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RESEARCH ARTICLE



How Do Partner Support, Psychological Aggression, and Attachment Anxiety Contribute to Distressed Couples' Relationship Outcomes?

Thalie Labonté^a , Caroline Dugal^{b,c} , Marie-France Lafontaine^d ,
Audrey Brassard^b  and Katherine Péloquin^a 

^aDepartment of Psychology, Université de Montréal, Montréal, Quebec, Canada; ^bDepartment of Psychology, Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada; ^cClinique De Consultation Conjugale et Familiale Poitras-Wright, Côté (CCCF), Longueuil, Quebec, Canada; ^dSchool of Psychology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

Few studies have simultaneously looked at the relative contribution of positive and negative behaviors to understand relationship outcomes. This study examined the relative roles of perceived partner support and psychological aggression in two relationship outcomes—relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship—as well as the contribution of attachment anxiety as a moderator in 307 couples seeking relationship therapy. Path analyses revealed that perceived partner support was associated with individuals' own higher relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship. Attachment anxiety moderated these associations. Perceived partner psychological aggression was not associated with relationship outcomes.

Relationship instability and distress are associated with poorer mental and physical health (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014; Whisman & Baucom, 2012) and therefore are important public health issues. Nearly half of marriages and common-law relationships end in separation (Amato, 2010; Wright, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2008), while 20 to 31% of couples report experiencing clinically significant relationship distress (Whisman, Beach, & Snyder, 2008). Thus, it is crucial to pinpoint the factors underlying relational distress in order to help couples overcome their difficulties more effectively and ultimately, reduce the societal cost of relationship distress.

In the context of couple therapy, individuals commonly express dissatisfaction with their partner's behavior, whether because their partner exhibits too few positive or pleasant behaviors, or because they display too many negative or unpleasant behaviors. Therefore, therapeutic interventions often focus on increasing positive exchanges between partners or on changing problematic behaviors in order to improve relationship satisfaction (Benson, McGinn, & Christensen, 2012). However, we know little about the relative importance of positive and negative partner behaviors for relationship well-being because few studies have considered both types of behaviors simultaneously (Gere, MacDonald, Joel, Spielmann, & Impett, 2013; Rivers & Sanford, 2018). Yet, considering that positive and negative behaviors can occur independently and are only weakly correlated with each other (Sanford, Backer-Fulghum, & Carson, 2016), it is important to consider their unique role in relationship outcomes. Proponents of positive psychology have also criticized the lack of interest of previous literature in positive behaviors and claim that they could be just as important as negative behaviors (see Rivers & Sanford, 2018, for a review).

The present study addressed this limitation by examining how positive and negative partner behaviors concurrently contribute to relationship outcomes in relationally distressed couples. Most specifically, we focused on two key positive and negative partner behaviors due to their high potential to either benefit or harm the relationship: perceived support and psychological aggression from one's partner. Whereas partner support is essential for optimal relationship functioning and has been associated with higher personal well-being and relationship satisfaction (Collins, Ford, Guichard, Kane, & Feeney, 2010), sustaining psychological aggression has been associated with higher personal and relationship distress (Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010). Examining the relative contribution of positive and negative behaviors in couples who experience significant relationship distress also appears critical provided that the occurrence (or absence) of these behaviors might have different consequences for partners' relational well-being and the stability of their relationship.

Two relationship outcomes were considered in the present study: partners' relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship. Whereas relationship satisfaction represents the partners' level of happiness in the relationship, the willingness to invest in the relationship is the ability to commit to a relationship or to project oneself into the future with a romantic partner and is associated with lower risks of divorce and separation (Le & Agnew, 2003). Consistent with Rusbult's Investment Model (1980), relationship investment represents the amount of resources (e.g., time, efforts) that partners put into their relationship, with the more resources invested, the less likely they are to leave the relationship. Couple therapy is also more likely to be successful when individuals are committed and willing to invest in their relationship (Sheras & Koch-Sheras, 2008). Hence, both relationship outcomes provide clinically important yet distinct information—that is, the level of happiness in a relationship versus the commitment of partners toward their relationship. Research also provides support for a differentiation in these two variables. For instance, whereas some dissatisfied individuals may be more likely to report a desire to leave their relationship, certain unhappy relationships are in fact very stable (Davila & Bradbury, 2001), partly because partners are highly invested (emotionally, financially, etc.) in their relationship. Some individuals might also choose to stay despite the negative aspects of their relationship because it also involves positive aspects, thus highlighting the need to consider both positive and negative partner behaviors. Therefore, this study investigated the concurrent role of perceived partner support and psychological aggression in both partners' relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship in couples entering relationship therapy.

Perceived partner support and relationship outcomes

Partner support refers to the act of taking care and responding to the needs of a partner (Collins et al., 2010). While it is important in times of adversity, partner support also occurs daily, when partners encourage each other to express their feelings, provide affection, or reaffirm each other's worth. More broadly, receiving support from a partner fulfills a basic need for security and is crucial for healthy adult relationships (Lawrence et al., 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). However, individuals are not equal in their ability to provide support and sometimes fail to be supportive, which may harm the relationship and undermine relationship satisfaction (Collins et al., 2010; Gadassi et al., 2016; Reis, 2013). Providing sensitive support to a partner can also be difficult under stress or when the relationship is threatened because personal distress can tax personal resources and thus limit emotional availability to respond to the partner's needs (Collins et al., 2010). As such, providing sufficient and, more importantly, adequate support could be more challenging for distressed couples.

Several studies using community samples have shown that the perception of partner support as well as perceived partner responsiveness, a similar construct, are linked to higher relationship satisfaction in both partners (Collins et al., 2010; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Gosnell & Gable, 2013; Kane et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2008; Reis, 2013). Fewer studies have used a dyadic design

or looked at the association between perceived partner support and investment in the relationship or overall relationship commitment. For instance, a dyadic study revealed that perceived adequacy of support was associated with individuals' own higher relationship satisfaction. Men's perceived adequacy of support was also related to their partner's higher relationship satisfaction (Lawrence et al., 2008). Verhofstadt, Buysse, Devoldre, and De Corte (2007) also found an association between perceived partner support and women's higher relationship satisfaction, but there was no effect for men and partner support was not associated with commitment. Conversely, Segal and Fraley (2016) found that perceived partner responsiveness was associated with higher investment in the relationship. More research is thus needed to clarify the association between partner support and both partners' willingness to invest in the relationship, especially in distressed couples who may be more likely to experience commitment difficulties and to consider separation compared to happy couples (Hrapczynski, Epstein, Werlinich, & LaTaillade, 2012).

