

Couples' Helpful, Unhelpful and Ideal Conflict Resolution Strategies: Secure and Insecure Attachment Differences and Similarities

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Abstract

Twenty two heterosexual couples living in New Zealand participated in this study regarding helpful, unhelpful and idealized conflict resolution strategies. Thematic analysis was used to extract key themes, and these were categorized by whether individuals were securely or insecurely attached to their partners. Both secure and insecure individuals identified similar helpful conflict strategies, including turn-taking, listening and remaining calm. Differences emerged between secure and insecure individuals with regards to unhelpful strategies, with insecure individuals' descriptions taking on an overall negative slant, whilst secure individuals either did not use unhelpful strategies or have learned more helpful strategies over time. Similar ideal conflict strategies emerged for both secure and insecure individuals; however, secure individuals' descriptions were much more closely matched to the helpful strategies they use in their own relationships.

Keywords: secure attachment; insecure attachment; conflict resolution

Introduction

This paper reports on the qualitative component of a larger study (e.g., Du Plessis, Clarke, & Woolley, 2007) that was conducted with 22 couples in New Zealand. It focused on obtaining participants' perspectives on the conflict resolution strategies they use in their long-term relationships, and makes a distinction between secure and insecure attachment styles to identify differences between these groups. Following a brief review of adult attachment literature and conflict strategies, the study is introduced and its findings discussed.

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Attachment

The study of adult attachment grew from Bowlby (e.g., 1979; 1988) and Ainsworth's research (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) which focused on the attachment system of infants and their primary caregivers. Over the last two decades the attention of attachment research has shifted to the application of attachment theory to adult intimate relationships. Similar to the infant attachment bond, adult attachment is characterized by four defining normative processes including proximity maintenance, separation distress, and viewing the attachment figure as safe haven and secure base (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Research has indicated that adults with a secure attachment style describe higher levels of trust, intimacy, satisfaction and commitment in relationships, as opposed to adults with an avoidant attachment style who describe lower levels of these features, and who exacerbate relational threats (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). In another study it was found that husbands and wives with secure attachment styles were less rejecting and more supportive of their partners than their insecurely attached counterparts (Gao, Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 1997).

Conflict

When conflict arises it can threaten the very heart of the relationship. From an attachment perspective conflict creates a dilemma: the person, who is generally sought out when we are distressed, now becomes a source of threat. It is precisely because intimate relationships are characterized by a shared history and future, as well as strong emotional investments, that solving conflicts in the intimate setting seem to matter so much to couples (Peterson, 1983). Conflict is believed to be essentially neither positive nor negative (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2003), but rather a foreseeable outcome of the natural process of growth and change. Hample (2003) suggests that face-to-face arguments can have a variety of functions: as a means to obtain one's goals; establish dominance over the other person; display and define personal identity; and as a recreational activity. Marital conflicts are defined by Bradbury, Rogge, and Lawrence (2001) as "social interactions in which spouses

hold incompatible goals” (p.59). Beach (2001) however notes that one should view opposing goals as potential conflicts, rather than actual conflicts, due to the fact that couples often find means to interact cooperatively when faced with incompatible goals and interests. Conflict resolution strategies are interpersonal behaviours used in the context of a relationship to resolve disagreements (Marchand, 2004). Effective conflict resolution in couples occurs when each individual collaborates in creating a solution that meets both partners' needs, and conflict resolution experts concur that a key building block to effective conflict resolution is a willingness to engage in mutual collaboration (e.g., Crum; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). Generally, two fundamental categories for conflict styles are distinguished and include conflict strategies that are integrative (those that work toward the other person and advances relational goals) and those that are distributive (those that work in opposition to the other person because people are focused on reaching their own goals with no consideration for their partner's goals) (Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982).

Helpful conflict strategies

The literature indicates that couples who frequently use a positive problem solving style (e.g., compromise and negotiation), and infrequently use withdrawal and conflict engagement, are more satisfied with their relationships (Kurdek, 1994). Pistole and Arricale (2003) found that securely attached people report less fighting and more effective arguing, whereas preoccupied individuals view conflict as an attachment threat and focus on re-establishing togetherness, which might in turn hamper their problem solving ability. These researchers have also found that securely attached individuals reported less conflict avoidance than those with dismissing attachment styles (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Shi (2003) furthermore reported that secure individuals displayed more positive behaviour and higher relationship satisfaction than individuals who scored higher on preoccupied and avoidant attachment dimensions. Creasey (2002) suggests that although secure couples would occasionally use negative behaviours during conflict, their liberal use of positive behaviours enhances the positive emotional content of their discussions.

