

ATTACHMENT-RELATED ANXIETY AND AVOIDANCE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS



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INTRODUCTION

- Attachment theory is central to understanding behavior within the context of intimate relationships. In fact, an insecure attachment is associated with numerous difficulties in romantic relationships (Davila et al., 1999).
- There are two fundamental dimensions of insecure attachment: (1) anxiety (fear concerning abandonment and rejection), and (2) avoidance (avoidance of intimacy) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).
- The interpersonal circumplex model (IIP-circumplex; Allen et al., 1990) in couple relationships provides a framework for summarising problematic interpersonal behaviors within couples and help for better understanding how attachment insecurity influences these difficulties.
- The interpersonal circumplex model conceptualizes difficulties in romantic relationships as arising from two main evolutionary challenges that individuals face; (a) connecting with other people in order to form a protective community (communion), and (b) achieving a sense of one's own competence and control (agency) (Horowitz et al., 2006).
- In the present study, couple' interpersonal problems refer to four maladaptive relational behaviors, organized along the two axes of the interpersonal circumplex model: (1) Distant to Self-Sacrificing behaviors along the communion axis, and (2) Domineering to Nonassertive behaviors along the agency axis (Figure 1).

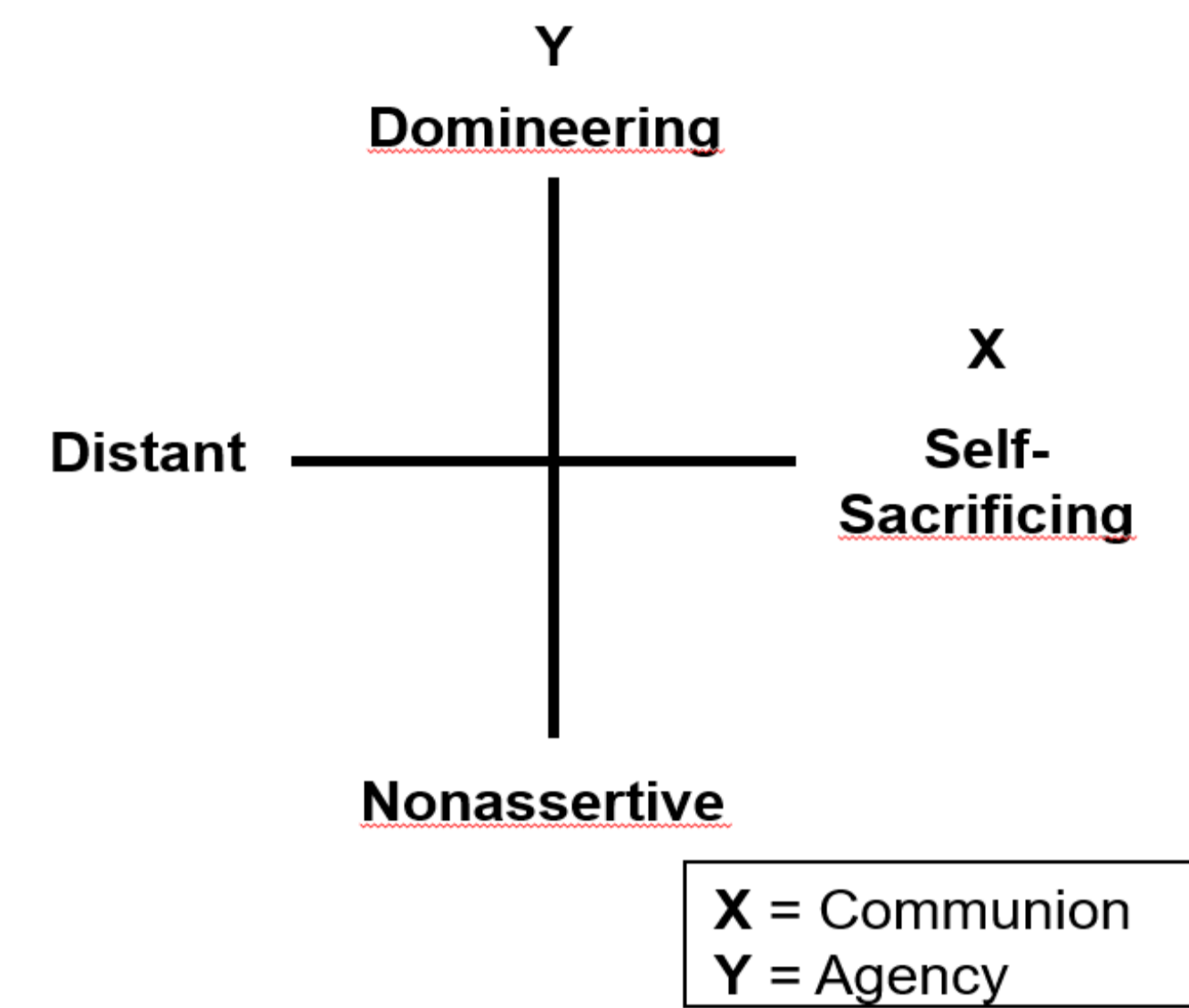


Figure 1. Circumplex structure of interpersonal behaviors

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Evaluate the associations between attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, and the four interpersonal difficulties experienced in romantic relationships among men and women.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 1945 university students (1566 females, and 379 males) between the age of 18 and 65 years (mean age of 25.2 years, SD = 6.5), completed a 60 to 90 minutes online questionnaire.
- 76% reported being in relationships for more than 6 months. At the time of the relationship, 54% weren't living with their partner, 37% were common-law partners, and 7% were married.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Experiences in close relationships

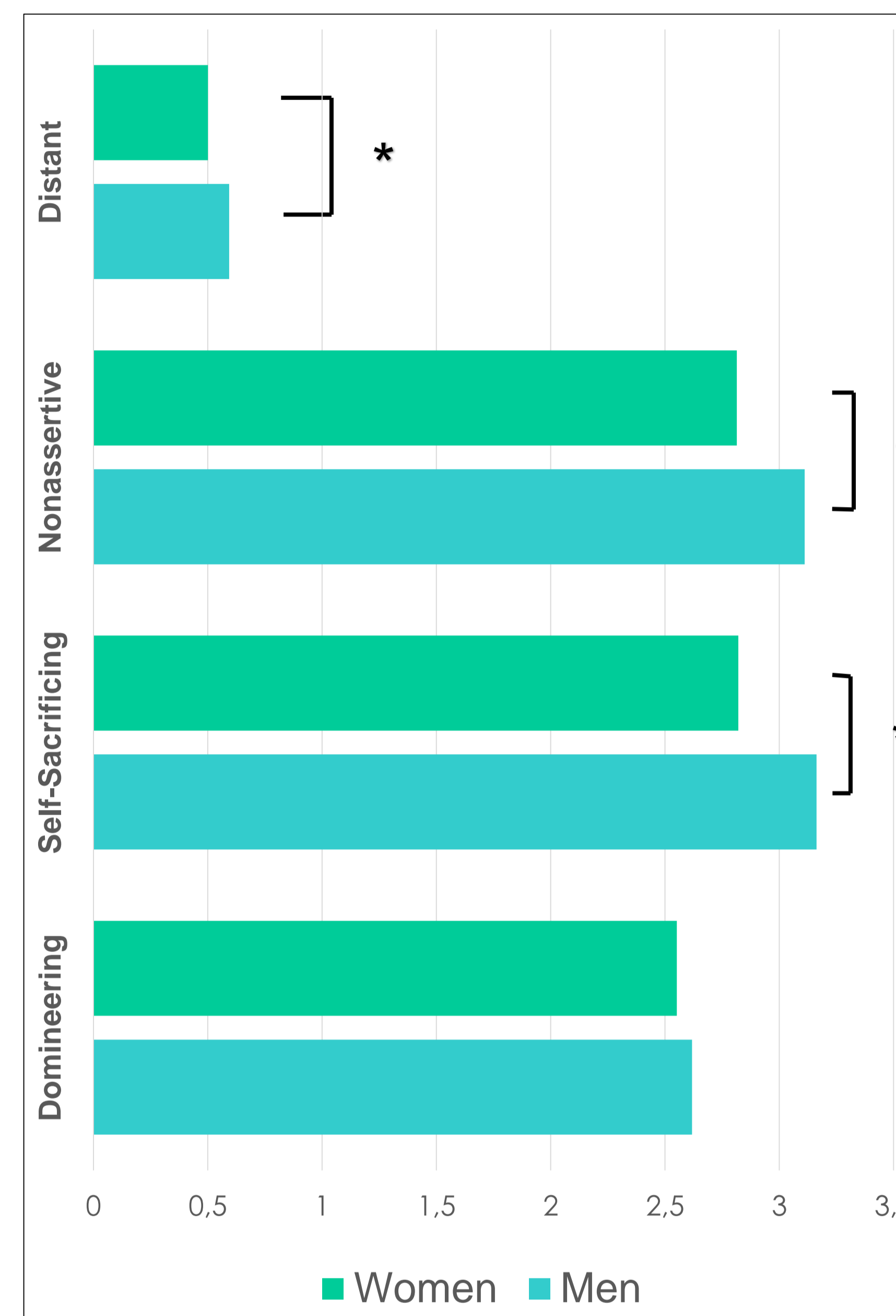
- The French version of the *Experiences in Close Relationships* (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998; French version, Lafontaine & Lussier, 2003) was used to measure the degree of anxious and avoidant attachment. The 36-item questionnaire uses a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of both dimensions is .90 and .91.