Perceived partner psychological aggression and relationship outcomes

Psychological aggression in couples is a subtype of intimate partner violence (along with sexual and physical violence) and includes verbal and nonverbal aggression (e.g., name calling, "silent treatment", threats) ranging from minor to severe (Breiding et al., 2015). It is highly prevalent in distressed couples—that is, 78% to 99% of individuals who seek relationship therapy report having sustained at least one act of psychological aggression in the past year (Simpson & Christensen, 2005; Tougas, Péloquin, & Mondor, 2016). Psychological aggression has also been associated with lower relational well-being and poorer mental and physical health, even when controlling for the effects of physical aggression (Taft et al., 2006).

Several studies have shown that individuals who sustain psychological aggression are less satisfied in their relationship (Burrus & Cobb, 2011; Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010; Simpson, Atkins, Gattis, & Christensen, 2008). However, few studies have used a dyadic design to examine the effects of psychological aggression on both partners. The link between psychological aggression and the willingness to invest in the relationship also remains unclear. Most of these studies have used Rusbult's Investment Model to conceptualize commitment (Rusbult, 1980), but findings have been inconsistent. Whereas some studies revealed associations between sustaining psychological aggression and lower overall commitment in women (Rhatigan & Axsom, 2006; Rhatigan & Street, 2005), other studies reported a positive association (Hanley & O'Neill, 1997) or no significant association (Arriaga, Capezza, & Daly, 2016) between these variables. Rhatigan and Axsom (2006) also found an association between psychological aggression and higher relationship investment. Thus, more research is needed to fully understand the link between psychological aggression and partners' willingness to invest in their relationship. It is possible that the concomitant presence of positive partner behaviors and psychological aggression contributes to partners' investment in their relationship and the stability of some dysfunctional relationships by providing simultaneous benefits.

Attachment anxiety and the perception of partner behaviors

Beyond the direct association between positive and negative partner behaviors and relationship outcomes, other individual characteristics could affect how these behaviors contribute to relationship well-being. For example, attachment anxiety could impact how these behaviors are perceived and experienced, and therefore how they are linked to relationship outcomes in relationally distressed couples. Attachment theory stipulates that individuals whose caregiver provided care that was inconsistent or misaligned with the individuals' attachment needs are more likely to develop attachment anxiety (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). As adults, individuals with attachment anxiety believe that they are unworthy of love and attention from others and are more sensitive to signs of rejection or loss of love from their partner (Mikulincer & Shaver,

2016). This negative self-view and the strategies that individuals with attachment anxiety use to regulate attachment-related fears then influence their perceptions and interpretations of their partner's behaviors as well as their emotions and behaviors in their relationship (for reviews, see Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Because individuals high on attachment anxiety are more sensitive to proximity and rejection cues, positive and negative partner behaviors can act as triggers for these individuals' attachment system and can either reinforce or harm their feeling of security in the relationship. Whereas positive partner behaviors, such as partner support, are more likely to be interpreted as signs of availability and love, negative behaviors, such as partner psychological aggression, can be experienced as a rejection or interpreted as a threat to the relationship (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Individuals with attachment anxiety crave closeness and intimacy with their partner. Hence, these individuals tend to use excessive proximity-seeking and reassurance seeking behaviors to gain their partner's love and attention. However, because their partner often fails to meet the expectations of individuals with anxiety (e.g., provide the desired kind of support), these individuals are more likely to be disappointed and to view their partner and their relationship negatively (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008). As such, attachment anxiety might affect how partner behaviors are perceived, and thus moderate the links between perceived partner behaviors and the two relationship outcomes—relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest. This may be especially the case in relationally distressed couples who experience higher levels of attachment insecurities (Mondor, McDuff, Lussier, & Wright, 2011).

The moderating effect of attachment anxiety in the association between partner behaviors and relationship outcomes has not been studied thoroughly. However, some studies using similar variables may be useful to understand how attachment anxiety might modulate this association. For instance, Gosnell and Gable (2013) found that individuals with attachment anxiety reported a greater increase in their relationship satisfaction on days when they perceived more responsive support, suggesting that individuals with attachment anxiety might benefit more from their partner's support. Similarly, Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, and Kashy (2005) found that individuals with attachment anxiety tended to be more satisfied with their relationship on days when they perceived greater support from their partner, in comparison to individuals who are low on attachment anxiety. Individuals with attachment anxiety were also less satisfied by their relationship on days when they reported greater conflict. Conversely, Sadikaj, Moskowitz, and Zuroff (2011) did not find a moderating effect of attachment anxiety on the association between agreeable partner behavior and positive affect. However, they found a steeper increase in negative affect following negative partner behaviors for individuals higher on attachment anxiety, suggesting that negative partner behaviors might be perceived more negatively by these individuals.

Previous research investigating how positive and negative partner behaviors are perceived and experienced by individuals with attachment anxiety might also provide indirect support for the moderating effect of attachment anxiety on the associations between partner behaviors and both relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship. Most studies focusing on positive partner behaviors have found that individuals with attachment anxiety perceive these behaviors less positively than individuals with low attachment anxiety (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Kane et al., 2007; for a review, also see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), although a few studies did not find this association (Campbell et al., 2005; Gosnell & Gable, 2013). Regarding negative partner behaviors, studies have consistently shown that individuals with attachment anxiety tend to perceive or experience negative relational situations more negatively than individuals who are low on attachment anxiety (Campbell et al., 2005; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008). Hence, partner behaviors, whether positive or negative, seem to be perceived in a more negative manner overall by individuals with attachment anxiety compared to individuals with low attachment anxiety.