Unhelpful conflict strategies

Attachment styles can become apparent in conflict situations. For example, research has found that men with insecure attachment styles display more negative affect and engage in conflict more frequently, than their securely attached counterparts (e.g., Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996). The literature also identifies the demand-withdraw pattern as unhelpful when trying to solve conflict (Kurdek, 1995). In this demand-withdraw pattern women are generally the demanding party, whereas men tend to withdraw in response (Kurdek, 1995). The demand-withdraw pattern is said to account for more variance in relationship satisfaction than any other conflict resolution style and research suggests that it reflects the intensity and the amount of intimacy that people need in a relationship, with women generally desiring more intimacy, and men desiring greater separateness (e.g., Christensen, 1987; Jacobson, 1989). Conflict behaviour that is confronting (especially a negative start-up) has also been linked to unsatisfactory relationships (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Kurdek, 1994). Negative conflict behaviours such as complaining, criticizing, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling (withdrawal) have also been identified as harmful to relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1994).

Ideal relationships and conflict strategies

Previous research has shown that ideal partner standards are based around three dimensions: warmth/trustworthiness, vitality/attractiveness, and status/resources (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Ideal relationships have been found to be based on two dimensions of intimacy/loyalty and passion (Fletcher et al., 1999). More recent research (Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004) indicates that individuals in long-term relationships would value the "warm and homely person as opposed to the cold and attractive person" (p.670). Individuals who view their current relationships and partners as closely matching their ideal relationships and partners, have also been found to be more

satisfied with their relationships (Fletcher et al.,1999). Securely attached couples' relationships have been found to be characterized by greater congruence between their actual and ideal relationships (Mickulincer & Erev, 1991). Levine (1995) theorized that the discrepancy between ideal and actual love is a natural function of any long-term relationship, and it requires the individual to constantly manage this "gap" by using a range of defenses (e.g., idealization, denial, and rationalization) which in turn might enhance relationship well-being. More recently Caughlin (2003) also noted with regards to ideal communication in family relationships, that unmet ideals (discrepancies between ideals and perceptions of communication behaviour) are associated with relationship dissatisfaction.

Proposed themes

The purpose of this study was to focus on perceived helpful, unhelpful and idealized conflict strategies in couple relationships and to provide insight and understanding of subjective meanings. Based on a thorough reading of the relevant literature (summarized above) the researcher expected the following themes to be identified.

Secure and insecure partnerships. Firstly, secure attachment will include proximity maintenance, separation distress, and viewing each other as a safe haven and a secure base. This will be expected to come forth through descriptions of having high levels of trust, intimacy, satisfaction and commitment, and describing their partners as supportive (as well as having other characteristics that contribute to intimate, satisfied and committed relationships). Insecurely attached participants are expected to describe the opposite characteristics, as well as lower levels of trust, intimacy, commitment and satisfaction in their relationships.

Helpful conflict strategies. Securely attached participants are expected to use positive behaviours more frequently, than their insecure counterparts, and possibly have a wider range of helpful strategies. In general, positive problem solving behaviours such as compromise and negotiation by both partners are expected to appear as themes.

Unhelpful conflict strategies. Both the securely and the insecurely attached participants are expected to identify unhelpful conflict resolution strategies, although the insecure participants' strategies might be more negatively slanted, and their conflict might occur more frequently. Participants are expected to comment on the demand-withdraw pattern, and additionally strategies such as complaining, criticizing, contempt and defensiveness are expected to be viewed as unhelpful.

Idealized conflict strategies. Conflict resolution styles which results in greater amounts of warmth and trustworthiness in the relationship, will be held up as the ideal for long-term relationships. Greater congruence is expected between securely attached couples' ideal and real relationships as well as the manner in which they resolve conflict. Securely attached couples will report ideal conflict resolution styles close to their own. Insecurely attached participants are expected to hold more unrealistic ideas of their ideal relationships and how their ideal couple might solve conflict.

