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Congruence between Spouses' Perceptions and Observers' Ratings of Responsiveness: The Role of Attachment Avoidance

Lindsey A. Beck, Paula R. Pietromonaco, Cassandra C. DeVito, Sally I. Powers, and Alysia M. Boyle

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Abstract

Although close relationships require partners to depend on one another for mutual responsiveness, avoidantly-attached individuals are especially averse to risking such dependency. The authors propose that both avoidant and non-avoidant individuals perceive signs of their own and their partners' responsiveness in ways that reflect motivated perceptions of dependency. The present research examined how the interplay between spouses' attachment avoidance and observed responsive behaviors during marital conflict shaped perceptions of their own and their partners' responsiveness. Newlywed couples attempted to resolve a relationship conflict, then reported perceptions of their own and their partners' responsiveness during the conflict. Observers also coded both partners' responsive behaviors during the conflict. Avoidant husbands perceived themselves as less responsive than did observers; avoidant wives' perceptions that their husbands were less responsive matched observers' ratings. The discussion highlights the role of gender role norms in understanding links between attachment and responsiveness.

Keywords

close relationships; adult attachment; behavior; perceptions

The nature of close relationships requires partners to respond to one another's needs, as well as to depend on one another for mutual responsiveness (Clark & Mills, 2012; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Ideally, such responsiveness allows both partners to feel validated, cared for, and understood (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, risking dependency on partners can be difficult because people strive to balance the need for interpersonal closeness with the need to protect themselves from rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006).

Some individuals may be especially reluctant to risk depending on their partners. For example, people high in attachment avoidance are reluctant to solicit and provide support to their partners (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), to express emotions signaling their needs (J. A. Feeney, 1995; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007), to enter situations that provide information about another's regard for them (Beck & Clark, 2009), and to attribute relational motives to partners' responsive behaviors (Bartz & Lydon, 2006; Beck & Clark,

2010). Given that partners' ability to rely on one another for mutual responsiveness is a hallmark of close relationships (Clark & Mills, 2012; Reis & Shaver, 1988), it is especially important to understand how individuals interpret signs of their own and their partners' responsiveness in ways that fulfill their relationship needs and motives. Therefore, in the present research, we investigated how both avoidant and non-avoidant individuals might differentially perceive their own and their partners' responsive behaviors in ways that satisfy their relationship desires and goals.

Working Models of Attachment

The current work is grounded in attachment theory, which suggests that individuals develop internal working models about themselves in relation to important others as a function of their experiences in early relationships, as well as in later relationships across the life span (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Pietromonaco & Beck, in press). These mental representations, or internal working models, include individuals' generalized beliefs, expectations, and feelings about their attachment figures' availability and responsiveness, as well as about their own worthiness of such responsiveness (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Pietromonaco & Beck, in press). Internal working models operate in the interest of helping individuals regulate feelings of distress in the face of threat (see Pietromonaco & Beck, in press).

As a result of different experiences in interactions with relationship partners, individual differences arise in the content of working models. In the literature on adult attachment, these individual differences are conceptualized by two dimensions: attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Individuals who are high in attachment avoidance are overly self-reliant, tend not to self-disclose, and prefer to maintain relational distance from others, whereas individuals who are low in avoidance are comfortable being close to and depending on others, as well as having others depend on them. People who are high in attachment anxiety worry about their partners' availability, responsiveness, and attentiveness and desire excessive closeness; people who are low in anxiety do not report these concerns and instead trust that their partners will be available and responsive. In the present research, we focused on the dimension of attachment avoidance because we were especially interested in how individuals' comfort with relational dependency and closeness would shape their perceptions of their own and their partners' responsiveness in ways that fulfill their relationship needs and goals. Specifically, we emphasized how avoidant individuals' perceptions of responsiveness during a relationship conflict might satisfy their desires to evade dependency and closeness, as well as how non-avoidant individuals' perceptions of responsiveness during a relationship conflict might satisfy their desires to maintain dependency and closeness.

Attachment Avoidance and Responsiveness-Related Behavior

The specific characteristics associated with each attachment style lead individuals to behave in certain ways, particularly in their close relationships. For instance, individuals low in

attachment avoidance are comfortable relying on and being close to others. These individuals need not employ emotional barriers or extreme tactics to maintain their relationships. However, individuals high in attachment avoidance can harbor needs to keep others at arm's length. These individuals employ mechanisms that undermine the need for close relationships and the emotions and behaviors associated with them. For instance, people high in avoidance downplay their need for close relationships and make an effort to suppress attachment-related needs (for reviews, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, and Pietromonaco & Beck, in press), which results in thoughts and behaviors that maintain a sense of independence and self-reliance. Within a relational context, individuals high in avoidance aim to inhibit proximity-seeking and to suppress emotions that may activate the attachment system, while simultaneously managing to gain what they need from the relationship.