Furthermore, because partners' perceptions and behaviors in the relationship tend to impact each other, the tendency of individuals with attachment anxiety to perceive their partner's behaviors more negatively might foster a negative climate in the relationship marked by blame or mistrust, which could also affect their partner. As such, the negative outlook of individuals

with attachment anxiety on their partner's behavior could be associated with poorer relationship outcomes for their partner as well, but this question has never been examined. Conducting this type of research in couples who experience relationship distress seems especially important given that couples who come to therapy often have biased interpretations of their partner's behaviors and are more likely to attribute negative intentions to their partners (Hrabczynski et al., 2012). They are also more likely to report attachment anxiety compared to couples in the general population (Mondor et al., 2011).

The present study

We used a dyadic design and a sample of relationally distressed couples to examine the concurrent effects of positive and negative partner behaviors on two key relationship outcomes: relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship. We investigated (1) whether one's own perceived partner support and perceived partner psychological aggression are uniquely associated with both partners' relationship outcomes—relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship—when both types of behaviors and outcomes are considered concomitantly; and (2) whether attachment anxiety moderates the links between perceived partner behaviors (support and psychological aggression) and relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship for the individual and their partner.

Based on previous research, we expected positive associations between perceived partner support and both relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship, and negative associations between perceived partner psychological aggression and these relationship outcomes for both the individual (actor effect) and their partner (partner effect). We also expected that the positive association between one's perceived partner support and one's relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest would be weaker in individuals reporting higher attachment anxiety, whereas the negative association between perceived partner psychological aggression and these two relationship outcomes would be stronger in these individuals. Partner effects for these moderation effects were explored, although no hypothesis was put forward due to lack of previous research—that is, we explored whether an individual's attachment anxiety would moderate the association between their own perceived partner behaviors and their partner's relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship. Based on previous research, we did not expect sex/gender differences (Kane et al., 2007; Sadikaj et al., 2011).

Method

Participants and procedure

We recruited 307 mixed-sex/gender couples in a private couple therapy center located in a North American city, where couples pay for service. On average, men were 43.68 years old (range: 24–76, $SD=9.96$) and women were 41.48 years old (range: 22–71, $SD=9.33$). The mean income was Can\$95,000 for men and \$55,000 for women. Most participants (81.70% of men; 88.60% of women) had a postsecondary education, identified as White (94.98%), and reported French as their first language (91.20%). Most couples had children (83.39%) and 43.93% were married. On average, couples reported being in their relationship for 13.82 years (range: 0–49, $SD=10.13$) and were therefore mostly long-term couples, although our sample covered a wide range of relationship duration—that is, from new couples to lifelong couples.

Couples were recruited by their therapists during their first intake session in couple therapy over a four-year period from 2012 to 2015 as part of their routine clinical care. The therapists explained the goals and procedures of the study, the potential risks and benefits, as well as measures taken to ensure confidentiality. The therapists were all psychologists ($n=10$) or predoctoral psychology interns working under their supervision ($n=1$). The study was approved by the institutional ethics committee and participants were asked to sign a consent form and

complete questionnaires (available in the participants' preferred language, French or English), to be returned by mail before their next session. Partners were instructed to complete the questionnaires independently and were informed verbally and in the consent form that a summary of the results would be sent to their psychologist to inform their assessment and treatment plan. Participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting the quality of the services they received. No compensation was given for their participation, and couples who decided not to participate in the study continued their therapy without any negative consequences. Ninety-five percent of couples seeking therapy enrolled in the study.

Measures

Socio-demographic information

A demographic questionnaire inquired about personal and relationship information (e.g., age, level of education, income, duration of relationship, marital status, number of children).

Perceived partner support

Couples' perceived partner support was assessed with the *Partner Support Scale* (4 items; Brassard, Houde, & Lussier, 2011). Items (e.g., "My partner encourages me when I need it.") are rated on a 5-point rating scale assessing the frequency of received support (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*) and are averaged to form a total score. Even though the scale measures a frequency, support is operationalized through subjective assessment (e.g., by specifying that support must be provided when it is needed) rather than measured with an objective inventory of behaviors considered as always supportive. It therefore only measures the frequency of adequate forms of support. In that scale, a higher score reflects higher perceived partner support. The scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = .84$ for men and $.86$ for women), excellent temporal stability, and good predictive validity for current and future relationship satisfaction (Brassard et al., 2011). Internal consistency was good in the current sample: $\alpha = .83$ for men and $.86$ for women.

Perceived partner psychological aggression

Participants completed the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* to assess perceived partner psychological aggression (8 items for that subscale; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Participants reported the frequency of their partner's use of psychological aggression toward them in the last 12 months (e.g., "My partner insulted or swore at me."). Each item is rated on a 8-point rating scale assessing frequency (1 = *once*, 2 = *twice*, 3 = *3–5 times*, 4 = *6–10 times*, 5 = *11–20 times*, 6 = *more than 20 times*, 7 = *not in the past year, but it happened before*, 0 = *this has never happened*) and is then recoded at the mid-point of its category (1, 2, 4, 8, 15, 25, 0 and 0 respectively) in accordance with the scoring procedure described by Straus et al. (1996). Items are summed to create a score of frequency of psychological aggression experienced in the past year, ranging between 0 and 200. These items previously showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .79$) and construct validity (Straus et al., 1996). Internal consistency was satisfactory in this sample ($\alpha = .66$ for men and $.68$ for women).

Relationship Satisfaction

Participants completed the brief *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* to measure their relationship satisfaction (4 items; Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005; e.g., "In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?"). Items are rated on 6-point (0 = *always*, 5 = *never*) and 7-point (0 = *extremely unhappy*, 6 = *perfect*) rating scales. A global score is created by summing all items (range: 0 to 21). A higher score indicates higher relationship satisfaction while a score of 13 or less indicates clinically significant relationship distress. The DAS-4 previously

showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$) and excellent predictive validity for relationship dissolution (Sabourin et al., 2005). In this sample, Cronbach alphas were .71 for men and .72 for women.