Method

Participants

Twenty-two heterosexual couples living in New Zealand were recruited by means of advertisements in the local media (i.e., Auckland community newspapers). Couples came to a testing room at Massey University to complete the questionnaires. The study was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. Of the 44 participants (22 couples) the mean age for the sample was 42 years ($SD = 10.27$). Participants were required to cohabit in a heterosexual relationship of at least 6 month duration, and the mean length of relationships were 161 months (approximately 13 years; $SD = 138.50$), with the maximum being 496 months (approximately 41 years). The majority of the participants were in marital relationships (77%). Approximately half of the sample had children with their current partner or from a previous relationship (52%). The majority of the sample was of New Zealand European descent (75%), with some Maori participants (9%), and other participants

totaling 16% (e.g., Polynesian, Australian, German, and Singaporean Chinese). Full time employed participants totaled 52%, whereas 43% were not employed full time, or fell in another category (including retired, full time students, part time workers, unemployed, and full time homemakers). In terms of frequencies, the majority of the participants (59.2%) were satisfied with their relationships (slightly satisfied, satisfied or very satisfied), with 25% mixed (neither dissatisfied, nor satisfied), and 15.8% dissatisfied with their relationships (as measured by the 3-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS) (Schumm et al., 1986).

Measures

As part of a larger study participants self-reported their attachment styles to their relational partners using a relationship attachment scale developed by Le Poire et al. (1997). It measured partner attachment using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The secure partner attachment subscale ($\alpha = .83$) (12 items) included items such as (1) "I believe that my partner is capable of unconditional positive regard", and (2) "My partner is always there for me in times of crisis". The results of the secure attachment subscale were divided between Secure and Insecure Attachment categories (through median split of the secure attachment scale (Le Poire et al., 1997).

For the purposes of the results reported here participants also completed four written qualitative questions. Based on a thorough reading of relevant literature the questions were developed by the researcher and her supervisors to fulfill the research aim and answer the research questions, which included obtaining a deeper understanding of conflict resolution strategies that couples perceive as helpful, unhelpful and ideal. The questions included:

- 1) Please describe your relationship with your current romantic partner. Include as much detail as you can and be sure to include characteristics of your relationship (e.g., "We have a caring and nurturing relationship") as well as qualities of your romantic partner (e.g., "He works long hours");

2) In your current relationship are there any ways of sorting out problems and arguments that work really well? Please give examples and comment;

3) In your relationship with your current partner have you noticed any ways of sorting out problems and arguments that result in failure to reach a solution to a problem, or that makes a problem worse? Please give examples and comment; and

4) Imagine your ideal relationship. How would the couple in your ideal relationship handle conflict?

Analysis

For the purposes of analyzing this data set thematic analysis was used. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis was used as an “essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants” (p. 81). Boyatzis (1998) views thematic analysis as a process that is utilized to encode qualitative data. More specifically a theme is construed as a pattern found in the qualitative information that describes and organizes the information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To this extent thematic analysis was deemed an appropriate methodology to tease out core themes underlying participants’ relationships with their intimate partners, as well as the strategies that they use to resolve (or not resolve) their conflict.

The coding process followed a three-step progression, and involved (a) developing concepts and categories to organize data into a framework of ideas, (b) comparing data instances, cases and categories for similarities and differences, and (c) unifying key themes. Following on from the expected themes taken from the literature, five key themes were identified for each of the qualitative questions. Excerpts from the written answers are used to illustrate themes where relevant, and a summary of the key themes can be found in Table 1.

Key Themes

Secure and Insecure Partnerships

Clear differences emerged in the manner that secure and insecure individuals view their romantic partners and relationships. Securely attached individuals described their partners as caring, loving and committed, and their relationships as being based on open communication, support and consideration, as well as attraction, affection, trust and integrity.

“He is warm and caring towards me and thinks of me before himself a lot. I knew when I first met him that he was the man I wanted in my life. He is a hard worker and we are both working to common goals, and I am looking forward to our future together” (New Zealand European female, 42).

In contrast insecurely attached individuals' relationships are characterized by a lack of closeness, overly controlling behavior, poor communication, unbalanced give-and-take, and frequent arguments.

“I feel that I am not respected or ‘cherished’ by her and that I am more of a burden than a partner to her.” (New Zealand European male, 39).