A wealth of empirical evidence exists to support these claims. For example, avoidant individuals have been found to stifle typical emotional responses to rejection and to display lower levels of warmth and support toward their romantic partners than do non-avoidant individuals; these individuals also seek lower levels of support from their romantic partners than do non-avoidant individuals (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Furthermore, in contrast to individuals low in avoidance, individuals high in avoidance typically seek support indirectly, if at all, and do not seek more support in increasingly stressful situations (Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2000). Rather, highly avoidant individuals distance themselves from threat by suppressing threat-related thoughts and diverting their attention from threat-related cues (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997; Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Lussier, Sabourin, & Turgeon, 1997). When actual danger is present, avoidant individuals engage "fight or flight" type schemas (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011), which translate into behaviors that tend to be self-preserving rather than prosocial (Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997). Taken together, this research supports the idea that avoidant individuals rely on themselves for support and care rather than on their partners, which serves to maintain the relational distance and independence they desire. In contrast, non-avoidant individuals feel comfortable relying on their partners for support and care, as well as having their partners rely on them, which serves to maintain the relational interdependence they desire and strengthen the close relationships they value.

Attachment Avoidance and Perceptions of One's Own Responsiveness

Working models, as reflected in attachment styles, not only shape behavior but also influence how individuals perceive their close relationships. In keeping with avoidant individuals' emotional distancing mechanisms, these individuals exclude thoughts conveying dependence or vulnerability from their conscious awareness, thereby bolstering notions of independence and self-reliance (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They also defensively inflate their own self-concepts, further reinforcing their reasons for being independent.

However, because avoidant individuals aim to exclude attachment-related thoughts and feelings from their conscious awareness, a discrepancy sometimes exists between their perceptions of their own behavior and their observed behavior. Specifically, avoidant

individuals, as well as non-avoidant individuals, may interpret their behaviors in ways that fulfill their attachment-related beliefs and goals. For example, a study examining romantic partners' memories of their behavior during a conflict discussion found that non-avoidant individuals remembered themselves as behaving more supportively than they initially had reported behaving immediately after the discussion a week earlier, but only when they were more distressed during the discussion (as rated by observers; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). In contrast, avoidant individuals remembered themselves as behaving less supportively than they initially had reported behaving immediately after the discussion, but again only when they were more distressed during the discussion (Simpson et al., 2010). These findings suggest that both avoidant and non-avoidant individuals may remember their responsive behaviors in ways intended to help them regulate attachment-related distress. These results also contribute to the well-documented evidence (e.g., Bartz & Lydon, 2006; Beck & Clark, 2010; Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004; Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, & Frazier, 2011) that avoidant individuals interpret information in ways that fulfill their relationship needs and goals of evading dependency and closeness, whereas non-avoidant individuals interpret information in ways that fulfill their relationship needs and goals of maintaining and increasing closeness.

Attachment Avoidance and Perceptions of Partners' Responsiveness

These cognitive mechanisms apply to avoidant and non-avoidant individuals' perceptions of their partners' behavior as well. Just as individuals may alter their perceptions of themselves to fit with their working models, they also may alter their perceptions of others to fit with their models. Importantly, individuals' perceptions of their partners' ambiguous or unsupportive behaviors may be especially likely to reflect their cognitive strategies. For example, in a study of romantic partners' perceptions of social support, insecure individuals (avoidant, anxious, or both) who received a written message of low support (ostensibly from their partner) perceived it more negatively than did secure individuals (Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004, Study 1); however, the perceptions of secure and insecure individuals did not differ when they received a message of high support. Furthermore, when individuals' partners wrote their own messages of support, insecure individuals perceived their partners' messages as more unsupportive than did secure individuals, but only when the messages contained low or moderate levels of support (as evaluated by trained coders; Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004, Study 2). Again, secure and insecure individuals' perceptions did not differ when they received highly supportive messages. These findings suggest that individuals' levels of attachment avoidance may exert an especially powerful influence on their perceptions of responsiveness when their partners behave in an unsupportive or ambiguous manner.

Related research further supports the idea that avoidant individuals may perceive their partners as less responsive than do non-avoidant individuals, which fulfills avoidant individuals' relationship motives of maintaining emotional distance and independence, as well as non-avoidant individuals' relationship motives of fostering intimacy and dependence. For instance, avoidant individuals are less likely than non-avoidant individuals to make relational attributions for a potential relationship partner's responsive behavior, as well as less likely to assign such behavior importance for the relationship (Bartz & Lydon, 2006).

These attributions extend to established relationships; for example, in a daily-diary study of newlywed couples, individuals higher in avoidance perceived that their spouse had given them benefits less voluntarily—i.e., out of a sense of obligation rather than of care—even when their spouse’s self-reported perceptions were taken into account (Beck & Clark, 2010). A follow-up study revealed that, regardless of dispositional attachment style, experimentally priming attachment avoidance led individuals to perceive that their friends had given them benefits less voluntarily (Beck & Clark, 2010). In addition, in a study in which dating partners discussed positive experiences with one another, avoidant individuals perceived their partners’ behaviors as less responsive than did trained observers (Shallcross et al., 2011). However, this study focused on dating partners’ perceptions of discussions of positive events; therefore, it is not clear whether these effects would extend to other types of discussions, such as discussions of relationship conflicts, or to married individuals, who are apt to have more experience on which to base their perceptions of their partners’ responsiveness. Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals’ levels of avoidance shape their perceptions of their partners’ responsiveness in ways that satisfy their relationship desires and motives, especially when their partners behave in an unresponsive manner (e.g., Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004).