Willingness to invest in the relationship

Participants' willingness to invest in their relationship was measured with one item (item 32) from the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976). This item assesses how one feels about the future of the relationship and to what extent one is willing to invest more resources in the relationship. This item was chosen for its high face validity, its clinical usefulness, and its brevity (the number of items was restricted due to the clinical nature of the sample). Participants chose the statement that best described how much they were willing to invest in their relationship from a choice of six possible statements ranging from "My relationship can never succeed, and there is no more that I can do to keep the relationship going" (0) to "I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and I would go to almost any length to see that it does" (5). A higher score implied a higher willingness to invest in the relationship. Even though this item was taken from the full *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976), it is not part of the brief *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (4 items; Sabourin et al., 2005) and has been discarded from two other brief versions of the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (DAS-7, Sharpley & Rogers, 1984; DAS-14, Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995). Moreover, it measures participants' future intentions toward their relationship instead of capturing current relationship satisfaction and therefore provides different and clinically relevant information on partners' potential level of commitment.

Attachment insecurities

Attachment anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned.") and attachment avoidance (e.g., "I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.") were assessed with the *Experiences in Close Relationship* (36 items; Brennan et al., 1998). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly) and are averaged to form total scores, with higher scores reflecting higher attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, respectively. The scale has shown excellent internal consistency for attachment anxiety ($\alpha: .88-.91$) and attachment avoidance ($\alpha: .88-.94$; Brennan et al., 1998; Lafontaine & Lussier, 2003). In this sample, Cronbach's alphas were .89 for men and .90 for women for attachment anxiety and .88 for men and women for attachment avoidance.

Analytic strategy

Preliminary analyses were conducted using SPSS 25. Data was screened for normality and missing data were handled by the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) function of Mplus 8.4. Preliminary analyses were also conducted to identify potential covariates among demographic variables. Path analyses were conducted in Mplus with the maximum likelihood estimation function and bootstrapping, specifying 2000 samples from our data. We used the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) to examine both actor and partner effects while controlling for all effects simultaneously. Both partners' perceptions of partner support and partner psychological aggression were included in the model as independent variables whereas both partners' relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest were included as dependent variables. All possible actor and partner effects were tested in the model. To test for the moderating effect of attachment anxiety, both partners' attachment anxiety scores and the interaction terms between attachment anxiety and perception of partner support and psychological aggression (Support x Attachment Anxiety and Psychological Aggression x Attachment Anxiety) were included in the model. Predictor variables were centered around their respective grand means. Because attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance share significant variance (Cameron, Finnegan, & Morry, 2012), analyses controlled for avoidance.

An omnibus test of distinguishability was also performed to verify if dyad members were distinguishable based on their sex/gender (Kenny et al., 2006). A model in which all actor and partner effects were constrained to be equal between men and women was compared to a model in which all parameters were freely estimated. The chi-square difference test showed that the two models differed significantly ($\Delta\chi^2(17) = 35.65; p = .005$), indicating sex/gender differences. Thus, we retained a partially constrained model in which only the actor and partner effects that did not differ significantly between men and women were constrained to equality. This semi-constrained model no longer differed significantly from the freely estimated model ($\Delta\chi^2(16) = 22.09; p = .140$).

Because moderation effects were verified on an exploratory basis, non-significant paths between attachment variables or interaction terms, and outcomes were removed to increase the model's parsimony and statistical power. The fit of the model was assessed using the model chi-square (a nonsignificant χ^2 indicates a good fit), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; values less than .05 indicate an excellent fit), the comparative fit index (CFI; values greater or equal than .95 indicate an excellent fit), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; values less than .08 indicate a good fit; Kline, 2016).

Results

No variable significantly departed from normality as per Kline's (2009) guidelines and less than 1.8% of the data was missing. Demographic variables (e.g., age, income, relationship length, marital status) were only weakly or not significantly related to study variables and thus, were not included as covariates in the main analyses. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all variables are shown in Table 1. Participants' answers were widely distributed over all anchors of the rating scales, suggesting sufficient variance in all study variables.

Most participants fell in the clinical range for relationship distress on the brief *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (<13 ; $M_{\text{men}} = 11.40, SD = 3.26$; $M_{\text{women}} = 10.68, SD = 3.23$; Sabourin et al., 2005), supporting the clinical nature of our sample. Participants showed a moderately high willingness to invest in their relationship ($M_{\text{men}} = 3.45, SD = 0.97$; $M_{\text{women}} = 3.47, SD = 0.88$), although 15.10% of men and 11.80% of women reported a relatively low willingness to invest in their relationship. Men and women generally perceived a moderate level of support from their partner ($M_{\text{men}} = 3.43, SD = 0.77$; $M_{\text{women}} = 3.38, SD = 0.80$) and men reported an average of 15.03 instances where they experienced psychological aggression from their partner in the past year (range: 0–94, $SD = 19.60$), whereas women reported an average of 18.42 of such instances (range: 0–100, $SD = 22.32$). Bivariate correlations between partner behaviors and the two relationship outcomes—relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship—supported the need to investigate these associations further.

The final APIM model is depicted in Figure 1. Fit indices were excellent: $\chi^2(53) = 68.02, p = .080$; RMSEA = .03, 90% CI [.00–.05]; SRMR = .05; CFI = .97. The model explained 39.30% of the variance in men's relationship satisfaction and 43.40% in women's relationship satisfaction. Regarding the willingness to invest in the relationship, the model explained 14.70% of its variance in men and 15.80% of its variance in women.

Support and psychological aggression's relative contribution to relationship outcomes

All results can be found in Table 2. Controlling for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, the perception of partner support was associated with men's and women's higher relationship satisfaction. It was also associated with their higher willingness to invest in their relationship. Regarding partner effects, the perception of support was not significantly associated with the partner's relationship satisfaction but it was significantly associated with the partner's lower willingness to invest.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for men and women study variables and covariates.