“... arguments are a daily ‘norm’... When arguing we tend to get off track and become emotional... I think our main problem is not how we sort out our differences and arguments, but its just that there are so many – all the time about every little thing.” (Dutch female, 32).

A moment should also be taken to comment on the overall slant of the partner characteristics, as well as the exceptions to this. The secure participants reported overall a more positive perspective of their partners, and the reverse was true for the insecure participants who overall reported a more negative perspective of their partners. However, to

balance out the pictures that were painted by the previous comments, it should be noted that individuals in the secure category also had less than flattering comments to make about their respective partners:

“We are very different in most other respects and do not have many interests in common. This causes problems between us... She becomes very unhappy when she feels she is not getting enough of my time. I believe she is quite needy in many ways.” (New Zealand European male, 56).

The same also applied to the insecure group where some participants also balanced out their overly negatively slanted comments with positive comments:

“We are lovers, best friends and he means more to me than anyone in this world.” (New Zealand European female, 27).

This information fleshes out the picture of secure and insecure attachment, thus showing the range of experiences as well as the variation within each categorization.

Helpful conflict strategies

Both secure and insecure individuals were able to identify a number of similar helpful conflict resolution strategies that they use in their relationships, including calm discussions, taking turns during discussion, listening and trying to understand the other's perspective.

“Listen to what the other person has to say and try to understand why they feel that way without taking personal objection before making any response.” (New Zealand European female, 41).

In addition, the insecurely attached individuals qualified that calm discussions should take place away from distractions.

“... we have begun meeting for coffee every Tuesday – just to spend some time together with no children, and often we end up resolving minor stuff through a chat.” (New Zealand European female, 38).

Furthermore, securely attached individuals noted the importance of timely discussions, and potentially involving a third party when an impasse is reached. The insecurely attached individuals also noted the importance of taking responsibility for behavior, as well as negotiating and compromising during conflict.

Unhelpful conflict strategies

Both secure and insecure participants identified a number of unhelpful strategies, including withdrawal, attacking and overly emotional behavior, as well as blame and personal insults.

“Things that make it worse for me is when my partner simply shuts down and stops listening to me – he just turns off as if I’m unimportant and shortly after leaves the room. That’s what makes the situation worse.” (Maori female, 41).

A number of participants who are securely attached indicated that they do not fail to reach resolution to their problems, or have not noticed any strategies that make their problems worse. In addition, it should be noted that some securely attached participants have learned to use more constructive strategies over time.

“In our early days I used to get sulky and would withdraw. It didn’t help but we sorted that out years ago.” (New Zealand European male, 43).

Although there was overlap between both groups' unhelpful strategies, insecure individuals' unhelpful strategies were overall more negatively slanted. In addition they described behavioral patterns which exacerbated conflict in the relationship.

“Just asking for a discussion to try and sort out an issue sets it up for failure as [he] instantly assumes I will be nagging or criticizing and then he is unwilling to even discuss the matter... in the event that the discussion is put off and off and off I get more and more frustrated and my behavior deteriorates out of control – verbally.” (New Zealand European female, 38).

Ideal conflict strategies

Both groups reported similar ideal conflict strategies, including a desire for no conflict in ideal relationships, listening well to obtain deeper understanding and calm, in-depth discussions. The insecure group indicated the importance of finding mutually acceptable solutions and resolving conflict before going to bed. In addition the securely attached group identified a focus on problem solving as ideal. A number of securely attached individuals also commented that they would be using strategies similar to their own in their ideal relationship.

“Like us! Conflict is a fact of life but our understanding is we will work things through – we are committed to our marriage, even if at times we do argue.” (New Zealand European female, 50).