The Current Research

The present research extends prior work on the strategies avoidant individuals may use to evade relational dependency, as well as on the strategies non-avoidant individuals may use to maintain relational dependency, by examining the role of partners’ perceptions of responsiveness. Partners’ ability to depend on one another for mutual responsiveness is a defining component of close relationships (Clark & Mills, 2012; Reis & Shaver, 1988), so it is especially important to understand how avoidant and non-avoidant individuals differentially perceive their own and their partners’ responsiveness, as well as how their perceptions align with their behaviors to reflect motivated perceptions of dependency. Specifically, we examined how spouses’ levels of attachment avoidance might interact with observers’ ratings of their responsive behaviors during a marital conflict to predict their perceptions of responsiveness. Newlywed couples attempted to resolve a relationship conflict, and then reported their perceptions of their own and their partners’ responsiveness during the conflict. Trained observers also coded the extent to which both partners behaved responsively during the conflict.

This study allowed us to test two key sets of hypotheses about the links among partners’ attachment avoidance, responsive behaviors, and perceptions of responsiveness. Our first set of hypotheses involved spouses’ perceptions of their own responsiveness during the marital conflict. Specifically, we examined how spouses’ attachment avoidance and their responsive behaviors during the conflict (as rated by trained observers) might interact to predict perceptions of their own responsiveness. Consistent with research indicating that avoidant individuals defend themselves against closeness and dependency, we predicted that individuals’ attachment avoidance would moderate the link between observers’ ratings of their responsive behaviors and individuals’ perceptions of their own responsiveness. That is, we expected that when individuals were higher in avoidance, observers’ ratings of their responsive behaviors would predict individuals’ perceptions of themselves as less

responsive. In other words, individuals who were more avoidant should perceive themselves as less responsive, especially when observers rated them as more responsive. Avoidant individuals may feel threatened by their own responsive behaviors during a marital conflict because these behaviors promote closeness and dependency, but they can attenuate this threat and maintain a sense of autonomy by perceiving their behaviors as less responsive.

We also considered the possibility that gender differences in the context of the marital conflict might moderate these predicted effects. Although responsive behaviors are inconsistent with the relational goals of both avoidant husbands and avoidant wives, avoidant wives may feel less threatened by their responsive behaviors because these behaviors are consistent with gender role norms (e.g., Eagly, 1987). That is, avoidant wives can attenuate potential threats posed by their responsive behaviors by attributing those behaviors to gender-based expectations that women behave responsively toward others, instead of to the unique aspects of their relationship with their spouse. However, avoidant husbands cannot attenuate threats using this strategy because their responsive behaviors are inconsistent with gender role norms, and instead must attenuate threats and maintain autonomy by perceiving their behaviors as less responsive. Therefore, these predictions may be more likely to be supported for husbands than for wives.

Our second set of hypotheses involved spouses' perceptions of their partners' responsiveness during the marital conflict. Specifically, we investigated how spouses' attachment avoidance and their partners' responsive behaviors during the conflict (as rated by trained observers) might interact to predict perceptions of their partners' responsiveness. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Bartz & Lydon, 2006; Beck & Clark, 2010; Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004) suggesting that non-avoidant individuals interpret responsiveness-related information in ways that fulfill their relationship motives of maintaining and increasing closeness and dependency, we predicted that individuals lower in avoidance would consistently perceive their partners as responsive, regardless of their partners' levels of responsive behavior (as rated by trained observers). Non-avoidant individuals may feel threatened by their partners' unresponsive behaviors during a marital conflict because these behaviors undermine closeness and dependency, but they can attenuate this threat and maintain the intimacy and dependence they desire by perceiving their partners' behaviors as more responsive. In contrast, we expected that individuals higher in avoidance would be more likely to recognize their partners' unresponsive behaviors than would individuals lower in avoidance because these behaviors do not threaten their goals of maintaining relational independence and autonomy. In line with previous findings that individuals' attachment avoidance may predict perceptions of their partners' responsiveness only when their partners behave in an unsupportive or ambiguous manner (e.g., Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004), we hypothesized that individuals who were higher in avoidance would perceive their partners as less responsive, but only when observers also rated their partners as less responsive. When avoidant individuals' partners behave less responsively, their behavior validates avoidant individuals' attachment-related expectations and desires to defend themselves against closeness and dependency, which may lead avoidant individuals to recognize their partners' behavior as less responsive.

We again considered the possibility that gender differences in the context of the marital conflict might moderate these predicted effects. Gender may play a role in how spouses perceive their partners' responsiveness because, in marital conflict interactions, women are more likely to voice concerns about the relationship and to direct discussions about sources of disagreement (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Kelley et al., 1978). Although women in general may be expected to initiate and guide discussions about a relationship conflict, avoidant women are unlikely to want to do so; therefore, these discussions may be especially threatening for avoidant wives because they are expected to lead and direct the discussion, but their desire to suppress attachment-related needs runs counter to these gender-based expectations. When their partner behaves in a less responsive manner, avoidant wives can attenuate this threat of leading the discussion by recognizing their partner as less responsive, which allows them to justify not taking a more active role in the discussion and not depending on their partner. Therefore, these predictions may be more likely to be supported for wives than for husbands.

Method

Participants

Participants were members of 228 opposite-sex newly married couples. Couples were identified from marriage licenses filed in several municipalities in Western Massachusetts and invited to participate via mail and phone. Eight of the couples were recruited through alternative methods (e.g., flyers, advertisements) to identify and recruit couples who lived in the local area but were married elsewhere. To be eligible for participation in the study, we required that both partners were in their first marriage, that they were between the ages of 18 and 50 years old, that neither had any children, that they were able to participate within seven months after the date of their marriage, and that the wife was not pregnant at the time of the laboratory session.