Interpersonal Problems in couples relationships

- Four scales from the *Inventory of Interpersonal Problems in couple relationships* (IIP-Couple; Paradis & Boucher, 2007) were used to measure the interpersonal problems in intimate relationships. This questionnaire is an adaptation of the *Inventory of Interpersonal Problem-Circumplex* (IIP-Circumplex; Allen et al., 1990). The IIP-Couple is designed to assess a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* (0) to *extremely* (4), different domains of interpersonal difficulties that individuals might have while interacting or attempting to interact with their partner. The 64 items produce eight subscales with score of 0 to 32. In this study, only four of the height dimensions were considered: Domeneering, Nonassertive, Distant and Self-Sacrificing. Internal consistency of each dimension varies from .79 to .83.

RESULTS

Figure 1 Interpersonal Problems in Couple relationships means scores for men and women



Note. * $p < .001$

Independent-sample t-tests were run to determine if there were gender differences on the subscale scores of each domains of couple interpersonal difficulties. Significant results indicate that men were more likely to report being **Distant** ($t(470.87) = 4.891$ $p = .000$), **Nonassertive** ($t(1794) = 3.718$ $p = .000$) and **Self-Sacrificing** ($t(1794) = 5.936$ $p = .000$) than women.

Table 1 MEN's Interpersonal Problems in Couple relationships according to the type of attachment

IIP variables	Types of attachment	β	t	Semi-partial R^2	Ajusted R^2
Domineering	Anxiety:	.196	4.079***	.037	.255
	Avoidant:	.438	9.100***	.187	
Self-Sacrificing	Anxiety:	.427	9.036***	.177	.281
	Avoidant:	.258	5.456***	.065	
Nonassertive	Anxiety:	.326	7.000***	.103	.306
	Avoidant:	.400	8.595***	.156	
Distant	Anxiety:	.149	3.635***	.022	.462
	Avoidant:	.641	15.688***	.399	

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 2 WOMEN's Interpersonal Problems in Couple relationships according to the type of attachment

IIP variables	Types of attachment	β	t	Semi-partial R^2	Ajusted R^2
Domineering	Anxiety:	.329	13.950***	.099	.254
	Avoidant:	.301	12.783***	.083	
Self-Sacrificing	Anxiety:	.392	16.618***	.141	.254
	Avoidant:	.225	9.550***	.047	
Nonassertive	Anxiety:	.265	11.252***	.065	.256
	Avoidant:	.364	15.474***	.122	
Distant	Anxiety:	.174	8.734***	.028	.464
	Avoidant:	.612	30.625***	.343	

Note. *** $p < .001$

CONCLUSION

- Results indicate that men report more problems associated to being *Distant*, *Nonassertive* and *Self-Sacrificing* than women. No statistically difference was found for Domineering.
- Multiple regressions reveal that having an anxious or avoidant attachment is significantly associated to interpersonal problems in romantic relationships on all four domains measured in both, men and women.
- Particularly, *anxious*-attachment in women and *avoidant*-attachment in men was associated with couple interpersonal problems in the *Domineering* northern hemisphere of the circumplex. Anxiously-attached men and women experienced more problems related to being too *Self-sacrificing*. For both men, and women, avoidance was associated with being too *Non-assertive*, while *avoidant*-attachment was **most strongly** associated to problems in with being too *Distant* in the relationship.

Clinical implications

- The interpersonal model adds a dimension to the understanding of the attachment system.
- Couple therapy (i.e., Emotions-Focused Couple Therapy) could include the framework offered by this model in their conceptualisation of intimate relationships.
- This model also contributes to understanding the interaction patterns and relationship problems.

Contact

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