Partners' Appreciation and Understanding: Moderation of Low Self-Disclosure and Relationship Identification Caused by Attachment-Related Avoidance

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Abstract. Attachment-related avoidance is known to hinder emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and relationship identification in intimate relationships. This study examines how individual differences in attachment-related avoidance predict variations in self-disclosure and relationship identification, particularly when moderated by perceived appreciation and understanding from partners. Drawing on attachment theory, the study hypothesizes that avoidantly attached individuals who feel appreciated or understood by their partners will report higher levels of self-disclosure and relationship identification. Participants involved in intimate relationships will be recruited from China and randomly assigned to groups experiencing varying levels of partners' appreciation or understanding through controlled interaction tasks. The study will employ self-reported measures before and after these interactions to assess changes in self-disclosure and relationship identification. The results are expected to show that higher levels of perceived appreciation and understanding lead to greater improvements in relationship outcomes. Secondary analyses will explore the effects of gender and partner attachment styles. Findings will have both theoretical and practical implications, contributing to a deeper understanding of attachment theory and offering insights for therapeutic interventions that aim to foster appreciation and understanding in relationships, particularly for individuals with avoidant attachment styles.

Keywords: attachment-related avoidance, self-disclosure, relationship identification, partners' appreciation, perceived understanding.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, explains the critical importance of early bonds between infants and their primary caregivers. Specifically, Bowlby posited that infants need a close relationship with at least one caregiver in order to ensure their survival and foster healthy social and emotional development. Then, Mary Ainsworth expanded Bowlby's work in the 1960s, identifying four attachment patterns in infants: secure, avoidant, anxious, and disorganised attachment. Finally, in the 1980s, attachment theory has been extended to adult relationships, becoming a key framework in understanding relational dynamics across the lifespan[1].

People with avoidant attachment style, precisely, are very distrustful of close relationships and are afraid to make themselves dependent on others, in some cases to avoid the pain of rejection, in others to avoid the stress of being someone else's caregiver[2]. Hence, several interpersonal problems will appear, both dominance and affiliation dimensions, such as coldness, and negatively to the subscales associated with affiliation like exploitable and overly expressive[3]. In addition, it is found that avoidant attachment style will lead to one's low level of self-disclosure and relationship identification, which usually puzzles and does harm to one's partner, breaking their relationship.

Self-disclosure, the act of sharing personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, is crucial for deepening emotional connections in intimate relationships. However, for individuals high in attachment avoidance, this process is often seen as a threat to their autonomy, since they are less likely to disclose personal information and tend to maintain emotional distance. Studies have found that avoidant individuals are less motivated to engage in prosocial behaviors, self-disclosure, leading to further diminishing their emotional connection with their partners[4].

Besides, individuals with attachment-related avoidance tend to maintain emotional distance from their partners, which impacts how central the relationship becomes to their self-concept. It has been recorded that relationship identification involves seeing a specific relationship as an integral part of the self-concept, making the relationship central to one's identity. Avoidant individuals, however, are less likely to view relationships as such because they prefer independence and fear becoming overly reliant on others. This emotional detachment prevents them from integrating the relationship into their self-concept, causing lower relationship identification[5].

Recently, two daily experience studies have examined whether feeling appreciated by a romantic partner would buffer the negative effects. The studies came out that when avoidantly attached individuals felt highly appreciated by their partner, they displayed greater prosocial motivation; furthermore, one reason why avoidantly attached individuals were more prosocial when they felt appreciated is because they felt more committed to the relationship[4]. Plus, another research highlights the importance of felt understanding in enhancing relationship bonds, suggesting that it allows individuals to see their relationship as more central and significant to their identity. This process occurs through increased coherence—when individuals feel understood, their lives seem more coherent and meaningful, thereby enhancing the emotional significance and cognitive centrality of the relationship in their self-concept, which underlines feeling understood is critical for developing deeper relationship bonds, beyond the effects of caring and acceptance[5].

Nevertheless, all of these studies and findings are piecemeal or too general, none of them can detailedly verify a series of methods that might help to moderate intense interpersonal problems and discomfort arising when getting along between two people caused by someone's high level of attachment-related avoidance. Therefore, in this paper, I will introduce an experiment that can address this gap by discussing whether the moderation of partners' appreciation and understanding has positive effects, which owns both practical and theoretical implications. Practically, the findings can inform therapeutic interventions by highlighting the importance of fostering an environment where individuals feel genuinely appreciated and understood by their partners. Therapeutic strategies that focus on enhancing these perceptions might reduce the barriers to emotional closeness and improve communication, particularly for avoidant individuals. These insights can be applied in couples therapy or relational counseling, where practitioners can guide partners in offering meaningful support and validation, helping avoidantly attached individuals feel safer in their relationships. Theoretically, this study will deepen our understanding of attachment theory, particularly in the context of adult romantic relationships. By focusing on the nuanced role of partner perception, we aim to expand the current attachment framework, which has primarily

focused on individual behaviors and internal working models. The findings will shed light on how external factors, such as a partner's consistent expression of appreciation and understanding, can buffer the detrimental effects of avoidant attachment. This study will also contribute to broader discussions about the relational dynamics that either amplify or reduce attachment-related behaviors, offering insights into how specific interactions can reshape long-standing attachment patterns.