Table 1

Summary Table of Key Themes categorized by Secure and Insecure Partner Attachment (N = 44)

| Secure partner attachment | Insecure partner attachment |
|---|---|
| <i>Partner characteristics</i> | |
| 1. Caring, loving and committed relationship | 1. Lack of closeness |
| 2. Attraction, affection and sex | 2. Conflicting perspectives and frequent arguments |
| 3. Open communication | 3. Poor communication |
| 4. Support and consideration | 4. Overly controlling behaviour |
| 5. Trust, integrity and honesty | 5. Unbalanced give-and-take |
| <i>Unhelpful conflict resolution strategies</i> | |
| 1. No unhelpful conflict resolution strategies | 1. Avoidance |
| 2. Withdrawal | 2. Withdrawal |
| 3. Attacking and overly emotional behaviour | 3. Attacking and overly emotional behaviour |
| 4. Blame and personal insults | 4. Blame and personal insults |
| 5. Timing of argument | 5. Focus on 'winning' the argument |
| <i>Helpful conflict resolution strategies</i> | |
| 1. Calm discussions | 1. Calm discussions away from distractions |
| 2. Timely discussions | 2. Taking responsibility for behaviour |
| 3. Taking turns during discussion | 3. Taking turns during discussion |
| 4. Listening and trying to understand other's perspective | 4. Listening and trying to understand other's perspective |
| 5. Third party involvement | 5. Negotiate and compromise |
| <i>Conflict resolution in ideal relationships</i> | |
| 1. No conflict in ideal relationship | 1. No conflict in ideal relationship |
| 2. Listening well to obtain deeper understanding | 2. Listening well to obtain deeper understanding |
| 3. Calm and in-depth discussions | 3. Calm and in-depth discussions |
| 4. Openness and focus on problem solving | 4. Finding mutually acceptable solutions |
| 5. Utilizing strategies similar to own | 5. Resolving conflict before going to bed |

Discussion

Secure and Insecure Partnerships

Research has indicated that adults with a secure attachment style describe higher levels of trust, intimacy, satisfaction and commitment in relationships, as opposed to adults with an avoidant attachment style who describe lower levels of these features (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2004). In another study it was found that husbands and wives with secure attachment styles were less rejecting and more supportive of their partners than their insecurely attached counterparts (Gao et al., 1997). These results are echoed in the findings of the current study, with securely attached participants indicating caring, loving and affectionate relationships, whilst insecurely attached participants felt that there were frequent arguments and a lack of closeness in their relationships. In addition to poor communication between partners, insecurely attached participants commented that either themselves, or their partners, exhibited some overly controlling behaviour in the relationships, and there was often an unbalanced give-and-take in the relationship. In contrast, the securely attached individuals reported open communication in their relationships, as well as support and consideration for each other. For securely attached individuals there was also a sense that their relationships were built on trust, integrity and honesty between the partners.

Helpful Conflict Strategies

Previous research has indicated that securely attached people report less fighting and more effective arguing, whereas preoccupied individuals view conflict as an attachment threat and focus on re-establishing togetherness, which might in turn hamper their problem solving ability (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). These researchers have also found that securely attached individuals reported less conflict avoidance than those with dismissing attachment styles (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Along similar lines, Shi (2003) reported that secure individuals displayed more positive behaviour and higher relationship satisfaction than

individuals who scored higher on preoccupied attachment and avoidant attachment. Both the secure and the insecure groups were aware of helpful strategies. All of the strategies described by the participants in this study as 'helpful' would fall under the broader heading of a positive problem solving style. Gross and Guerrero (2002) also found that an integrative conflict style is generally perceived as the most appropriate and effective style, whereas the obliging and compromising styles are seen as neutral.

In terms of strategies, both the securely attached and the insecurely attached groups were able to identify a number of helpful strategies. Both groups identified calm discussions as helpful, with the insecurely attached group qualifying that the calm discussions should occur away from distractions. The secure group again mentioned that discussions need to take place at an appropriate time. The insecure group commented that it was important for each individual to take responsibility for their own behaviour during the conflict resolution process. Both groups indicated the importance of taking turns during a discussion, as well as the importance of listening intently to each other whilst attempting to understand the other party's perspective. Some participants in the securely attached group also saw the need for involving a third party if an impasse is reached. The insecure group indicated the helpfulness of negotiating and compromising during conflict.

Creasey's study (2002), of 145 young adult couples involved in romantic relationships, reiterates some of these findings, and also suggests some additional gender differences. It was found (Creasey, 2002) that young women, in particular, with secure attachment styles used more positive behaviour during discussions of conflict, and female attachment security also predicted the occurrence of joint couple positive behaviours, whereas male insecurity predicted the frequency of negative behaviours. Creasey furthermore suggests that although secure couples would occasionally use negative behaviours during conflict, their liberal use of positive behaviours enhances the positive emotional content of their discussions, and this is also in line with the current findings.