Variables	M	SD	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Satisfaction M	11.40	3.26	.50**	.50**	-.23**	-.51**	-.11	.31**	.05	.22**	-.11	-.22**	-.17**
2. Willingness to Invest M	3.45	0.97	.27**	.27**	.00	-.26**	.06	-.07	-.15*	-.03	.07	.05	-.28**
3. Perceived Partner Support M	3.43	0.77			-.30**	-.31**	-.11	.32**	.01	.32**	-.14*	-.17**	-.09
4. Perceived Partner Psychological Aggression M	15.03	19.60				.08	.06	-.26**	-.09	-.27**	.43**	.09	.13*
5. Attachment Avoidance M	2.87	0.86				.19**		-.30**	-.09	-.25**	.06	.19**	.18**
6. Attachment Anxiety M	3.45	0.96						-.25**	-.17*	-.04	.00	.17**	-.05
7. Satisfaction W	10.68	3.23							.38**	.56**	-.23**	-.47**	.02
8. Willingness to Invest W	3.47	0.88								.19**	-.06	-.20**	.09
9. Perceived Partner Support W	3.38	0.80									-.24**	-.33**	-.04
10. Perceived Partner Psychological Aggression W	18.42	22.32										.10	.03
11. Attachment Avoidance W	2.61	0.91											.10
12. Attachment Anxiety W	3.62	1.04											

Note. M = Men. W = Women.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

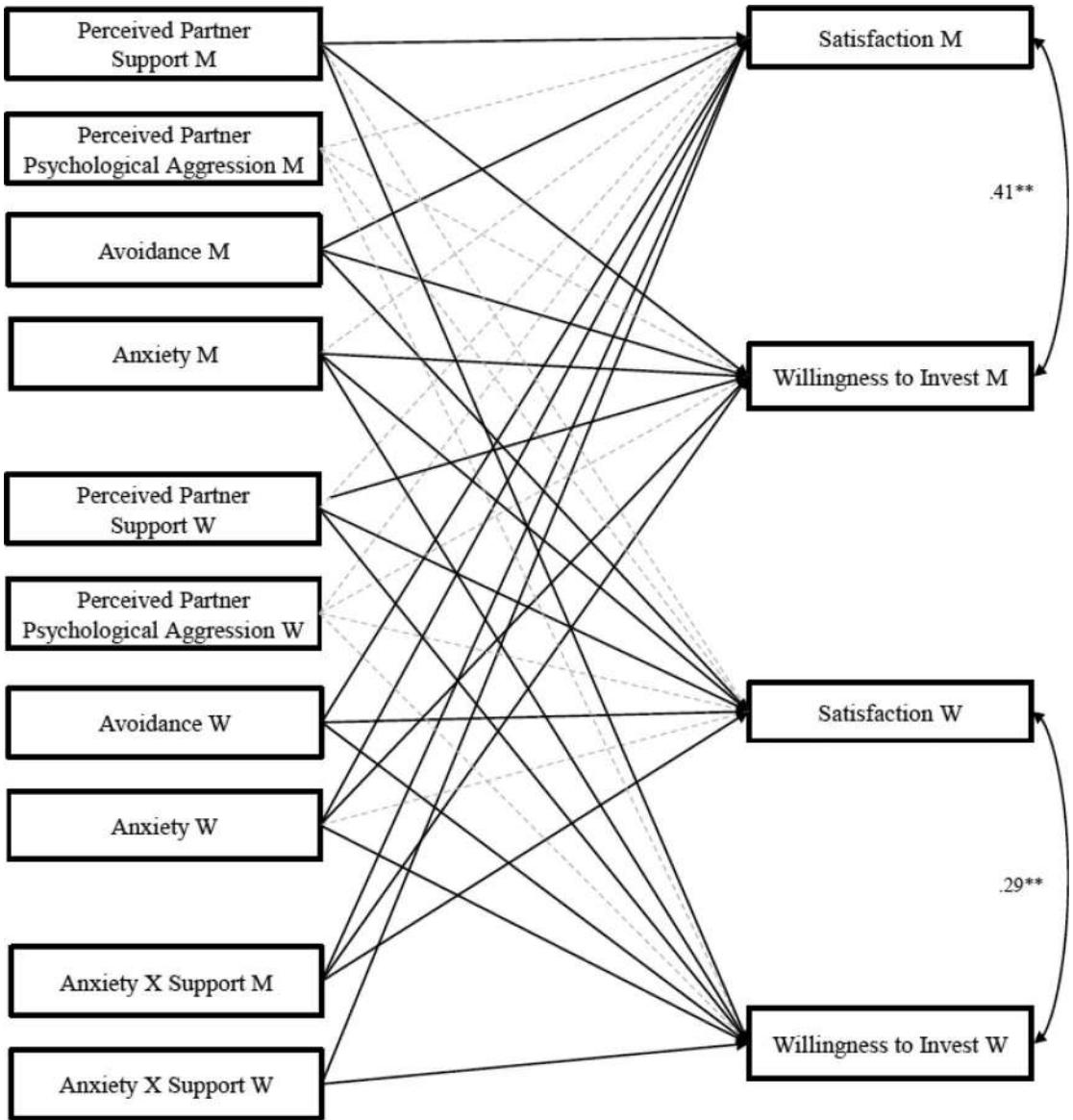


Figure 1. Path analyses of the associations between perceived partner behaviors and couples outcomes, with attachment anxiety as a moderator ($N=307$ couples).
 Note. All significant correlations between endogenous and exogenous variables have been included in the model, but are not included in the figure to avoid overloading it. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. M = Men. W = Women. ** $p < .01$.

Perceived partner psychological aggression was not associated with men and women’s relationship satisfaction, even though these variables were negatively correlated on the bivariate level ($r = -.23$ for men and women, $p < .01$), nor with men and women’s willingness to invest in the relationship. Regarding partner effects, participants’ perceived partner psychological aggression was not related to their partner’s relationship satisfaction nor their willingness to invest.

The moderating effect of attachment anxiety

Attachment Anxiety moderated the association between men’s own perceived partner support and their own relationship satisfaction. Men who perceived more support from their partner

Table 2. Results of the path analyses of the associations between perceived partner behaviors and couples outcomes, with attachment anxiety as a moderator and controlling for attachment avoidance.

