Filling the Void: Bolstering Attachment Security in Committed Relationships

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Abstract

Attachment security has many salutary effects in adulthood, yet little is known about the specific interpersonal processes that increase attachment security over time. Using data from 134 romantically committed couples in a longitudinal study, we examined trust (whether a partner is perceived as available and dependable) and perceived goal validation (whether a partner is perceived as encouraging one's personal goal pursuits). In concurrent analyses, trust toward a partner was uniquely associated with lower attachment anxiety, whereas perceiving one's goal pursuits validated by a partner was uniquely associated with lower attachment avoidance. In longitudinal analyses, however, the inverse occurred: Trust toward a partner uniquely predicting reduced attachment avoidance over time and perceived goal validation uniquely predicting reduced attachment anxiety over time. These findings highlight distinct temporal paths for bolstering the security of attachment anxious versus attachment avoidant individuals.

Keywords

attachment, close relationships, goals, personality development, interdependence

Attachment bonds have figured prominently in accounts of adult romantic relationships since Hazan and Shaver (1987) published their seminal article—among the most cited in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*—in which they proposed that relationship processes are shaped by adult *attachment styles*: stable individual differences in how people relate to, and what they expect from, significant others (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973). Despite the importance of attachment processes, existing research overwhelmingly has treated attachment styles as being relatively stable, and focused on their correlates and outcomes. Although attachment styles exhibit stability (Fraley, Vicary, Brumbaugh, & Roisman, 2011), they can change nonetheless (Bowlby, 1988). Like other personality traits with social bases (e.g., self-esteem, Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Kelley, 1983), attachment styles may shift as individuals interact with close others and readjust their inferences. Few studies have examined how attachment changes over time in romantic relationships (see, e.g., Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999). Our goal was to test specific relationship inferences that target aspects of insecure mental representations and increase attachment security over time.

We examined inferring that a partner can be trusted and perceiving one's goals validated by a partner, which have not been combined in previous research on change in attachment security (cf. Fuller & Fincham, 1995, on changes in trust). These inferences are particularly relevant to committed partners, who behave in ways that encourage trust and elicit one's ideal self

(Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieslequist, & Whitton, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Partner behaviors notwithstanding, changing attachment ultimately depends on the inferences a person makes of a partner's behavior (Kelley et al., 2003; Maisel & Gable, 2009). We suggest that the timing of such inferences is crucial; the combined effects of trust and goal validation may operate differently depending on the nature of an individual's insecurity and the temporal frame adopted. The main idea of our analysis is that the inference most relevant to increasing security over the long-term may differ from the inference most strongly associated with security in the short term.

Attachment Security

Attachment insecurity is reflected in discernible patterns of behavior, motives, affect, and perceptions that vary along two key dimensions: *Attachment anxiety* reflects heightened

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concerns over a close other's availability and acceptance, and doubts about one's self-worth; *attachment avoidance* reflects heightened independence, and doubts about the benefits of intimacy or trusting others to meet one's needs (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998). Low levels on both dimensions reflect attachment security. These dimensions are based on "working models," or underlying mental representations that distill past attachment-related experiences into a set of expectations or "scripts" regarding how significant others will respond to their attachment-related needs (Baldwin, 1992; Bretherton, 1991; Waters & Waters, 2006). Working models based on past attachment experiences guide current tendencies in interactions with attachment figures (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Attachment styles have been theorized to shift in key moments with attachment figures (Bowlby, 1982, 1988), as when a close other provides a sense of security and safety in times of distress, and/or conveys a bond sufficiently strong for a person to feel secure in turning to independent pursuits. Just as caregivers once did, relationship partners can fulfill normative attachment functions, providing security and encouraging personal growth (safe-haven and secure-base functions; Feeney, 2004).