Unhelpful Conflict Strategies

Research to date has indicated that couples who manage their conflicts constructively, experience more relationship satisfaction than their counterparts who utilize ineffective conflict resolution styles (e.g., Kurdek, 1994). Although some overlap did occur between unhelpful strategies for the participants in the secure and insecure groups, it can be noted that a number of participants in the secure category indicated that they had *no* unhelpful conflict resolution strategies. In other words, many of these participants felt that they only had helpful strategies which would no doubt assist them in solving their conflict constructively.

Research (e.g., Cohn et al., 1992; Cowan et al., 1996; George et al., 1996) has found that men with insecure attachment styles display more negative emotions and engage in conflict more frequently, than securely attached men. These researchers also found that in conflict situations where both partners exhibited insecure attachment styles, interactions were more strained. Gross and Guerrero (2000) found that the dominating style and avoiding style were perceived as inappropriate and ineffective when trying to solve conflict. In the current study the insecurely attached group also indicated avoidance as being an unhelpful strategy when attempting to solve conflict.

Another gender-specific spousal interaction that has been identified in the literature on unhelpful conflict resolution strategies is the demand-withdraw pattern (Kurdek, 1995). In the current study both men and women in the secure and the insecure groups indicated an awareness that withdrawal was an unhelpful conflict resolution strategy.

Gottman's more recent model of relational decay (1994) suggests that couples move toward divorce due to the negative conflict behaviour they display that systematically leads to negative beliefs about each other. In particular behaviours such as complaining/criticizing, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling (withdrawal) have been identified as corrosive to relationship satisfaction. In this regard, it can be noted that both the secure and the insecure groups identified attacking and overly emotional behaviour, as

well as blame and personal insults as unhelpful strategies during conflict. In addition, the securely attached individuals reported that the timing of the argument can quite often hamper effective problem solving. For the insecurely attached individuals a focus on 'winning' the argument was also reported to interfere with their conflict resolution abilities.

Although there was some overlap between the securely attached and insecurely attached groups in terms of what they perceived as unhelpful strategies, there was also an important point of difference: A number of secure participants indicated that although being aware of some ineffective conflict resolution strategies, they had also learned constructive conflict resolution strategies over time. In contrast some of the insecure participants indicated behavioral patterns that currently exacerbate their problems, or which cause their conflict to spiral out of control.

Ideal Conflict Strategies

Recent years have seen our cultural obsession with ideal love and ideal relationships (Evans, 2003) develop into booming enterprises for dating agencies and reality television programs, as they seek to exploit this phenomenon (Djikic & Oatley, 2004). Participants were asked to imagine their ideal relationship, and then to imagine how the couple in their ideal relationship would handle conflict. Firstly, a number of participants in the secure and insecurely attached groups indicated that in an ideal relationship there would be no conflict, as both individuals would be in perfect harmony with each other. According to the literature this does not bode well for their relationships satisfaction, as most couples experience some degree of conflict. In terms of real and ideal love relationships Coyne (2001) found that the greater the discrepancies between perceptions of actual and ideal love in the relationship, the lower the relationship satisfaction. Similarly, greater discrepancies between real and ideal partners/relationships would also contribute to relationship dissatisfaction (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). The secure group could however be closer to their own ideal couples, as many indicated that an ideal couple would utilize similar strategies to the strategies that they themselves use to solve conflict. To this extent Mickulincer and Erev

(1991) found that securely attached couples' relationships were characterized by greater congruence between their actual and ideal relationships. Greater congruence between real and ideal relationships has also been linked to relationship satisfaction (Fletcher et al., 1999). Levine (1995) theorized that the discrepancy between ideal and actual love is a natural function of any long-term relationship, and it requires the individual to constantly manage this "gap" by using a range of defenses which in turn might either enhance relationship well-being (possibly the secure group) or destabilize the individual and the relationship (possibly the insecure group).

