

Demand-Withdraw Communication Pattern and Romantic Satisfaction in Young Couples: an Attachment Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction: *The present study takes a look into a practical dimension of the relationship between attachment styles and romantic relationship satisfaction: the demand-withdraw communication pattern, as previous research confirms that this pattern depicts a set of elements that are potentially specific to certain attachment styles (demand and need are specific to the anxious style, while withdrawal and rejection are specific to the avoidant one).*

Objectives: *The objective was observing the influence of the pattern on the relationship between attachment styles and romantic couple satisfaction. The influence of the pattern on the relationship between anxious attachment and satisfaction, when it is the participant who makes the demands and the influence of the pattern on the relationship between avoidant attachment and satisfaction, when it is his partner who makes the demands were taken into account differently. Thus, it was possible to test the presence of the behavioral loop in which low romantic satisfaction and behaviors specific to this pattern accentuate each other.*

Methods: *A number of 165 young adults aged 18 to 30 completed a one-session set of 3 questionnaires addressing romantic relationship satisfaction, attachment dimensions and the presence of the pattern in their relationship.*

Results: *The results confirmed the attachment has predictor role on romantic relationship satisfaction, but failed to confirm the pattern as a significant moderator.*

Conclusions: *The lack of influence of the pattern can be potentially explained by the sample, which was largely composed of people in short-term relationships, who may relieve its impact through self-censoring due to secondary communication goals. However, the presence of the pattern has been correlated with anxious and avoidant attachment, a result that supports previous research and encourages approaching a preventive practice regarding its development. For future research, it is recommended to study the theme on a sample composed of individuals in long-term relationships, so that the onset of the pattern and its effects are more clearly observable.*

Keywords: *internal working models, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, romantic relationships*

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I. Introduction

The correlations between different attachment styles and couple satisfaction have already been a scientific consensus for several decades. Studies confirm a positive association between secure romantic attachment and positive relationship experiences (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Simpson, 1990). A positive correlation between anxious or avoidant attachment and conflict in the relationship, lack of trust in the partner and low marital satisfaction has also been reported (Feeney, 1994). However, as Möller, Hwang and Wickberg (2006) note, efforts to understand attachment are much more opportune when examined in situations of stress, separation or threat. Thus, it is justified to say that behavioral and communication patterns encountered when conflicts arise in the couple provide a favorable environment to observe the effects of attachment. Of these patterns, Millwood and Waltz (2008) point out that the demand-withdraw communication pattern is more common in couples with insecure attachment (in one or both partners) than in couples with secure attachment. Additionally, according to Caughlin and Huston (2002) there is an association between this pattern and low romantic relationship satisfaction. We therefore believe that the occurrence of these behaviors during conflict can confirm previous fears of partners with insecure attachment styles, so that a mutual amplification effect can occur between a potential dissatisfaction in the relationship and the demand-withdraw communication pattern. The utility of studying the impact of this communication pattern is given by the fact that it has a practical relevance, since it can be addressed in therapy.

Attachment

Attachment is the emotional bond between two individuals. Johnson (2019) states, as the first principle of attachment theory, that seeking and maintaining contact with intimate others is a primary motivation of people, regardless of the stage of development. Dependency is a natural aspect of human nature and not a sign of emotional immaturity or lack of differentiation from others, while emotional rejection and isolation are inherently traumatizing and are received as signs of danger by a nervous system developed for close connection with trusted individuals.

Individual differences regarding these bonds are commonly known as attachment styles. There are three main styles of engaging with others and adjusting emotions: secure, anxious and avoidant. By referring specifically to these styles, we can state according to