Inferring trust is likely to increase attachment security. Perceiving a partner as predictable and dependable captures the essence of trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), and specifically increases confidence that a partner provides a "safe haven" in times of need or distress (Murray et al., 2006). Perceived goal validation also is likely to increase attachment security. Feeling encouraged and validated in one's goal pursuits provides a "secure base" (Bowlby, 1973) from which to pursue personal interests. Whereas direct and salient supportive behavior by a partner might have negative consequences (cf. Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008)—for instance, causing anxious individuals to feel inadequate, or avoidant individuals to feel their self-reliance or personal control threatened—having a partner affirm and encourage one's own goals more specifically increases confidence that the goals are worth pursuing. We predicted that trust and goal validation each would be associated with increased attachment security.

Reducing Attachment Anxiety and Attachment Avoidance

Understanding the origins and current tendencies of insecure individuals suggests ways to reduce attachment insecurity. Attachment anxiety has origins in inconsistently satisfied needs or unsynchronized interactions (e.g., feeling generally neglected but occasionally overindulged; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Unsure about whether a close other will be responsive, anxious individuals become preoccupied with their partner's availability and dependability (i.e., hyperactivation strategies; Cassidy & Koback, 1988; Mikulincer, 1998a). Attachment avoidance, in contrast, has origins in an attachment figure's unresponsiveness or overly punitive actions. Feeling skeptical of a close others' responsiveness or even fearful, avoidant individuals seek to regulate their level of intimacy

in interactions so as to resume the safety of independence if necessary (i.e., deactivation strategies; Cassidy & Koback, 1988; Mikulincer, 1998a).

Concurrent Model. Given the current tendencies and issues that are chronically activated for anxious versus avoidant individuals, we predicted that trust and goal validation would exhibit unique concurrent associations with each attachment dimension. Anxious individuals are particularly focused outwardly to affirm their partner's responsiveness. For them, issues of trust are chronically activated in interactions with others (Collins, 1996; McClure, Bartz, & Lydon, 2013; Mikulincer, 1998a), which is likely to make trust more mentally accessible than validation of their personal goals. In contrast, avoidant individuals are particularly focused inwardly to retain their self-reliance. For them, projecting a functional (albeit fragile) sense of self-sufficiency is chronically activated (cf. Green & Campbell, 2000; Mikulincer, 1998b; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, table 7.1), which is likely to make their partner's role in their personal and independent pursuits more mentally accessible than trust.   AQ2

Therefore, we hypothesized that in concurrent analyses, the trust would exhibit a unique negative association with attachment anxiety and perceived goal validation would exhibit a unique negative association with attachment avoidance. Each of these hypothesized unique associations appears in the concurrent model depicted in Figure 1 (paths a and d, indicated in bold).

Longitudinal Model. We expected a different process to be involved in increasing attachment security over time, one that targets specific working models that underlie anxiety and avoidance. We draw on Mikulincer and Shaver's (2007) analysis of working models in predicting how to reduce insecurity.

Because attachment anxious individuals have experienced inconsistency in having their needs satisfied, their chronic focus on others' availability keeps them vulnerable and dependent on others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Their model of other is characterized by ambivalence (e.g., feeling anger, yet hope) and results in close monitoring of their connection to their partner (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Collins, 1996). However, as much or more than an ambivalent model of other, their experience with inconsistent care fundamentally has shaped a model of self that noticeably lacks feeling worthy of others' love (e.g., "If my partner sees the real me, my partner may want someone better and leave me;" Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, 1998b). Even if their trust needs are momentarily satiated, anxious individuals must contend with a self-model that has gaps in self-esteem, self-confidence, and feeling competent (Schmitt & Allik, 2005; see also Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, table 6.1).