In terms of other conflict strategies, both groups indicated that couples in their ideal relationship would be great listeners, and in that manner they would obtain a deeper understanding of each other. Calm and in-depth discussions would also solve the problems in an ideal relationship for both groups. The securely attached group also commented that openness and a focus on problem solving would be helpful. The insecurely attached group indicated that finding mutually acceptable solutions would be paramount for their ideal couple, and then interestingly enough a number of participants indicated the importance of resolving their conflict amicably before going to bed, maybe reflecting their own need for having closure. All the conflict strategies noted by the secure and insecure groups emulate ideals of warmth and trustworthiness. Warmth and trustworthiness in a relational partner is adaptive from an evolutionary perspective as it increases the likelihood that the relationship will be maintained long-term (Fletcher et al., 1999). This, according to Fletcher and his colleagues, is important if one considers the time investment of both partners in the long-term relationship and potential offspring (parental investment theory) (Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004). The discrepancies between perceived and ideal standards, and also between perceived and ideal conflict resolution styles, allows individuals to evaluate and make adjustments to their partners/relationships, as well as make causal attributions about their partners/relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001), and as such has implications for the longevity of a relationship (Fletcher et al., 2004).

Limitations

Participants were asked to self-report on their conflict behaviours. These are thus subjective reports of behaviour, and this data is not based on observed behavioral indicators. Partner attachment representations are not accessible to direct observation, and self-report is one potential manner of measurement, which has numerous limitations including memory and recall of attachment behaviour. In addition it should be noted that people possess multiple attachment schemas which are influenced by the various attachments they form to people in their lives (e.g., Mikulincer & Arad, 1999; Pierce & Lydon, 2001) and this research project only addressed current subjective models of attachment to the romantic partner. Attachment styles and other relationship variables, such as conflict resolution styles are relatively stable over time (e.g., Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002), but new experiences could also potentially affect changes. The self-report questionnaire was administered once only, thus providing a snapshot view of perspectives on partner attachment and real and ideal conflict behaviour. This did not allow for measurement of changes in these variables over time or for factors influencing changes longitudinally.

Twenty two heterosexual couples participated in this research project. From a qualitative perspective, the number of participants allowed for adequate variability to allow for a thematic analysis of the data (Boyatzis, 1998). However, Boyatzis also identified the following obstacles to effective thematic analysis, which could potentially have influenced the results in this study: projection, sampling, mood and style. Projection is viewed as attributing the researcher's emotions, qualities, values or conceptualizations onto the participants, and is particularly problematic to avoid if there is ambiguous material present (Boyatzis). Future studies could prevent or lessen the potential effect of projection by using several people to encode the information, thereby establishing consistent judgments and greater reliability of findings (Boyatzis). Adequate sampling minimizes the number of errors present in the data, so that the researcher can be sure that he/she is processing information that is not contaminated by other variables or unknown factors (Boyatzis). For the most part

the themes that were identified from the qualitative data were consistent with the literature, thus it can be assumed that adequate sampling of the relevant factors were allowed for. Lastly, Boyatzis identifies mood and style as an obstacle to effective data analysis, and by this he implies that one's mood and cognitive style can influence one's ability to identify the themes. It can be noted that the researcher did find the analysis of participants' attachments to their partners, as well as some of the stories that went with it more trying than some of the other questions due to the nature of the answers, including references to physical abuse, addictions and conflict in the family. However, the researcher did pace herself when analyzing these themes, and allowed adequate debriefing with supervisors to lessen the emotional impact of the content.

Conclusion

In summary, calm discussions, turn taking, listening, negotiating and compromising were all touted as helpful strategies during conflict resolution, whereas attacking, overly emotional behaviour, blame, personal insults and withdrawal were seen as unhelpful. In ideal relationships many couples believed there would be no conflict. In addition ideal conflict resolution strategies included intent listening to obtain a deep understanding, as well as calm and in-depth discussions. This project set out to obtain a more in-depth perspective of helpful, unhelpful and ideal conflict strategies in couples, and a number of important differences and similarities were noted between securely attached and insecurely attached groups. Although relevant to the general population (in particular New Zealand) these findings are also particularly relevant to couple therapists and clinicians with regards to which strategies are particularly helpful/unhelpful to couples. Additional qualitative studies comparing couples in therapy with happy couples would shed more light as to whether these differences become more pronounced, in comparison to this study. Future studies could also quantify these differences with quantitative methodologies. As indicated by some participants they have noticed that their conflict strategies have changed over time.

Longitudinal research could examine the processes involved with these changes in conflict strategies over time.

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