Johnson (2019) that a person with secure attachment can understand their emotions and reach out to those close to them when they feel alone or insecure. Once the response is received, the person is comforted and can regain their emotional balance. Also, because of their essential trust in others' responsiveness, they can tolerate responses that are not fully optimal. Adults with a secure attachment style tend to describe their romantic experiences as happy, confident and solid. They also tend to form satisfying and long-term relationships throughout their lives (Smith & Klases, 2016). People with anxious attachment are especially susceptible to rejection and abandonment and they intensify their emotions and emotional signals toward others, often becoming critical and demanding, which can cause others to withdraw. They find it more difficult to be comforted and tend to stay alert, and the reaction of many partners to retreat when they feel controlled strengthens their behavior. Thus, a person with an anxious attachment style will constantly seek an increased level of validation, intimacy and responsiveness from their partner, thus becoming overly dependent on their partner and chronically focused on negative emotions, diminishing their own satisfaction (Ho et al., 2011). Avoidant individuals experience reaching out for help as futile and see closeness to others as a risk, at best. They deny their own attachment needs and emotions and withdraw at any sign of vulnerability of their own or of others. They are not responsive to the emotional demands of others and do not realize the impact of their lack of responsiveness. Adults characterized as having an avoidant attachment style will find it difficult to commit to a relationship, and when they commit, they will find it harder to trust their partners and avoid asking for help because of these negative expectations (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2006), which can also lead to low satisfaction. Certain people who cannot organize their emotions and behaviors and are overwhelmed by them combine these two last styles into a fourth type called disorganized or fearful-avoidant.

However, it is important to note that these styles are not absolute, and each person may exhibit specific traits of several types. Strict framing of people according to them could raise issues such as the stability of attachment styles, describing individuals from the perspective of multiple combined styles and identifying the specific components of attachment styles that influence relationship outcomes (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Therefore, it is more useful to regard each of them as a continuum on which every person can be placed, rather than mutually cancelling categories (Fraley & Waller, 1998). Brennan, Clark and

Shaver (1998) propose a model in which attachment styles are best represented by the extent to which an individual avoids closeness to other people (avoidant style) and the extent to which he fears of not being loved or being abandoned (anxious style). This creates a bidimensional frame that measures the two styles and their features without excluding each other. In this framework, the secure attachment style would match low scores in both sizes, while the disorganized attachment style would match high scores in both sizes.

According to Hazan and Shaver (1987), attachment styles are correlated with early relational experiences and influence internal working models, namely one's own beliefs about the path of romantic love, about the availability and trustworthiness of partners and about how lovable one is. They claim that these beliefs can influence behaviors, which in turn can confirm initial beliefs and thus a feedback loop may occur. This view is also supported by Johnson (2019), according to which a close relationship creates a strong feedback loop in which patterns of interaction shape the internal working models. Subsequently, these working models form or maintain certain interaction patterns. Thus, communication patterns could be closely related to attachment-based internal working models.

Demand-withdraw communication pattern

Demand-withdraw communication pattern refers to a repeatedly observable behavior: one partner tries to bring up a conflictual matter and blames the other or demands behavioral changes, while the other withdraws and remains silent, refusing to discuss the issue (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). It is generally associated with undesirable effects. First, it is correlated with both presenting low marital satisfaction (Caughlin & Huston, 2002) and a decrease in marital satisfaction over time (Heavey, Christensen & Malamuth, 1995). It can also predict divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). In addition, its effects are not limited to married couples, but are also correlated with stress and intrusive thoughts in cohabitation relationships (Malis & Roloff, 2006), with physical abuse (Fournier, Brassard & Shaver, 2011), with increased cortisol levels during conflict (Heffner et al., 2006) and with a predisposition to depression of partners who take part in it (Byrne, Carr & Clark, 2004).

There are several explanatory models for how this pattern appears and why, including that of individual differences, that of gender differences (as a result of the gender roles conditioning, according to Napier, 1978), or that of social structure (resulting from the increased desire of people in positions of less social power, usually female

representatives, to change the state of affairs – Vogel & Karney, 2002). However, Caughlin and Scott (2010) propose a more complex explanatory model: the multiple goals perspective, according to which partners usually try to accomplish multiple goals simultaneously in conflict and these interactional goals can explain their behaviors. Thus, regarding the occurrence of demand-withdraw communication, several resorts are taken into account in addition to the main purpose. For example, a person may have a tendency to achieve their primary goal of causing a change in their partner's behavior, but also counterbalancing the secondary goals of maintaining a harmonious relationship (relational goal) and appearing a caring person (identity goal), they will partially or completely censor their desire for change. We can observe a similar effect on the behavior of the withdrawing person, as withdrawal can be perceived as an act of rejection that could be considered a threat to secondary goals. The effect can also happen the other way around, an example being that the identity goal of wanting to express the more valid perspective can lead to the completion of a discussion started in a constructive manner through a demand-withdraw type of behavior.