Of the 228 couples, three couples did not complete the study; two couples were excluded because one partner could not provide saliva (a procedure that was required for another aspect of the project) and one couple decided not to participate. In addition, one couple was excluded because one partner did not complete the attachment measure due to a computer malfunction. Nine additional couples were excluded from the analyses because at least one partner did not engage in responsive behavior during the laboratory discussion of an area of disagreement.

The final sample consisted of 215 couples. Husbands' average age was 29.02 years ($SD = 5.12$) and wives' average age was 27.62 years ($SD = 4.66$). Most participants had a bachelor's degree (44% of husbands, 47% of wives) or advanced degree (19% of husbands, 31% of wives). The majority of participants identified as White (96% of husbands, 92% of wives). The average length of couples' relationships (starting from the time they began dating) was 58.68 months ($SD = 34.12$).

Procedure

Throughout the session, participants separately completed questionnaires, including a measure of adult attachment style (the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire; ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) and a measure of their own and their partners' responsiveness during the conflict discussion. Partners were separated by a partition and the experimenter asked them not to talk to each other while completing questionnaires.

After completing some questionnaires, each partner identified three important and unresolved areas of disagreement in their relationship and rated the intensity of each on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Not at all intense [calm]*) to 7 (*Extremely intense [heated]*). For each couple's conflict discussion, the experimenter chose a topic that both partners had listed and that had the highest combined intensity rating, when possible. Otherwise, the experimenter chose a topic that had the highest intensity rating or chose a topic randomly (by flipping a coin), if two were tied. Next, the experimenter provided additional details about the upcoming conflict discussion by reminding couples that they would be discussing an important topic that they had disagreed about recently and that was not completely resolved. The experimenter also stated that "we would like you to *clearly* understand that we are asking you to discuss a topic you *disagree* about which might take the form of an argument ... and, it could even get a bit heated." After couples had been reminded about the conflict discussion, the experimenter took both partners to a private room, which was set up like a living room and included a small sofa and some lamps. The room also included three small, but visible, cameras to record the interaction. The experimenter asked couples to try to resolve the conflict topic chosen for them over the next 15 minutes. After the conflict discussion, participants answered questions about their own and their partners' responsiveness during the discussion. At the session's conclusion, the experimenter debriefed and thanked couples and gave each partner \$50.

Measures

Attachment style with spouse—Participants completed a version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) to assess their attachment styles. The instructions and items were revised to ask participants to rate their feelings about their relationship with their spouse (partner). (The standard version of the measure asks participants to rate their feelings about their romantic partners in general.) The avoidance subscale measures individuals' discomfort with dependence and intimacy (e.g., "I prefer not to show my partner how I feel deep down"; husbands' $\alpha = .86$, wives' $\alpha = .83$). The anxiety subscale measures individuals' concerns about rejection and abandonment (e.g., "I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him/her"; husbands' $\alpha = .88$, wives' $\alpha = .90$). All items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 7 (*Agree strongly*). Scores for the avoidance and anxiety dimensions were moderately correlated for men, $r(215) = .38$, $p < .001$, and for women, $r(215) = .44$, $p < .001$; therefore, we controlled for participants' levels of attachment anxiety when assessing effects of participants' attachment avoidance in our analyses.

Perceptions of own and partner responsiveness—Immediately after the conflict discussion, participants reported their perceptions of their own and their partners'

responsiveness during the discussion. Participants rated their perceptions of their own responsiveness using four items (husbands' $\alpha = .86$, wives' $\alpha = .90$): "In the discussion with your spouse, to what extent: (1) Were *you* supportive during the interaction?, (2) Were *you* responsive to your spouse's needs?, (3) Did *you* understand the way that your spouse feels about things?, (4) Did *you* show concern for your spouse?" Participants responded to all items on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). Participants rated their perceptions of their partners' responsiveness using four analogous items (husbands' $\alpha = .86$, wives' $\alpha = .92$): "In the discussion with your spouse, to what extent: (1) Was *your spouse* supportive during the interaction?, (2) Was *your spouse* responsive to your needs?, (3) Did *your spouse* understand the way that you feel about things?, (4) Did *your spouse* show concern for you?" Participants again responded to all items on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*).

Observer-rated responsiveness—Four trained observers coded couples' attachment behaviors, including both partners' responsiveness, during the conflict discussion using the Secure Base Scoring System (SBSS; Crowell et al., 1998; Crowell et al., 2002). The SBSS was designed to be analogous to scoring systems for infant-parent attachment behaviors (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978); it captures the behavioral aspects of the attachment system within an adult relationship. The SBSS assesses both partners' secure base use (careseeking) and secure base support (caregiving) behaviors while they discuss a topic on which they disagree, which should create a potentially distressing situation that activates attachment behavior in one or both partners and puts them in a position to respond to one another.

For the purposes of the present study, we focused on observer-rated responsiveness for both partners because it is conceptually analogous to participants' self-reported perceptions of responsiveness. The SBSS subscale assessing individuals' responsiveness to their partner's distress focuses on two related components: (1) desire and willingness to help the partner, and (2) effectiveness and effort of the individual's attempt to help the partner, as conveyed by the individual's affect, words, and behavior. Coders rated responsiveness on a scale from 1 to 7, with low scores representing poor responsiveness and high scores representing excellent responsiveness.