Predictor	Outcome	Actor effect			Partner effect		
		β	SE	<i>p</i>	β	SE	<i>p</i>
Perceived Partner Support M	SAT	.36	.04	<.001	.03	.04	.42
Perceived Partner Support M	WTI	.21	.05	<.001	-.11	.04	.01
Perceived Partner Psychological Aggression M	SAT	-.07	.04	.07	-.03	.04	.42
Perceived Partner Psychological Aggression M	WTI	.03	.04	.47	.01	.04	.88
Attachment Avoidance M	SAT	-.31	.04	<.001	-.11	.03	<.001
Attachment Avoidance M	WTI	-.14	.04	<.001	-	-	-
Attachment Anxiety M	SAT	.05	.03	.10	-.08	.03	.02
Attachment Anxiety M	WTI	.09	.04	.03	-.19	.04	<.001
Attachment Anxiety X Support M	SAT	-.10	.05	.05	-.08	.03	.02
Attachment Anxiety X Support M	WTI	-.15	.06	.01	-	-	-
Perceived Partner Support W	SAT	.38	.04	<.001	.03	.04	.41
Perceived Partner Support W	WTI	.22	.05	<.001	-.11	.04	.01
Perceived Partner Psychological Aggression W	SAT	-.08	.04	.07	-.03	.04	.42
Perceived Partner Psychological Aggression W	WTI	.04	.05	.46	.01	.05	.88
Attachment Avoidance W	SAT	-.33	.04	<.001	-.11	.03	<.001
Attachment Avoidance W	WTI	-.16	.04	<.001	-	-	-
Attachment Anxiety W	SAT	.06	.03	.10	-.09	.04	.01
Attachment Anxiety W	WTI	.09	.04	.03	-.20	.04	<.001
Attachment Anxiety X Support W	SAT	-	-	-	-.08	.03	.02
Attachment Anxiety X Support W	WTI	.12	.06	.03	-	-	-

Note. SAT = Relationship Satisfaction, WTI = Willingness to Invest in the Relationship, M = men, W = women.

reported higher relationship satisfaction when they presented low, moderate and high levels of attachment anxiety, but this association was no longer significant when they presented very high levels of attachment anxiety (see Figure 2). This effect was not found in women. Attachment anxiety also moderated the association between participants' own perceived partner support and their own willingness to invest in the relationship in men and women, but in the opposite direction. Men who perceived higher partner support expressed a stronger willingness to invest in their relationship when they reported low or moderate levels of attachment anxiety, but not when they reported high levels of attachment anxiety (see Figure 3a). Conversely, women who perceived higher support from their partner also expressed a stronger willingness to invest in their relationship when they reported moderate to high levels of attachment anxiety, but not when they reported low levels of attachment anxiety (see Figure 3b).

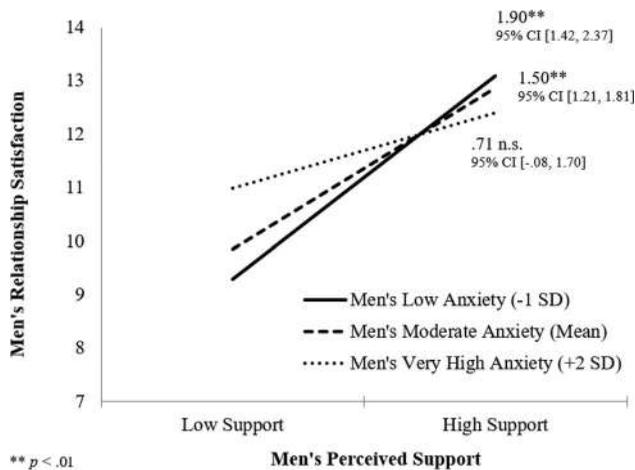


Figure 2. Attachment anxiety moderating the association between perceived partner support and relationship satisfaction in men.
 Note. The slope at “High Anxiety” (+1 SD) was similar to the “Moderate Anxiety” slope. It is not included in the figure to avoid overloading it.

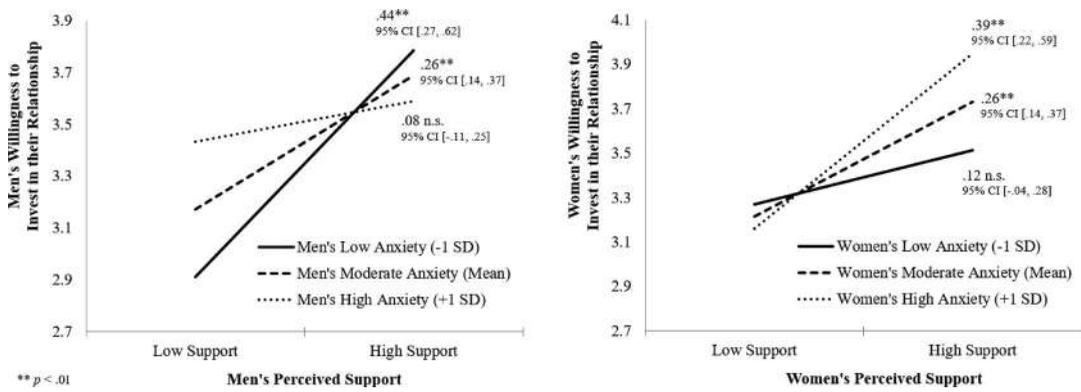


Figure 3. Attachment anxiety moderating the association between perceived partner support and the willingness to invest in the relationship.

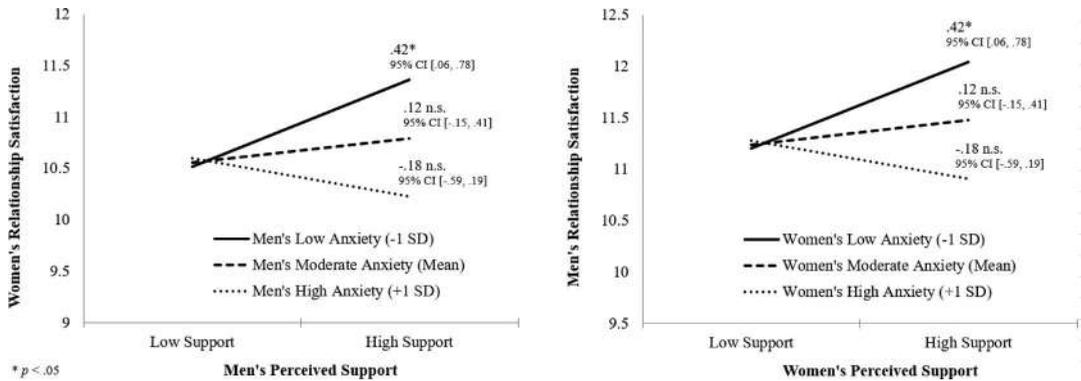


Figure 4. Attachment anxiety moderating the association between participants' perceived partner support and their partner's relationship satisfaction.