The presence of the demand-withdraw communication pattern has been associated with insecure attachment, anxious and avoidant type (Fournier, Brassard & Shaver, 2011; Givertz & Safford, 2011). Currently, there are studies that correlate attachment with during-conflict behaviors through the idea that in interactions with attachment figures, emotions and behaviors are guided by the internal working models (Creasey, 2002).

Pietromonaco, Greenwood and Barrett (2004) suggest that a person with an anxious attachment style will experience more negative emotions and will consequently react in a counterproductive manner to the conflict, coercing the partner into a discussion that focuses excessively on their own feelings and concerns. Contrary, a person with an avoidant attachment style will tend to avoid conflict or minimize its importance in order to avoid emotionally close-up behaviors, such as sharing their thoughts and feelings, to maintain their independence (Pietromonaco, Greenwood & Barrett, 2004). Thus, an avoidant partner may fail to fulfill the wishes of an anxious one, and the anxious partner may be unable to accept the distancing, creating a loop in which the need for comfort and the need for distance accentuate each other.

Also, in a 2017 study, Taylor, Seedall, Robinson and Bradford examined the connection between attachment styles and skin conductance. Skin

conductance is a measure of electrodermal activity that indicates the intensity of emotions (or of suppression of emotion) and psychological distress by quantifying the excitation of the vegetative nervous system. They noticed a particularly increased skin conductance during and after conflicts in those couples composed of an anxious and an avoidant partner, compared to other couples. They suggest a link between this increased distress and the demand-withdraw pattern, finding similarities between the characteristics of the anxious style and the demander's role and between the characteristics of the avoidant style and the withdrawer's role. Thus, the distress suffered by these couples in particular can be correlated with the negative effects of the demand-withdraw communication pattern.

Objective and hypotheses

The objective of the present study is therefore to establish the relationship between different attachment styles and romantic relationship satisfaction, as well as the role of the demand-withdraw communication pattern in this relationship, since this pattern seems to serve both as a predictor of low romantic satisfaction (Heavey, Christensen & Malamuth, 1995) and as a result of it (Noller et al., 1994). Consistent with previous research, it is of interest to differently follow the link between the anxious attachment style of the individual and the demand-individual/ withdraw-partner communication pattern and the link between avoidant attachment style of the individual and the demand-partner/ withdraw-individual communication pattern. Thus, we can observe the presence (or absence) of the behavioral loop based on the internal working models mentioned above.

Accordingly, we wish to address two hypotheses:

1. Anxious attachment is a predictor of low romantic relationship satisfaction, and this relationship is moderated by the demand-participant/ withdraw-partner communication pattern.

2. Avoidant attachment is a predictor of low romantic relationship satisfaction, and this relationship is moderated by the demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern.

II. Method

Procedure

The design of the study is cross-sectional. The participation was voluntary and it involved the online completion (on Google Forms) of a set of 3 questionnaires

along with the demographic data, in a single session. This was preceded by the acceptance of the invitation to complete the study, which was shared on social media platforms. The potential participants were also informed about the purpose of the study and about the compliance with the "General Data Protection Regulation" (GDPR) and were able to provide answers only after they gave their consent to the processing of personal data.