Four trained observers coded partners' responsive behaviors during the conflict discussion using the SBSS. An intraclass correlation coefficient (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) was calculated for the responsiveness subscale using the scores for the 30% of conflict discussions that had been coded by all trained observers to determine agreement among the observers. The intraclass correlation coefficient for responsiveness was .92, which indicated excellent agreement.

Results

Analytic Strategy

We used the Hierarchical Linear Modeling, Version 7 (HLM 7; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2011) program to fit two-level hierarchical linear models, which allowed us to take into account nonindependence in spouses' data. Analyses modeled individual responses

(Level 1) as nested within couples (Level 2). We used the cross-sectional multivariate outcomes model, described by Lyons, Zarit, Sayer, and Whitlatch (2002), which let us model separate equations for husbands and wives. We tested two analogous models: One with perceptions of own responsiveness as the outcome and one with perceptions of partner responsiveness as the outcome.¹

The Level 1 model—The level 1 model was represented by the following equation:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{1j}(\text{female intercept}) + \beta_{2j}(\text{male intercept}) + r_{ij}$$

Y_{ij} represents the perceptions of responsiveness for the i^{th} person in the j^{th} couple, which is estimated by the wife's mean perceptions of responsiveness (β_{1j} , the female intercept), the husband's mean perceptions of responsiveness (β_{2j} , the male intercept), and the measurement error for that individual (r_{ij}).

The Level 2 model—Every coefficient in the level 1 model becomes an outcome in the level 2 model, which is predicted by a series of level 2 variables. The level 2 model was represented by the following equations:

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + [\text{predictors}]$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + [\text{predictors}]$$

The intercepts for both members of couple j are each estimated by the overall means for all wives' and husbands' mean perceptions of responsiveness (γ s). Slopes were modeled as fixed across couples due to the limited degrees of freedom at level 1 (i.e., two individuals in each couple; Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Kashy & Kenny, 2000).

We tested two analogous models: One predicting perceptions of own responsiveness and one predicting perceptions of partner responsiveness. The predictors in both models included participants' own attachment orientations (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety), observer-rated responsiveness, and the interactions between observer-rated responsiveness and participants' own attachment orientations. We also included the partners' attachment orientations (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) and the interactions between observer-rated responsiveness and the partners' attachment orientations as predictors in order to control for potential effects of the partners' attachment orientations. Because participants' levels of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety were moderately correlated ($r = .38$ for men; $r = .44$ for women), we included both attachment dimensions in

¹We also conducted three additional analyses for each model, controlling for (1) couples' average relationship length (starting from the time they began dating), (2) couples' average cohabitation length (starting from the time they began living together), and (3) both partners' emotional stability, assessed by the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) emotional stability scale (Goldberg, 1999; IPIP, 2001). These control variables did not significantly predict husbands' or wives' perceptions in either model, with the exception of husbands' emotional stability, which significantly predicted husbands' enhanced perceptions of their own responsiveness. Furthermore, the effects in the two original models remained the same even when controlling for these variables.

our analyses in order to control for potential effects of attachment anxiety when testing our predicted effects of attachment avoidance.

Perceptions of Own Responsiveness

We hypothesized that individuals who were more avoidant would perceive themselves as less responsive, especially when observers rated them as more responsive, due to avoidant individuals' desire to defend themselves against closeness and dependency. We further anticipated that gender might moderate this effect. Specifically, avoidant husbands may be especially likely to evidence this strategy because their responsive behaviors are inconsistent with gender role norms for men, so they must attenuate threats posed by their responsive behaviors by perceiving their behaviors as less responsive. We tested this hypothesis for both husbands and wives to determine whether there were gender differences in the model. To test our hypotheses, we predicted participants' perceptions of their own responsiveness from participants' own attachment orientations (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety), their partners' attachment orientations (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety), participants' observer-rated responsiveness, the interactions between participants' observer-rated responsiveness and their own attachment orientations, and the interactions between participants' observer-rated responsiveness and their partners' attachment orientations.²

The results supported our hypothesis that avoidant husbands would perceive themselves as less responsive, especially when observers rated them as more responsive. The results for husbands revealed significant main effects of husbands' attachment avoidance and husbands' observer-rated responsiveness, as well as the expected significant interaction between these two variables. Husbands who were higher in avoidance perceived themselves as less responsive to their wives, $\gamma = -.39$, $t(205) = -4.778$, $p < .001$, whereas husbands who were higher in observer-rated responsiveness perceived themselves as more responsive to their wives, $\gamma = .12$, $t(205) = 3.603$, $p < .001$. Importantly, as expected, the interaction between husbands' avoidance and husbands' observer-rated responsiveness significantly predicted husbands' perceptions of their own responsiveness, $\gamma = -.14$, $t(205) = -2.835$, $p = .005$. Figure 1 illustrates this finding by presenting associations between husbands' avoidance and husbands' perceptions of their own responsiveness for prototypical husbands who were high (1 *SD* above the mean) and low (1 *SD* below the mean) in observer-rated responsiveness. Although husbands higher in avoidance generally perceived themselves as less responsive to their wives, simple slopes tests revealed that this relationship was especially strong at high levels of observer-rated responsiveness, $\gamma = -.60$, $t(205) = -5.255$, $p < .001$, compared to low levels of observer-rated responsiveness, $\gamma = -.19$, $t(205) = -1.822$, $p = .070$.