We posit that reducing attachment anxiety over the long-term rests on improving the model of self, specifically through inferences that encourage one's pursuit of personal goals. Perceiving one's personal goals validated by a partner has been shown to provide an immediate boost to self-esteem, regardless
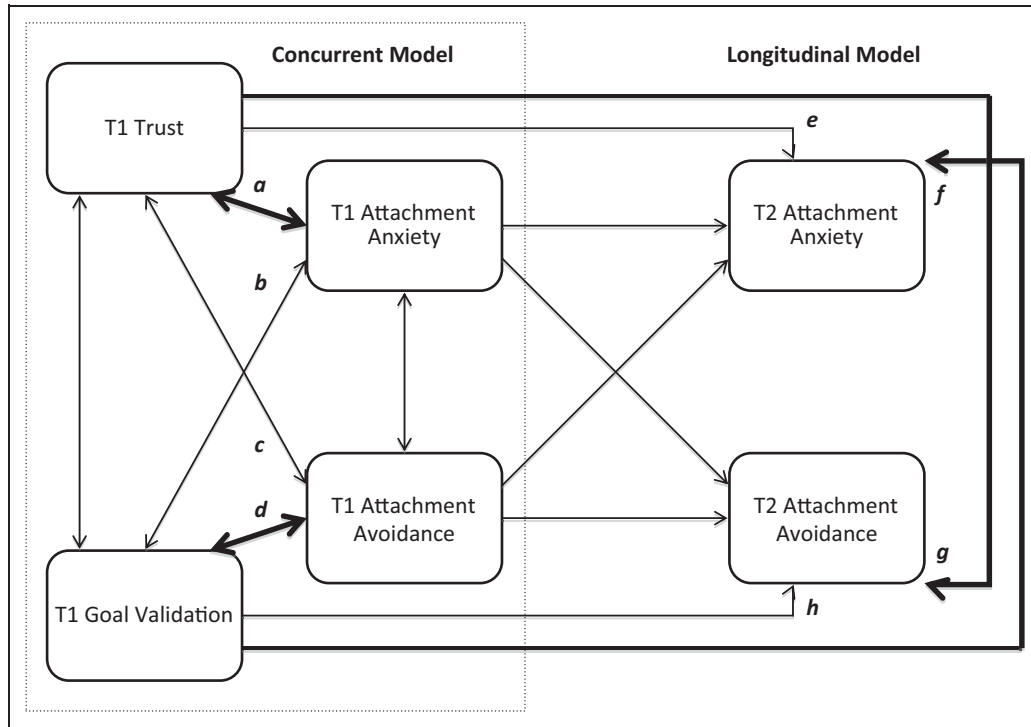
Figure 1. Predicted concurrent and longitudinal models, with letters indicating the hypothesized unique associations of trust and goal validation on attachment anxiety versus attachment avoidance.

Table 1. Descriptive Information of Primary Variables: Reliabilities, Means, and Standard Deviations.

Variable	Time 1			Time 2			Time 3		
	α	M	SD	α	M	SD	α	M	SD
Criterion variables									
Anxious attachment	.89	2.10	(1.57)	.92	2.33	(1.67)	.89	1.70	(1.42)
Avoidant attachment	.88	1.56	(1.18)	.88	1.83	(1.26)	.86	1.36	(1.11)
Predictor variables									
Trust	.81	6.61	(0.86)	.87	6.62	(1.02)			
Perceived goal validation	.82	6.48	(1.11)	.85	6.61	(1.10)			

Note. Reliability was assessed with Cronbach's α. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Times 1, 2, and 3 were separated by 1-year lags. Time 3 trust and perceived goal validation were not examined. All items employed a 9-point response scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 4 = *agree somewhat*, 8 = *agree completely*), and were averaged for each variable to indicate higher levels of the measured construct.

of attachment styles (Feeney, 2004). As attachment anxious individuals gain self-confidence in pursuing their personal goals, they are likely to feel more autonomous and less dependent on others over time (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and thus more secure.

Because attachment avoidant individuals have experienced close others who are primarily unresponsive, their chronic efforts to remain independent keep them focused inward, immune to others. Their model of self is characterized by defensive self-enhancement (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), exaggerating their abilities to justify their self-sufficiency. However, as much or more than projecting their desired model of self, avoidant individuals' experiences fundamentally have shaped a model of other that noticeably lacks trust in others' dependability (e.g., "If I depend on my partner, I'll find that

I can't trust him/her to be responsive;" Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, 1998b). Even if their independence needs are momentarily satiated by having their personal pursuits validated and encouraged, avoidant individuals must contend with a model of other that is devoid of deriving benefits from intimacy or closeness (Feeney, 2007).