Participants

The study involved 165 young adults aged 18 to 30 ($M = 21.31$, $SD = 2.14$), and the inclusion criteria were adult age and the existence of a romantic relationship at the moment. Of these, 129 were female (78.2%), 35 were male (21.2%) and one participant was of other genders (0.6%). In terms of background, 143 (86.7%) come from urban areas and 22 (13.3%) from rural areas. Considering the level of education, 105 graduated from high school/ vocational school (63.6%), 49 from university studies (29.7%), 7 from post-graduate studies (4.2%), two from secondary school (1.2%) and other two post-secondary studies (1.2%). Their romantic relationship durations ranged from two weeks to 6 years ($M = 18.74$ months, $SD = 17.49$ months).

Instruments

The 3 questionnaires were the following, assigned in this order:

To measure the romantic relationship satisfaction, we used the Romantic Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), translated in Romanian by Alina Chiracu. This involves 7 question type items that address the perceived quality of the couple relationship (e.g., "To what extent does this relationship meet your initial expectations?"). The answers are marked on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "low" and 5 equals "high". Scoring is done by adding them together (items marked with "R" are reverse-scored). The scale has a Cronbach Alpha index of .85.

For the measurement of attachment styles, we used the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), translated by Alina Chiracu. It contains 30 items that target the participant's feelings about close relationships (e.g., "10. I am comfortable depending on other people."). The answers are given on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 stands for "not at all like me" and 5 stands for "very much like me". To quantify the two dimensions of interest, anxious attachment and avoidant attachment, we used the scoring proposed by Kurdek (2002) in the study "On

being insecure about the assessment of attachment styles”. After determining the direction of the score of the items (some of them are reversed), he recommends measuring the anxious attachment by items 11, 18, 21, 23 and 25 (Cronbach Alpha = .85) and measuring the avoidant attachment by items 10, 12, 13, 15, 20, 24, 29 and 30 (Cronbach Alpha = .75), resulting in the two-dimensional model proposed by Simpson, Rholes and Nelligan in 1992.

For the demand-withdraw communication pattern, we used the short form of the “Communication patterns questionnaire” (CPQ-short form), developed by Christensen and Heavey (1990), in our own translation. This questionnaire includes 11 items describing behaviors in the couple at the beginning and during a conflict, with answers on a Likert scale of 1 to 9 that correspond to the likelihood of these behaviors occurring (1 = “very unlikely”, 9 = “very likely”). 6 of these items actually represent 3 pairs of complementary items, addressing the emergence of the demand-withdraw communication pattern in both directions, according to the participant’s perception. Thus, the demand-participant/ withdraw-partner communication pattern is summarized by adding items 3, 8 and 10 (e.g., “8. I nag and demand while my partner withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.”) (Cronbach Alpha = .69), and the demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern is summarized by adding items 4, 9 and 11 (e.g., “4. My partner tries to start a discussion while I try to avoid a discussion.”) (Cronbach Alpha = .69).

III. Results

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients and internal consistency coefficients are shown in Table 1.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-----------|---------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1. Sat | (.85) | | | | |
| 2. Anx | -.36*** | (.85) | | | |
| 3. Avoid | -.23** | .27*** | (.75) | | |
| 4. Partic | -.53*** | .32*** | .09 | (.69) | |
| 5. Partn | -.27*** | .21** | .25** | .43*** | (.69) |
| M | 30.41 | 12.15 | 21.43 | 9.76 | 9.53 |
| SD | 4.30 | 5.65 | 5.90 | 6.04 | 5.86 |

Note: Sat = Romantic relationship satisfaction, Anx = Anxious attachment, Avoid = Avoidant attachment, Partic = Demand-participant/ withdraw-partner communication pattern, Partn = Demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern. Internal consistency is shown diagonally, between brackets.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients and internal consistency coefficients

Regarding the assumption of normality, the following was observed: besides the romantic relationship satisfaction scale (skewness = -1.24, kurtosis = 1.69), all the other scales have normal distributions: anxious attachment (skewness = .48, kurtosis = -.76), avoidant attachment (skewness = .51, kurtosis = -.16), demand-participant/ withdraw-partner communication pattern (skewness = .88, kurtosis = .21) and demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern (skewness = .86, kurtosis = .09).