Although the interaction between wives' avoidance and wives' observer-rated responsiveness did not significantly predict wives' perceptions of their own responsiveness,

²We also conducted one additional analysis for each original model that included the interaction between participants' own avoidance and anxiety; the interaction between their partners' avoidance and anxiety; the interactions among observer-rated responsiveness, participants' own avoidance, and participants' own anxiety; and the interactions among observer-rated responsiveness, partners' avoidance, and partners' anxiety. Although some of the two-way interactions between anxiety and avoidance significantly predicted husbands' perceptions (findings available upon request), the three-way interactions did not significantly predict husbands' or wives' perceptions in either model and the key interaction effects in the two original models remained the same even when these variables were included.

the results did reveal several significant main effects. First, wives who were higher in attachment anxiety unexpectedly perceived themselves as less responsive to their husbands, $\gamma = -.12$, $t(205) = -2.029$, $p = .044$; second, wives whose husbands were higher in avoidance also perceived themselves as less responsive, $\gamma = -.26$, $t(205) = -2.853$, $p = .005$; and third, wives who received higher responsiveness ratings from observers perceived themselves as more responsive, $\gamma = .21$, $t(205) = 5.024$, $p < .001$.

Perceptions of Partner Responsiveness

We hypothesized that less avoidant individuals would consistently perceive their partners as responsive, regardless of their partners' levels of responsive behavior (as rated by observers), due to their desires to promote relational closeness and dependency. In contrast, we expected that more avoidant individuals would perceive their partners as less responsive when observers also rated their partners as less responsive, in line with avoidant individuals' attachment-related expectations and desires to defend themselves against closeness and dependency. Furthermore, we anticipated that this effect would be most evident among avoidant wives, who could use this strategy to justify not taking a more active role in the conflict discussion, despite the fact that women may be expected to lead such discussions. To test our hypotheses, we predicted participants' perceptions of their partners' responsiveness from participants' own attachment orientations (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety), their partners' attachment orientations (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety), their partners' observer-rated responsiveness, the interactions between their partners' observer-rated responsiveness and participants' own attachment orientations, and the interactions between their partners' observer-rated responsiveness and their partners' attachment orientations.

The results supported our hypothesis that more avoidant wives would perceive their partners as less responsive when observers also rated their partners as less responsive, whereas less avoidant wives would consistently perceive their partners as more responsive, regardless of their partners' levels of responsive behavior (as rated by observers). The results for wives revealed significant main effects of husbands' attachment avoidance and husbands' observer-rated responsiveness, as well as the expected significant interaction between wives' avoidance and their husbands' observer-rated responsiveness. Wives whose husbands were higher in avoidance perceived their husbands as less responsive, $\gamma = -.25$, $t(205) = -2.519$, $p = .013$, whereas wives whose husbands received higher responsiveness ratings from observers perceived their husbands as more responsive, $\gamma = .23$, $t(205) = 5.900$, $p < .001$. Importantly, as expected, the interaction between wives' avoidance and their husbands' observer-rated responsiveness significantly predicted wives' perceptions of their husbands' responsiveness, $\gamma = .12$, $t(205) = 1.972$, $p = .050$. Figure 2 illustrates this finding by presenting associations between wives' avoidance and wives' perceptions of their husbands' responsiveness for prototypical husbands who were high (1 *SD* above the mean) and low (1 *SD* below the mean) in observer-rated responsiveness. Simple slopes tests revealed that, as expected, wives' perceptions of their husbands corresponded with those of observers at high levels of observer-rated responsiveness, $\gamma = .10$, $t(205) = .599$, $p = .550$, but not at low levels of observer-rated responsiveness, $\gamma = -.24$, $t(205) = -1.980$, $p = .049$. In other words, wives who were higher in avoidance perceived their husbands as less responsive, but only

when their husbands also were rated as behaving less responsively by observers. In contrast, wives who were lower in avoidance perceived their husbands as more responsive, regardless of whether their husbands were rated as behaving more or less responsively by observers.

Although the interaction between husbands' avoidance and their wives' observer-rated responsiveness did not significantly predict husbands' perceptions of their wives' responsiveness, the results did reveal several significant main effects, as well as an unexpected interaction. Two of the main effects were analogous to those found for wives. First, husbands whose wives were higher in avoidance perceived their wives as less responsive, $\gamma = -.22$, $t(205) = -2.201$, $p = .029$; second, husbands whose wives received higher responsiveness ratings from observers perceived their wives as more responsive, $\gamma = .18$, $t(205) = 4.758$, $p < .001$. Also, husbands who were higher in avoidance perceived their wives as less responsive, $\gamma = -.47$, $t(205) = -5.576$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, wives' avoidance and wives' observer-rated responsiveness interacted to significantly predict husbands' perceptions of their wives' responsiveness, $\gamma = .16$, $t(205) = 2.381$, $p = .018$. Figure 3 illustrates this finding by presenting associations between wives' avoidance and husbands' perceptions of their wives' responsiveness for prototypical wives who were high (1 *SD* above the mean) and low (1 *SD* below the mean) in observer-rated responsiveness. Simple slopes tests revealed that husbands' perceptions of their wives corresponded with those of observers at high levels of observer-rated responsiveness, $\gamma = -.02$, $t(205) = -.137$, $p = .891$, but not at low levels of observer-rated responsiveness, $\gamma = -.42$, $t(205) = -3.721$, $p < .001$. In other words, husbands perceived their more avoidant wives as less responsive, but only when their wives also were rated as behaving less responsively by observers.