2. Hypothesis

The primary hypothesis of this study is that perceived appreciation and understanding from a partner can moderate the relationship between attachment-related avoidance and lower levels of self-disclosure and relationship identification. Detailedly, it is expected that avoidantly attached individuals who feel appreciated or understood by their partners will report higher levels of self-disclosure and relationship identification compared to those who do not experience these perceptions after the process of experiencing varying levels of perceived appreciation or understanding from their partners through controlled interaction tasks or scripted communication than before. Moreover, the degree of perceived appreciation or understanding is predicted to have a proportional effect: higher levels will lead to greater improvements in relationship outcomes, while lower or medium levels will show smaller effects.

3. Method

The study, which is longitudinal, will be conducted in several stages, following a structured process to explore the moderating role of perceived partner appreciation and understanding on the relationship between attachment-related avoidance and self-disclosure and relationship identification.

We will report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions. This study will be approved by and carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Institutional Review Board for human participants with written informed consent obtained from all participants.

3.1. Participant recruitment

Participants will be recruited from China, and they will be individuals involved in intimate relationships. The study will aim to gather a sufficient sample size based on a power analysis to ensure the results are statistically reliable. According to G*Power, the sample size should be 42. Exclusion criteria will be applied, such as participants who fail manipulation checks or do not meet the required demographic profiles.

3.2. Procedure

3.2.1. Initial measurement of attachment-related avoidance

All participants will begin by completing the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire. This self-reported measure will assess their levels of attachment-related avoidance, providing the baseline for understanding each participant's attachment style.

3.2.2. Assignment to experimental conditions

Participants will then be randomly assigned to one of three groups, each experiencing varying levels of perceived appreciation or understanding from their partner. The conditions include:
A. High level of perceived appreciation/understanding
B. Medium level of perceived appreciation/understanding
C. No change (control group)

3.2.3. Controlled interaction tasks

Each group will participate in controlled interaction tasks or engage in scripted communication scenarios designed to elicit different levels of perceived appreciation or understanding from their partner. These tasks are tailored to simulate interactions that either enhance or maintain typical levels of perceived support.

3.2.4. Post-intervention assessment

Following the interaction tasks, participants will complete another set of self-reported questionnaires one month later. This second assessment will measure their current levels of self-disclosure and relationship identification, allowing a comparison with their pre-intervention scores.

3.3. Data analysis

The study will compare the changes in self-disclosure and relationship identification across the three groups. A larger improvement in the group experiencing high levels of perceived appreciation and understanding is expected, indicating a stronger moderating effect. A moderate change is expected in the medium-level group, while minimal or no change is anticipated in the control group. The data will be analyzed using repeated-measures ANOVA to assess the interaction between levels of perceived appreciation/understanding and changes in self-disclosure and relationship identification. This method allows for within-subject comparisons across different levels of appreciation/understanding, highlighting any statistically significant improvements in relationship outcomes.

Secondary analyses will also be conducted to examine the role of gender and the attachment style of the partner on the results. These analyses will provide additional insights into how attachment avoidance interacts with broader relational factors.

4. Results

By the end of the study, the results will either confirm or reject the hypothesis that perceived appreciation and understanding from partners can moderate the negative effects of attachment-related avoidance on intimate relationships. These findings will have practical implications for relationship counseling and therapeutic strategies aimed at improving relationship satisfaction for individuals with avoidant attachment styles. Possible situations include:

Strong Positive Correlation ($r > 0.7$)

Expectation: Individuals with high levels of perceived appreciation and understanding experience significant improvements in self-disclosure and relationship identification, even if they have avoidant attachment tendencies.

Moderation: Appreciation/understanding effectively weakens the negative effects of attachment avoidance, leading to higher relational outcomes.

Proportionality: The higher the perceived appreciation/understanding, the stronger the correlation between appreciation/understanding and improved self-disclosure/identification.

Moderate Positive Correlation (0.3<r<0.7)

Expectation: Individuals who perceive moderate to high appreciation and understanding from their partners experience noticeable, but not drastic, improvements in self-disclosure and relationship identification.

Moderation: Perceived appreciation and understanding buffer the negative effects of avoidant attachment, but the improvements are moderate because avoidance still has a strong influence.

Proportionality: Higher appreciation and understanding yield better relational outcomes, but the effect is not as pronounced as in the strong positive correlation. For instance, avoidant individuals might become somewhat more open but not fully disclose or strongly identify with their partner.