Inferential statistics

To test the predictor role of anxious attachment and avoidance attachment on romantic satisfaction, we used simple regression analysis. Thus, it turned out that anxious attachment explains about 13% of the variance in romantic satisfaction ($r^2 = .13$, $F = 24.69$, $p < .001$), and that avoidant attachment explains about 5% of the variance in romantic satisfaction ($r^2 = .05$, $F = 9.24$, $p < .01$). Both anxious attachment and avoidant attachment are predictors in negative regression models and have statistically significant effects on romantic satisfaction (Table 2).

| Predictor | B | t | r ² | F |
|-----------|---------|----------|----------------|----------|
| Anx | -.27*** | -4.96*** | .13*** | 24.69*** |
| Avoid | -.16** | -3.04** | .05** | 9.24** |

Note: Anx = Anxious attachment, Avoid = Avoidant attachment
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 2. Effects of attachment styles on romantic relationship satisfaction

To test the moderating role of the demand/ withdraw communication pattern on the relationship between attachment styles and romantic satisfaction the software PROCESS 4.1 was used (Hayes, 2022). With regard to the first hypothesis, the interaction between anxious attachment and demand-participant/ withdraw-partner communication pattern does not have a significant effect on romantic satisfaction ($B = -.008$, $t = -.98$, $p = .32$). Likewise, with regard to the second hypothesis, the interaction between the avoidant attachment and the demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern also has no significant effect on romantic satisfaction ($B = .008$, $t = .98$, $p = .32$). These results show that in none of the cases the demand/ withdraw communication pattern moderates the relationship between attachment styles and romantic relationship satisfaction. In other words, the relationship between anxious attachment and romantic satisfaction is similar regardless of the level of presence of the demand-participant/ withdraw-partner

communication pattern, and the relationship between avoidant attachment and romantic satisfaction is similar regardless of the level of presence of the demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern.

IV. Discussions

These results show that the two hypotheses have only been partially confirmed. Thus, both anxious attachment and avoidant attachment have negative effects on romantic satisfaction. However, the demand-withdraw communication pattern does not turn out to be a moderator in these relationships. These results can have several causes and implications.

If we look at the hypotheses separately, we firstly notice (Table 1) that in the case of hypothesis 2, the avoidant attachment style (predictor) correlates more strongly with the demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern (moderator) than with the romantic satisfaction (criterion), which makes moderation analysis an inappropriate process for the given situation. There is also a statistically significant correlation between the anxious attachment style and both types of the communication pattern. In contrast, the avoidant attachment style shows a significant correlation only with the expected pattern (demand-partner/ withdraw-participant).

Another important aspect to emphasize is the rather large and statistically significant correlation between the two patterns, which may suggest that, at least in the case of our sample, the pattern tends to represent two-way demand/ withdraw communication (both partners have alternately both the role of the demander, as well as the role of the withdrawer). One way to clarify this would be to study both members of a couple and to compare their reports, to certainly tell whether one of them assumes one of the two roles specifically more often and whether this role correlates with attachment styles. In addition, one might notice the communicational impact of a partner with low scores on both anxious and avoidant attachment (so-called secure attachment). It is assumed that these partners would not allow the development of the pattern due to their understanding of their own emotions, the desire to reach out to those close to them in case of need and the essential trust in their responsiveness and due to their tolerance to responses that are not fully optimal. Another recommendation is to study the effect of high scores on both anxious and avoidant attachment (so-called disorganized attachment) on romantic satisfaction and the role of the communication pattern in this relationship. Although our present objective was to

study these attachment traits separately, people with high scores on both dimensions are a special case to address because communication mechanisms will be much more complex. If in our sample there was a fairly large correlation between the two forms of the pattern, perhaps on the individual level, in the case of those with disorganized attachment, the presence of both forms will be even more clearly observable. However, returning to the perspective of studying the pattern with the help of both partners in a couple, we recall that previous studies show that the presence of this pattern is similarly recognized by both partners (Schrodtt et al., 2013), so that for the purposes of the present research we can assume that the reports of a single partner are sufficiently relevant.