Discussion

Although close relationships require partners to depend on one another for mutual responsiveness (Clark & Mills, 2012; Reis & Shaver, 1988), avoidantly-attached individuals may be especially averse to risking dependency on their partners. Existing research suggests that people high in attachment avoidance take behavioral and cognitive steps to protect themselves from risking relational dependence. Avoidant individuals are reluctant to enter situations that provide feedback about another's relationship interest in them (Beck & Clark, 2009), to give and seek support from their partners (Simpson et al., 1992), to express emotions that reveal their needs (J. A. Feeney, 1995; Simpson et al., 2007), and to make relational attributions for their partners' responsive behaviors (Bartz & Lydon, 2006; Beck & Clark, 2010).

The present study extends prior work in several ways. This research investigates key strategies that avoidant and non-avoidant individuals use to fulfill their relationship needs and goals; we suggest that avoidant individuals protect themselves from risking relational dependence by defensively perceiving signs of their own responsiveness, whereas non-avoidant individuals promote relational dependence and closeness by benevolently perceiving signs of their partners' responsiveness. Specifically, we examined how the interplay between newlywed partners' attachment avoidance and their responsive behaviors during a relationship conflict shaped their perceptions of their own and their partners' responsiveness. In doing so, we emphasize the importance of taking an integrated approach

toward examining responsiveness by incorporating multiple perspectives: perceptions of one's own responsiveness, perceptions of one's partner's responsiveness, and trained observers' ratings of both partners' responsiveness. Our findings underscore the contributions of each perspective, as well as highlight the significance of gender as an important feature of the relationship context.

Our first set of predictions involved spouses' perceptions of their own responsiveness during the marital conflict. We expected that spouses who were high in avoidance would perceive themselves as less responsive toward their partners during the conflict, especially when trained observers rated them as more responsive. Avoidant individuals may feel threatened by their responsive behaviors during the conflict because these behaviors encourage dependency and closeness, but perceiving their behaviors as less responsive allows them to mitigate this threat and maintain a sense of independence. These predictions were supported for husbands but not for wives, which may reflect gender differences in the context of the conflict discussion. For instance, when women behave responsively toward their spouses during a conflict, their behaviors are consistent with gender role norms (e.g., Eagly, 1987); when men behave responsively toward their spouses during a conflict, their behaviors are not consistent with gender role norms. Although responsive behaviors remain inconsistent with the relational motives of both avoidant men and avoidant women, these behaviors may be less threatening for avoidant women because they can attribute their responsive behaviors to the gender-related demands of the situation. For example, avoidant women can attenuate potential threats resulting from their responsive behaviors by attributing these behaviors to the gender-based expectation that they behave responsively toward others, rather than to the unique aspects of their partner or their relationship. In contrast, avoidant men cannot attenuate threats using this strategy, and instead must maintain a sense of relational independence by perceiving their behaviors as less responsive. These possibilities and others represent important directions for future research.

Although our findings for avoidant wives' perceptions of their own responsiveness did not parallel those for avoidant husbands, the results for wives revealed several significant effects that are consistent with prior research. Wives who were higher in attachment anxiety perceived themselves as less responsive to their husbands, which aligns well with previous findings that anxious caregivers are less responsive to their partners (e.g., Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2000) and perceive themselves as providing compulsive and controlling care to their partners (e.g., B. C. Feeney & Collins, 2001). We also found that wives whose husbands were high in avoidance perceived themselves as less responsive, consistent with evidence that individuals underestimate their own responsiveness to avoidant romantic partners (e.g., Shallcross et al., 2011). In addition, previous research suggests that avoidant individuals may be unwilling or unable to benefit from their partners' attempts at responsiveness (for reviews, see Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2010, and Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), which may lead their partners to perceive themselves as less responsive toward avoidant individuals.

Our second set of predictions involved spouses' perceptions of their partners' responsiveness during the marital conflict. We expected that less avoidant individuals would consistently perceive their partners as more responsive, regardless of their partners' levels of responsive behavior (as rated by observers). Non-avoidant individuals may feel threatened by their

partners' unresponsive behaviors because such behaviors undermine dependence and closeness, but they can attenuate this threat and promote the dependence and closeness they value by perceiving their partners' behaviors as more responsive. In contrast, we predicted that more avoidant individuals would perceive their partners as less responsive, but only when observers also rated their partners as less responsive. When avoidant individuals' partners behave in a less responsive manner, their behavior confirms avoidant individuals' attachment-related expectations and desires to evade closeness and dependency, which may lead avoidant individuals to recognize their partners' behavior as less responsive. As anticipated, these predictions were supported for wives but not for husbands, which may reflect gender differences in the context of the marital conflict. That is, conflict discussions may be especially threatening for avoidant wives because they are expected to lead and direct the discussion (cf. Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Kelley et al., 1978), but their relational motives contradict with these gender-based expectations. When their partners behave in an unresponsive manner, avoidant wives can justify not taking a more active role in the conflict discussion and not depending on their partners by recognizing their partners' behavior as unresponsive.

