants to understand if and how participants regarded their partner's behavior during the conflict, and their own ability to understand or sympathize with their partner's behavior, as typical or atypical. Future research that administers the PT intervention to just one member of a couple might also help parse apart the contributions of the PT induction on self (i.e., actor perceptions of their partner's experience, ability to empathize with their partner, and any change in behavior as a result of these shifting cognitions and emotions) versus partner (i.e., reduced partner withdrawal behavior during the conflict) in protecting individuals against the negative effect of partner attachment avoidance on perceived self–partner overlap.

In sum, this study has provided additional support for the idea that PT training may help increase relationship health in part by attenuating the negative influence of attachment avoidance on the sense of cohesion within a romantic couple. It is the first study to demonstrate the effectiveness of a brief PT intervention in this regard, and also the first to show that this mitigating effect occurs via *partner* attachment avoidance. This work suggests that such a brief preconflict intervention may be a promising tool for use with couples.

5. While we did not ask participants about the content of their thoughts, we did ask about their state levels of PT and mindfulness during the conflict discussion. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant between-group differences in state PT during conflict, $F(2, 203) = 4.07$, $p = .02$. State PT in the PT group ($M = 3.35$, $SD = .52$) was higher than in the mindfulness condition ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .59$), but interestingly did not differ from the control condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .54$). We also found a significant between-group difference in decentering (one primary aspect of mindfulness), $F(2, 203) = 4.34$, $p = .01$, with those in the mindfulness condition reporting more decentering during the conflict ($M = 2.03$, $SD = .73$) than did those in the PT condition ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .60$) and the control condition ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .55$). The between-group effect of curiosity (the second primary aspect of mindfulness) was nonsignificant, $F(2, 203) = .81$, $p = .45$. These findings provide some evidence for the efficacy of the inductions used.

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