We posit that reducing attachment avoidance over the long-term rests on improving the model of other, specifically through inferences that affirm a partner's trustworthiness. Avoidant individuals share the universal need to be accepted by others (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). As attachment avoidant individuals gain confidence that others can be trusted, they are likely to fill a void in their model of other, feel less driven to maintain independence (Feeney, 2007; Mikulincer, 1998a), and thus feel more secure.

In contrast to the hypothesized concurrent model, in longitudinal analyses we hypothesized that perceived goal validation would exhibit a unique association with decreases in attachment anxiety and trust would exhibit a unique association with decreases in avoidance. Each of these hypothesized unique associations appears in the longitudinal model depicted in Figure 1 (paths f and h, in bold).

Current Research

We expected that perceiving a partner as trustworthy and as validating one's personal goals would be negatively associated with insecurity when each is tested separately, but each was expected to have a unique association that would vary depending on the dimension of insecurity and temporal frame, as shown in Figure 1. We tested these predictions with a preexisting data set of newly committed couples.[1] We also examined couple functioning as a covariate to isolate the associations of trust and perceived goal validation with attachment, beyond relationship quality.

Method

Design and Participants

The sample consisted of 137 of the 187 couples who completed relevant measures on at least two of the three measurement occasions separated by 12 months, hereafter referred to as T1, T2, and T3.[2] At T1, participants were 25 years old on average (SD = 4.52, range 19–47), and 88% were Caucasian. Approximately half (52%) were university students. Relationship duration was 39 months on average (SD = 24.25); 82% were living together and 70% were married or engaged. Couples were paid $80, $120, and $110 for participating in T1, T2, and T3, respectively.

The sample excludes couples lost due to attrition (n = 50 of the 187 couples). Participants who dropped out after T1 had relationships that were shorter in duration, 32 months, vs. 39 months, $t(367) = 2.63$, $p = .009$, more likely to be dating (38% dating, 25% engaged, 27% married, 10% other, vs. in the current sample: 14% dating, 21% engaged, 59% married, 6% other), but no different in age (25 years old).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via community announcements and selected if they qualified as newly committed (see Note 1). Couple members completed questionnaires independently prior to or during a lab session and were paid for their participation.

Measures

Table 1 displays reliabilities (alphas), means, and standard deviations for the main variables. All items used a 9-point response scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 4 = *agree somewhat*, 8 = *agree completely*) unless noted otherwise, and were averaged for each variable such that higher numbers indicated higher levels of the measured construct.

Trust was measured with 12 items based on a scale by Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985; e.g., "I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me"). *Perceived goal validation* was measured with 6 items (e.g., "My partner is doubtful that I can achieve my goals," reverse-scored). Trust and goal validation predictors were correlated, T1 $r(368) = .56$, T2 $r(237) = .59$, both $p < .001$. A measure of couple functioning was administered and used as a covariate in isolating the effects of trust and goal validation beyond relationship quality (i.e., Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976; M = 109.46, SD = 9.74, possible range 0–143; T1 α = .87).

Anxious and *avoidant attachment* dimensions were measured with an abbreviated (18-item) version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Brennan et al., 1998). We used the 9 highest loading items for each subscale reported by Brennan and colleagues. Attachment anxiety and avoidance were correlated (simple correlations ignoring couple clustering): .50 at T1, .50 at T2, and .57 at T3.

Results

The data were analyzed using multilevel models to account for nonindependence among the two partners' reports on multiple measurement occasions; couple intercepts were modeled as random effects and slopes as fixed effects (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Concurrent analyses examined *within-time* associations at T1, T2, and T3, testing the association of the relevant predictors with each attachment dimension while controlling for the other dimension as a covariate (e.g., the model predicting attachment anxiety controlled for avoidance as measured concurrently). Longitudinal analyses examined *residualized change* across two 1-year lags for each couple (T1–T2, T2–T3); for each attachment dimension separately, this analysis examined the association of the relevant predictors at one time (e.g., T1) with an attachment dimension at the subsequent time (e.g., T2), while controlling for the criterion attachment dimension (i.e., the residualized effect) and the other attachment dimension at the previous time (e.g., T1). Initial models tested each perception separately and subsequent models tested the hypothesized *unique effects* of trust and goal validation when included simultaneously as predictors.