Our results for wives contribute to prior evidence that avoidant individuals recognize their partners' lack of responsiveness (e.g., Collins & B. C. Feeney, 2004) by indicating conditions under which these perceptions are likely to arise. We found that avoidant wives perceived their husbands as less responsive, but only when their husbands behaved less responsively. In contrast, when their husbands behaved more responsively, avoidant wives perceived them as more responsive, and their perceptions did not differ from those of non-avoidant wives. That is, avoidant wives' perceptions of their husbands' responsiveness did not suffer when their husbands behaved responsively. In contrast, non-avoidant wives consistently perceived their husbands as responsive, even when their partners were not rated as behaving responsively by observers. These results suggest that partners may have benefited from their spouses' positive illusions about them (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b) under these circumstances.

In contrast to our results for wives' perceptions of their partners' responsiveness, avoidant husbands perceived their wives as less responsive, regardless of observers' ratings of their wives' responsiveness. However, husbands' perceptions of their wives' responsiveness unexpectedly varied as a function of their wives' avoidance and observers' ratings of their wives' responsiveness. That is, husbands perceived their more avoidant wives as less responsive, but only when observers also rated their wives as less responsive. Husbands may perceive their avoidant wives as less responsive because their wives are violating gender role norms in multiple ways, which may make it easier for husbands to recognize their wives' unresponsive behaviors (or, alternatively, may make it more difficult for husbands to overlook or ignore their wives' unresponsive behaviors). First, these wives' behaviors challenge gender-based expectations because they are not behaving responsively and supportively. Second, these wives' attachment orientations challenge gender-based expectations because avoidant individuals do not desire closeness or interdependence with their partners, which may make wives' unresponsive behaviors even more apparent. Therefore, avoidant wives' unresponsive behaviors may be more difficult for husbands to

overlook or easier for husbands to recognize, compared to non-avoidant wives' unresponsive behaviors.

These findings complement and contribute to previous research on perceptions of partners' responsiveness. For example, our results for husbands extend prior evidence that individuals perceive their avoidant partners as less responsive (e.g., Shallcross et al., 2011) by specifying conditions under which these perceptions are likely to occur. We found that husbands perceived their avoidant wives—but not their non-avoidant wives—as less responsive when their wives also behaved less responsively. However, when avoidant wives behaved more responsively, husbands also perceived them as more responsive; furthermore, husbands' perceptions of avoidant wives did not differ from their perceptions of non-avoidant wives at high levels of observer-rated responsiveness. These results indicate that individuals' perceptions of avoidant partners' responsiveness do not suffer when their partners behave in a responsive, supportive manner.

Limitations and Future Directions

We also note several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting our results. First, despite our firm theoretical reasons for believing that spouses' attachment avoidance shapes their perceptions of their own and their partners' responsiveness, our results are correlational and do not allow us to draw causal conclusions. Furthermore, although our assumption that attachment avoidance reflects motivated defensiveness against intimacy is consistent with prior research (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, and Pietromonaco & Beck, in press, for reviews), future work should continue to investigate this idea by directly manipulating such motivations and examining whether they drive individuals' perceptions of responsiveness. Finally, the present research focused on relatively young, opposite-sex newlywed couples, so it will be important to examine whether the observed effects extend to other couples, including same-sex couples, older couples, and couples of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. We anticipate that these effects will generalize to other types of couples, but that unique aspects of the relationship context may determine the exact patterns of these effects. For instance, newly married partners typically are more satisfied with their relationship compared to partners who have been married longer, which may differentially influence their perceptions of their own and their partners' responsiveness. As another example, future work that examines these processes among same-sex couples will illuminate the role of gender as a significant aspect of the relationship context, particularly in relation to the effects that involved gender differences in opposite-sex couples.

Conclusions

Taken together, these findings suggest that both avoidant and non-avoidant individuals perceive signs of their own and their partners' responsiveness in ways that reflect motivated perceptions of dependency. These perceptions, in turn, fulfill relationship needs and motives for both avoidant and non-avoidant partners. For example, when avoidant husbands perceive their responsive behavior toward their partners as less responsive, they can justify not increasing dependence on their partners and can maintain a sense of autonomy. Similarly, when avoidant wives recognize their partners' behavior as less responsive, they, too, can

justify not increasing relational dependence and can maintain the independence they desire. In contrast, when non-avoidant wives consistently perceive their husbands as responsive and when husbands consistently perceive their non-avoidant wives as responsive—regardless of their partners' levels of responsive behavior—they can justify maintaining or increasing dependence on their partners and strengthening their relationships. To the extent that these perceptions represent spouses' positive illusions about their partners, such perceptions could even shape partners into more responsive, supportive partners over time (e.g., Murray et al., 1996b).

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Figure 1.

Husbands' observer-rated responsiveness moderates the relationship between husbands' attachment avoidance and husbands' perceptions of own responsiveness.

Figure 2. Husbands' observer-rated responsiveness moderates the relationship between wives' attachment avoidance and wives' perceptions of husbands' responsiveness.

Figure 3.

Wives' observer-rated responsiveness moderates the relationship between wives' attachment avoidance and husbands' perceptions of wives' responsiveness.