As for the partner effects, participants' attachment anxiety moderated the association between their own perceived partner support and their partner's relationship satisfaction for men (Figure 4a) and women (Figure 4b). When participants reported low levels of attachment anxiety, their own higher perceived support was associated with their partner's higher relationship satisfaction, but this association was not significant when they reported moderate or high levels of attachment anxiety. Attachment anxiety did not moderate the association between perceptions of partner support and the partner's willingness to invest in their relationship, nor the association between perceived partner psychological aggression and both partners' relationship outcomes—that is, relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship.

Discussion

In the present study, we examined the relative contribution of perceived partner support and psychological aggression to both partners' relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship in a sample of relationally distressed couples seeking therapy. We also explored the moderating role of attachment anxiety in these associations. Our findings suggest that in couples experiencing significant relationship distress, perceived partner support may be a key factor to explain individuals' relationship satisfaction and their willingness to invest in the relationship, as well as their partner's willingness to invest in the relationship. Interestingly, perceived partner psychological aggression was not related to participants' own relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship once we accounted for the contribution of partner

support. Furthermore, attachment anxiety moderated the effect of perceived partner support on relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship, but the nature of this effect differed between men and women.

Perceived partner behaviors and relationship outcomes

Consistent with previous studies (Collins et al., 2010; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Kane et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2008; Reis, 2013) and supporting our hypothesis, we found that men and women who perceived more adequate support from their partner reported higher relationship satisfaction (moderate effect size) and a greater willingness to invest in their relationship (small effect size), which is an important component of relationship commitment, as per Rusbult's Investment Model (1980). The association that we observed between perceived support and relationship satisfaction brings additional support for the key role that supportive behaviors plays in relationship well-being, even in a context of relationship difficulties and after controlling for psychological aggression and attachment insecurities. Similarly, the association that we found between perceived partner support and the willingness to invest in the relationship implies that partner support could be an important factor for relationship commitment, even after considering the effects of psychological aggression and attachment insecurities. According to the Investment Model, the more individuals invest in their relationship, the less likely they are to leave their relationship (Rusbult, 1980). Therefore, our result suggests that individuals who perceive receiving more support from their romantic partner are more likely to be willing to invest time and energy and to be emotionally involved in their relationship, thus potentially reducing the risk of relationship dissolution. This finding brings additional information regarding the association between support and commitment (Segal & Fraley, 2016; Verhofstadt et al., 2007). Clinically, these findings support interventions geared toward increasing positive relationship behaviors such as support to improve relationship satisfaction and stability in the context of couple therapy. More specifically, clinicians could help partners to provide more sensitive support and ensure that these behaviors are reinforced and well-received by the other partner. Clinicians could also provide psychoeducation about different types of support (e.g., instrumental, emotional, validation; Wills & Shinar, 2000) and guide partners in expressing their needs in the relationship to ensure that the support provided is compatible with the desired support.

Conversely, individuals who reported experiencing more psychological aggression from their partner did not express being less satisfied in their relationship. This finding contrasts with previous research (Burrus & Cobb, 2011; Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010; Simpson et al., 2008) and the negative association that we found at the bivariate level. In other words, once we considered the contribution of partner support, the association between psychological aggression and relationship satisfaction was no longer significant. Again, this finding stresses the importance of positive behaviors for distressed couples. Similarly, perceived partner psychological aggression was not associated with men's and women's willingness to invest in their relationship. This lack of association is less surprising given that many individuals stay in unhappy relationships and tolerate aggressive behaviors (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Moreover, bidirectional psychological aggression is very common in couples seeking therapy (Tougas et al., 2016) and aggressive behaviors can occur and increase progressively, without the partners identifying them as being inappropriate or violent per se (Wright et al., 2008). As such, clinicians should be wary regarding this issue. Although couple therapy is often aimed at fostering relationship stability, it should not be the focus if the presence of aggression constitutes a threat to one or both partners' psychological and physical integrity, in which case couple therapy is counter-indicated. More research is needed to clarify the circumstances under which psychological aggression is more likely to reduce relationship commitment and lead to separation.

In sum, even though couples participating in our study faced important relationship difficulties, partner support was an important contributor to men's and women's relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in their relationship, over and above the effect of perceived partner psychological aggression and attachment insecurities. This finding gives further support to the

claim that researchers should give more attention to positive behaviors (see Rivers & Sanford, 2018, for a review).

Regarding partner effects, although there were small to moderate positive bivariate correlations between participants' perceived partner support and their partner's relationship satisfaction, when accounting for all variables in the overall model, these associations were no longer significant. These results indirectly suggest that in couples who experience significant relationship distress, the perception of support that is received, rather than the support that is given, might be more important for relationship satisfaction. Providing support is costly (Collins et al., 2010) and might not be sufficiently rewarding to breed relationship satisfaction, unless reciprocated. However, this claim should be taken with caution because provided support was not measured per se and is inferred from the partner's perception of received support. Nonetheless, supporting our interpretation, we found that when men and women perceived more adequate support from their partner, their partner's willingness to invest was lower. Although surprising, this finding could suggest that relationally distressed partners who provide more support might be more likely to question their relationship if the benefits that they get are not perceived as equal to the investments and efforts that they put in their relationship. In such case, this could explain their lower willingness to invest in their relationship. Another explanation could be that highly invested individuals try to be supportive but they fail to do so by using unhelpful behaviors that are not perceived as adequate by their partner. In line with this, Brock and Lawrence (2014) found that, when men reported experiencing more stress, both partners were more likely to "overprovide" support, which is at least as detrimental as underprovision of support according to these authors. In sum, our results underscore the importance of ensuring that supportive behaviors are not only expressed but are also appropriate in quantity and quality according to the situation and the needs of the other partner (Brock & Lawrence, 2009). Nonetheless, these interpretations need to be considered with caution because they imply that the perception of partner support was representative of the support that was given by the partner.