Table 2 provides the standardized coefficients (and t value in parentheses) for the association of each perception (e.g., trust) with each attachment dimension, tested across various concurrent and longitudinal models that excluded the other perception (e.g., goal validation). When tested separately, trust and perceived goal validation each predicted lower attachment anxiety and lower attachment avoidance.

Table 3 provides the standardized coefficients (and t values in parentheses) for the unique associations of trust and goal validation when tested simultaneously. The concurrent analyses revealed the hypothesized pattern illustrated in Figure 1: Trust was uniquely associated with lower attachment anxiety beyond the effect of perceived goal validation (Figure 1, paths

Table 2. Testing the Association of Each Predictor With Attachment Anxiety and Avoidance: Concurrent and Longitudinal Analyses.

	Attachment Dimension	
Predictor	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment
Concurrent analysis of trust		
Other attachment dimension	.44 (14.70)***	.51 (14.65)***
Trust	−.13 (−4.23)***	−.10 (−2.86)**
Concurrent analysis of perceived goal validation		
Other attachment dimension	.44 (14.42)***	.49 (14.36)***
Perceived goal validation	−.06 (−1.86)†	−.19 (−6.03)***
Longitudinal analysis of trust		
Same (criterion) attachment dimension	.71 (16.89)***	.55 (12.02)***
Other attachment dimension	−.04 (−0.97)	.05 (0.99)
Trust	−.11 (−2.80)**	−.16 (−3.68)***
Longitudinal analysis of perceived goal validation		
Same (criterion) attachment dimension	.72 (18.02)***	.54 (11.68)***
Other attachment dimension	−.07 (−1.61)	.08 (1.81)
Perceived goal validation	−.16 (−4.19)***	−.10 (−2.44)*

Note. The table provides standardized coefficients with corresponding *t* values in parentheses for models testing each predictor separately (in total, four models on anxious attachment and four models on avoidant attachment). Concurrent models tested variables within the same time and controlled for the other attachment dimension ($df = 591$ for the two trust models and $df = 592$ for the two perceived goal validation models). Longitudinal models tested 1-year lags between predictor and criterion variables, and controlled for earlier levels of the criterion attachment dimension (residualized change) and the other attachment dimension ($df = 316$ for the two trust models and $df = 317$ for the two perceived goal validation models).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. † $p = .063$.

Table 3. Relative (Independent) Associations of Trust and Perceived Goal Validation: Concurrent and Longitudinal Analyses.

	Attachment Dimension	
Predictor	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment
Concurrent associations		
Other attachment dimension	.43 (14.26)***	.49 (14.09)***
Trust	**−.12$_a$ (−3.79)*** **	**−.02$_c$ (−0.44)**
Perceived goal validation	**−.01$_b$ (−0.35)**	**−.19$_d$ (−5.29)*** **
Longitudinal associations		
Same (criterion) attachment dimension	.71 (17.09)***	.54 (11.67)***
Other attachment dimension	−.07 (−1.60)	.05 (0.97)
Trust	**−.04$_e$ (−0.89)**	**−.14$_g$ (−2.82)** **
Perceived goal validation	**−.14$_f$ (−3.17)** **	**−.03$_h$ (−0.70)**

Note. The table provides standardized coefficients with corresponding *t* values in parentheses for models that tested trust and perceived goal validation simultaneously (four models in total). The key hypothesis tests appear in bold font. Subscripts reference specific paths in Figure 1. Concurrent models tested variables within the same time and controlled for the other attachment dimension ($df = 589$). Longitudinal models tested 1-year lags between predictor and criterion variables, and controlled for earlier levels of the criterion attachment (residualized change) dimension and the other attachment dimension ($df = 314$).
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

a and *b*), whereas goal validation was uniquely associated with lower attachment avoidance beyond the effect of trust (paths *c* and *d*). Also reported in Table 3, and as hypothesized, the

longitudinal analyses revealed the inverse pattern: Trust uniquely predicted declines over time in attachment avoidance beyond the effect of perceived goal validation (Figure 1, paths *g* and *h*), whereas perceived goal validation uniquely predicted declines over time in attachment anxiety beyond the effect of trust (*f* and *e*). All of the hypothesis tests yielded the same pattern of results when controlling for couple functioning, and when including main and interaction effects of participant sex.