Weak Positive Correlation (0<r<0.3）

Expectation: Individuals who feel low to medium levels of appreciation and understanding show slight or minimal improvements in self-disclosure and relationship identification.

Moderation: Perceived appreciation and understanding have a weak moderating effect on avoidantly attached individuals, perhaps because avoidant tendencies are more deeply ingrained and appreciation isn't sufficient to overcome them.

Proportionality: Even with some appreciation or understanding, avoidant individuals may still struggle to disclose or fully identify with the relationship. The impact is marginal.

No Correlation (r=0)

Expectation: Perceived appreciation and understanding have no effect on self-disclosure and relationship identification in avoidant individuals.

Moderation: The moderator (appreciation/understanding) fails to alleviate avoidant tendencies, leading to no significant changes in relationship outcomes.

Proportionality: Neither high nor low appreciation and understanding affect outcomes, meaning avoidant attachment may completely dominate relational behavior.

e) Negative Correlation (r<0)

Expectation: Higher levels of perceived appreciation and understanding paradoxically result in lower self-disclosure and relationship identification.

Moderation: This could indicate that avoidant individuals might feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable by high levels of appreciation, triggering defensive withdrawal behaviors.

Proportionality: Higher appreciation and understanding would lead to worse relational outcomes in avoidant individuals, causing them to disclose even less or identify less with the relationship.

Based on my hypothesis that perceived appreciation and understanding moderate the relationship between attachment-related avoidance and relational outcomes, I expect a moderate to strong positive correlation (r=0.5−0.85), particularly for individuals who have experienced high levels of appreciation and understanding. The correlation would be lower for individuals with medium levels of perceived appreciation and understanding during the intervention, but still positive if some level of appreciation and understanding have been perceived.

5. Limitations

Nevertheless, there are some limitations in the experiment, which are listed below:

Since the experiment relies on self-reported questionnaires at the beginning and in the end to reflect one's level of self-disclosure and relationship identification, there is a potential for response

bias, where participants may not provide fully accurate or honest answers, affecting the accuracy of the experiment results. Precisely, as participants know what the expected results are, they may intentionally act positively in the designed experiment. Besides, since intimate relationships is a sensitive topic, participants may not want to fully disclose personal information, or they just cannot face some problems with courage, especially when their attachment style is insure.

b) In the experiment, participants experience controlled interactions or scripted communication designed to evoke varying levels of appreciation and understanding from their partners. These artificial interactions may not fully capture the complexities and subtleties of real-life relationship dynamics. Due to the unnatural behaviors between participants and their partners, the experiment results may be of low external validity, which means the findings may not be as applicable to real-world scenarios as desired. Moreover, there is possibility for participants and their partners to return to their original way of getting along with after the experiment, causing a sense of drop-off. This sense of drop-off may lead to counteractive effects.

c) Participants' identity will influence the generalization of experiment results. Firstly, the sample is restricted to participants from China, which is quite limited, because attachment styles and relationship behaviors can vary significantly across cultures, especially in terms of how people express and perceive appreciation and understanding. Therefore, there will be a concern that whether the findings are applicable to other cultural contexts. Secondly, gender effects do need to be considered. For example, men and women may experience and express appreciation or understanding in different ways. Without adequately addressing these gender differences, there could be confounding variables that obscure the true relationship attachment avoidance, self-disclosure, and relationship identification. Finally, partners' different attachment styles can also make the results varied. For instance, partners with avoidant attachment style maintain distance, so although they are required to offer much appreciation and understanding to participants, it may not work.

d) The perceived level of being appreciated or understood by a partner is a complex and subjective experience. It might be difficult to ensure that the experimental manipulation consistently influences participants' perceptions in the desired way across different individuals. Hence, if the manipulation isn't strong or clear enough to some participants, they may not experience the intended variation in appreciation or understanding and the expected experiment results cannot be certificated.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims to fill a critical gap in understanding how attachment-related avoidance impacts self-disclosure and relationship identification, particularly when moderated by perceived appreciation and understanding from partners. By exploring the nuanced role of partner perceptions in intimate relationships, this research will provide valuable insights into both theoretical and practical applications. The findings have the potential to deepen our comprehension of attachment theory, shedding light on how external relational factors can buffer or mitigate the challenges posed by avoidant attachment. Practically, the study could lead to the development of more targeted therapeutic interventions that foster appreciation and understanding in relationships, thereby enhancing emotional closeness and improving relational outcomes. While there are certain limitations, this research represents an important step toward better addressing the complexities of attachment avoidance and its effects on relationship dynamics. Ultimately, the study's findings will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to navigate and strengthen relationships,

particularly for individuals with avoidant attachment tendencies, fostering healthier, more fulfilling connections.

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