In terms of normality assumption, the sample was negatively asymmetric regarding relationship satisfaction (skewness = -1.24). This can be attributed to a sampling bias due to the self-selection process. More specifically, because of the description that mentioned studying couple satisfaction, it is possible that among those who were invited to participate in the study, those who would score higher on romantic satisfaction were more open to completing it than those who would have lower scores.

Also, if we refer to the other variables, positive asymmetric distributions were observed in the sample both for age (skewness = 1.03) and for relationship duration (skewness = 1.29). Short-term relationships studied in this way can provide an explanation for the low presence of the demand-withdraw communication pattern and its effects on the quality of the relationship. First, individual episodes are excluded by definition from the concept of pattern, and its development through the recurrent appearance of the behavior involves conversational topics that span several discussions (sometimes even over several years) (Malis & Roloff, 2006). In addition, early-stage couples may censor their requests in communication partially or completely to fulfil their secondary goals, such as the relational goal of not affecting the balance of the relationship or the identity one of not appearing authoritarian (Caughlin & Scott, 2010). Also, with withdrawal being considered an act of rejection, the one to whom the demands are made may also be restricted in communication by secondary purposes, although his primary wish would be to withdraw. For example, they may resort to a covert avoidance, such as directing the discussion topic in a direction congruent with the existing one, but also away from the unwanted problem. Caughlin and Scott's (2010) perspective of multiple goals is based on the

assumption that goals can change over time. Thus, the correlation between low satisfaction in a relationship and the increased presence of the pattern in later years (Noller et al., 1994) may suggest that those dissatisfied with the solutions of certain problems may become frustrated by unsuccessful attempts to address problems constructively and may therefore relinquish certain identity or relational goals, aspect that would facilitate the appearance of the request/ withdrawal communication pattern over time.

We conclude that a major limit of the present study is the sample of which half of the respondents are part of romantic relationships with up to one-year durations (median = 12 months) and we recommend studying the phenomenon either on a more diverse sample, or on a sample composed strictly of people with long-term relationships. Also, a longitudinal design would facilitate the study of the appearance of the pattern and of the causal relationships between it and romantic relationship satisfaction. In addition, there are a number of variables that, although not the subject of this study, can influence (perhaps even interactively) the emergence of the pattern, such as gender, education level and background. It should not be overlooked that the demand-wife/ withdraw-husband communication pattern is more common than its opposite (demand-husband/ withdraw-wife) (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Well, from a gender role perspective, it would be useful to study whether this prevalence is potentiated in rural (and usually more conservative) environments than in urban ones. Also, from the perspective of social structure, we might be interested if whether this lack of symmetry is lower in highly educated environments where (theoretically) power is meritocratically shared, because male people would no longer have a resistant motivation to withdraw when they are asked to give up the powers they owe to the status quo.

V. Conclusions

Although the results confirmed the hypotheses only partially (which may be due to the sample composed of people who are predominantly in short-term relationships), we believe that the study is congruent with previous research and with the attachment theory. In addition, the used sample could serve, in contrast to samples composed of people in long-term relationships of the recommended future studies, when creating a model that clearly indicates the point at which the demand/ withdraw communication pattern begins to have an effect on the relationship between attachment dimensions and couple satisfaction.

However, we believe that its main contribution is that it provides insight into the development of the demand/ withdraw communication pattern and into the onset of its effects on romantic relationship satisfaction. Thus, if in the case of recently formed couples we can talk about a censorship of negative behavior specific to the pattern due to secondary purposes that erode over time, a mental health practitioner may consider addressing certain client cognitions or emotions with special attention before they turn into potentially harmful relationship behaviors. Such a preventive approach is all the more justified as our data showed a statistically significant correlation between the avoidant attachment style and the demand-partner/ withdraw-participant communication pattern and between the anxious attachment style and both forms of the pattern. In this case, people with high scores on these attachment dimensions are at greater risk of getting involved in this pattern of communication and should therefore be especially supported in avoiding patterns that would cause undesirable effects in their lives, before they get observable and become self-fulfilling prophecies.

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