Discussion

The current research represents a novel approach to thinking about how to change each dimension of attachment security. Trust and goal validation each were associated with greater attachment security, as expected given that these inferences are components of creating a safe haven and providing a secure base (Feeney, 2004). However, the unique associations of these predictors supported distinct concurrent and longitudinal models (Figure 1) and have several theoretical and practical implications.

By comparing trust and goal validation, the current study suggests novel and potentially useful information for changing a person's attachment orientation. Anxious individuals predominantly regulate their insecurity through external validation (e.g., seeking proof that others care), which accounts for the unique concurrent association with trust beyond the effect of goal validation. However, even if their trust needs are met, they remain dependent and fundamentally must contend with a lack of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-worth (Collins, 1996; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Being encouraged to pursue personal goals can fill these voids in their working model of self, which accounts for the unique longitudinal association with perceived

goal validation beyond the effect of trust. This suggests that targeting their working model of self may be a particularly effective way of increasing security.

In contrast, avoidant individuals turn away from others and inward to regulate their insecurity, which accounts for the unique concurrent association with goal validation (feeling encouraged or "allowed" to pursue personal goals) beyond the effect of trust. However, even if their needs for independence are met, they remain fundamentally distrustful of intimacy with others (Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, 1998a). Feeling trust toward a partner directly fills this void in their working model of other, which accounts for the unique longitudinal association with trust beyond the effect of goal validation. Thus, attachment insecurity may decrease through inferences that improve the model of self among anxious individuals and the model of other among avoidant individuals (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

We do not wish to imply that anxious individuals have a well-functioning model of other or that avoidant individuals have a well-functioning model of self (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, chapter 6 for a thoughtful analysis of this issue). However, we are suggesting that efforts limited to assuaging immediate insecurities may fall short of improving self-perceptions of anxious individuals or encouraging trust among avoidant individuals. As anxious individuals feel more self-confident, this may set in motion a process of gaining autonomy that, in turn, reduces their preoccupation with their partner's trust and overdependence (i.e., reduces their hyperactivation strategies; Cassidy & Koback, 1988). As avoidant individuals feel more trust, this may set in motion a process of feeling more comfortable with intimacy and less inclined to be self-sufficient (i.e., reduces their deactivation strategies; Cassidy & Koback, 1988). We did not provide direct evidence of an intervention. However, our findings suggest a "wise" intervention (Walton, 2013) that targets specific aspects of one working model, but triggers a recursive and broadening process that addresses all mental models that underlies attachment insecurity.

An issue that remains unresolved in the current study concerns how to regulate short-term insecurities to bring about long-term change. Our concurrent findings could be interpreted in different ways. It may be that increasing attachment security involves two stages, first indulging a persons' current attachment strategy (Cassidy & Koback, 1988) to assuage insecurity, as a means of "paving the way" to change working models in the long term. This two-pronged approach would translate into making salient a partner's trustworthiness for anxious individuals and encouraging personal goal pursuits for avoidant individuals, before targeting long-term change.

Another interpretation of our findings is that alleviating immediate insecurity ironically may interfere with efforts to reduce insecurity over time, an idea consistent with Mikulincer and Shaver's (2007) analysis of working models (e.g., pp. 153–154). Short-term attempts to manage insecurity may be dissociated with long-term processes to bolster security over time—akin to treating symptoms rather than underlying causes. Among anxious individuals, dependence and low self-worth

have reinforcing properties. Chronic activation of trust may make salient how much a person needs their partner, and discourage independent pursuits. Among avoidant individuals, being self-focused and distrustful have been mutually reinforced. Focusing internally on one's independent goal pursuits may interfere with seeking to depend on a partner. We are not implying that trust and goal validations undermine each other; they were strongly correlated. However, it is conceivable that although individuals infer trust and goal validation in ways that covary, they may attend to situations that target one of these perceptions more than the other and fail to make the most of situations that increase security over time.

An issue that remains to be examined further concerns the effects of partner actions, as compared with interpretations and inferences of partner actions (Maisel & Gable, 2009; Weiner & Hannum, 2012). If attachment insecurity has self-perpetuating qualities, which situations are likely to afford new attaching-bolstering inferences? We have suggested that such situations can occur in newly committed relationships. One process is interpersonal (Simpson, Rholes, Orina, & Grich, 2002). Interactions in committed relationships refute negative working models of other when a partner conveys their pro-relationship motives (Holmes, 2002; Simpson, 2007; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Another process is intrapersonal, whereby a personal experience elicits new inferences of partner interactions and triggers change (e.g., renewed sense of commitment to romantic involvements, a new outlook on life or on interactions with others, the winnowing of social networks, spiritual influences). Over repeated interactions, even the working models of highly insecure individuals are likely to change; avoidant individuals may begin to doubt their need to minimize dependence (e.g., "Given that my partner consistently is willing to addresses my needs, maybe it is okay to get closer"), and anxious individuals may begin to doubt their need to affirm their partner's love for them (e.g., "Given that my goals seem worth pursuing, maybe I am okay on my own and developing my own skills.").

A final consideration concerns the generalizability of our findings, which were obtained among newly committed adult relationships and cannot be assumed to apply to other relationships. However, obtaining similar findings in other contexts could affect interventions for bolstering security. Our data suggest specific perceptions that may be relevant across the lifespan. Anxiously attached youth may benefit in the short-term from trusting their peers, but may thrive over time if a particularly close friend encourages their personal goals. Conversely, avoidantly attached youth may benefit in the short term from being encouraged to pursue their personal goals, but may thrive over time from a friend who is consistently there for them regardless of goal pursuits. In old age, anxious individuals who cling to others in the short term may benefit over the long term from knowing others appreciate their lifetime accomplishments; avoidant individuals who shun others' approval for lifetime accomplishments in the short term may benefit over the long term from knowing they are deeply loved and cared for.

The current associations with attachment security highlight effects that were obtained despite a relatively limited range in

attachment. These findings suggest that positive change is possible even among relatively well-adjusted individuals. The study design does not afford causal inference, but it does capitalize on longitudinal methods to demonstrate that predictors of attachment security shift over time.

In conclusion, research on adult attachment styles has overwhelmingly focused on the correlates and outcomes of presumably stable attachment styles, rather than on identifying the specific psychological conditions under which attachment styles change over time. Our findings revealed that declines in attachment insecurity do occur over time, and they are predicted from theoretically relevant and targeted inferences: feeling one's personal goals validated by a partner to reduce attachment anxiety, and inferring trust in a partner to reduce attachment avoidance. Insecurely attached individuals have extant interpersonal tendencies to regulate their insecurity, but bolstering attachment security over time may occur by targeting specific aspects of their working models. The divergence in concurrent versus longitudinal findings suggests unique temporal pathways to reduce attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance over the long term.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The data analyzed were part of a larger five-wave longitudinal study of "newly committed" couples—namely, couples who had begun living together, become engaged, or married within the previous year, or couples who had such plans for the coming year. The study included several measures, only some of which were directly relevant to the current research. Partner reports of both predictor variables were not available. Published papers utilizing this data set at the time of writing this included: Finkel, Campbell, Buffardi, Kumashiro, and Rusbult (2009; study 3), Kumashiro, Rusbult, and Finkel (2008; study 4), Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, and Stocker (2007), Righetti, Rusbult, and Finkenauer (2010), Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, and Finkel (2009; studies 1, 2, and 4a), and Schneider, Konijn, Righetti, and Rusbult (2011). No other articles published from this data set tested models predicting attachment.
2. Couples were assessed every 6 months, but variables relevant to the current analysis were assessed at the first (T1 in the present article), third (T2), and fifth (T3) measurement occasions (every 12 months).

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Author Biographies