Similarly, although we found a small negative bivariate correlation between men's perceived partner psychological aggression and women's relationship satisfaction (this effect was not found in women), this association was no longer statistically significant when examined in the overall model that accounted for all other variables. We also found no partner effect for the willingness to invest in the relationship. These findings indirectly suggest that the use of psychological aggression toward one's partner is not associated with one's relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship. These findings are in line with previous research reporting no correlation between the use of such aggression and commitment (Arriaga et al., 2016). The absence of association between participants' perceived partner psychological aggression and their partner's relationship outcomes, when controlling for perceived partner support and attachment insecurities, might be due to the different reasons why aggression is used in relationships. Some people use aggression as a way to distance themselves from their partner (Sommer, Babcock, & Sharp, 2017), whereas others use it as an ineffective cry for affection when they fear rejection (Lussier, Lafontaine, Brassard, & Sabourin, 2017), suggesting some motivation to pursue the relationship. As such, the use of psychological aggression could reflect an inability to solve problems effectively and a pattern of dysfunctional communication rather than an actual desire to hurt or dissolve the relationship, especially in couples who are seeking help for their difficulties. Interventions focusing on enhancing constructive communication and problem solving (i.e., that help partners recognize and reduce aggressive behaviors) could help partners address difficulties and express their needs without using aggression. Nonetheless, these hypotheses need to be verified in future research since we did not directly measure the perpetration of psychological aggression.

Moderation by attachment anxiety

Previous research has shown a moderating effect of attachment anxiety in the association between partner behaviors and relationship outcomes (Campbell et al., 2005; Gosnell & Gable, 2013; Sadikaj et al., 2011). Extending this research, we found that participants' attachment anxiety moderated the

associations between their own perceived partner support and their own relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship, but the results differed between men and women.

Men who perceived more support from their partner were more satisfied with their relationship, but this association was no longer significant when men reported very high levels of attachment anxiety. Similarly, men reported being more willing to invest in their relationship when they felt supported by their partner, but not when they endorsed high levels of attachment anxiety. These results are in line with previous studies (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Kane et al., 2007) and suggest that men reporting higher levels of attachment anxiety might perceive and react less positively to positive partner behaviors and thus not reap the benefits of partner support when it comes to their relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship. As such, our results suggest that when men experience high or very high levels of attachment anxiety, the support provided by their partner would possibly no longer appease these men's self-doubts and fear of losing their partner and therefore no longer contribute to men's relationship satisfaction or willingness to invest in the relationship.

For women, the results told a different story—that is, when women perceived more adequate support from their partner, they reported being more willing to invest in their relationship, but only when their attachment anxiety was moderate or high. This is consistent with other studies reporting that individuals with attachment anxiety benefit more from positive partner behaviors (Campbell et al., 2005; Gosnell & Gable, 2013). Considering that these women experience high relationship distress, the perceived lack of adequate support from their partner may only be one of many problems in their relationship (e.g., sexual problems, divergent values, conflict). This might be especially true for women because they tend to report more reasons for seeking therapy than men, and to report more negative emotions and blame toward their partner in the context of couple therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). Thus, whether they feel supported by their partner or not might not be enough to impact women's willingness to invest in the relationship, unless they are very anxious and thus highly concerned about partner rejection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In such cases, for women with attachment anxiety, partner support could be a key factor for their level of commitment and desire to invest in the relationship, because partner support would give these women the reassurance that they need. However, we found that attachment anxiety did not moderate the association between perceived partner support and relationship satisfaction in women, suggesting that attachment anxiety in women may not hamper the benefits of partner support for relationship satisfaction. This is coherent with another study that found that attachment anxiety did not moderate the association between agreeable partner behavior and positive affect (Sadikaj et al., 2011). Thus, our findings suggest that perceived partner support is beneficial to women's satisfaction, regardless of their level of attachment anxiety.

Overall, this observed gender difference suggests that in women with attachment anxiety (but not men with attachment anxiety), partner support might fulfill their need for reassurance, which could positively affect their desire to invest in their relationship. It seems important to note that attachment anxiety is more prevalent in women than men (Del Giudice, 2011). This aligns with the fact that women are socialized to show their emotions and to be more relationship-oriented, whereas men are expected to be more self-reliant (Mondor et al., 2011). As such, whereas it is socially accepted for women to need reassurance, men who report attachment anxiety may find it difficult to display what could be perceived as gender-discordant attachment behaviors. Research has shown that men who fail to conform to gender norms (e.g., by appearing less confident or more vulnerable than what is socially prescribed) and who see it as a failure seem to experience more negative emotions and report lower self-esteem (Reilly, Rochlen, & Awad, 2014; Witt & Wood, 2010). Therefore, men with attachment anxiety might be less receptive to their partner's support because society tells them that they should not be needy or that showing vulnerability equates being weak. This perception of weakness might therefore prevent them from fully benefiting from partner support.

Partner effects in these moderation effects were also explored—that is, whether participants' own attachment anxiety moderated the association between their own perceived partner support

and their partner's relationship satisfaction and willingness to invest in the relationship. Interestingly, we found that when men and women reported receiving more support from their partner, their partner reported being more satisfied, but only when the participants reported low attachment anxiety. Individuals with attachment anxiety have been shown to compulsively seek reassurance, even more so in the context of relational discord where this need for reassurance might be heightened (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). They have also been shown to express frustration when their partner is not immediately responsive and to be less satisfied with the support they receive (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Providing support to a partner who is high on attachment anxiety could be draining and may therefore no longer be associated with the other partner's relationship satisfaction. Moreover, attachment anxiety did not moderate the association between men and women's own perceived partner support and their partner's willingness to invest in the relationship. Clinically, our results suggest that clinicians should not assume that partners who are perceived as being more supportive are necessarily more relationally satisfied and committed. Although being supportive is a desirable relationship behavior, providing support to a partner who is high on attachment anxiety could be tiresome and may contribute to relationship problems and dissatisfaction in couples experiencing significant relationship distress. Therapy could aim to establish a more secure bond between the partners, which could help individuals with attachment anxiety to be more appreciative of the support they are receiving, and therefore decrease the pressure felt by their partner (Johnson, 2019).

Attachment anxiety did not moderate the association between perceived partner psychological aggression and either relationship satisfaction or the willingness to invest in the relationship. Based on previous studies (Campbell et al., 2005; Sadikaj et al., 2011; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008), we expected individuals with attachment anxiety to react more negatively toward negative behaviors and therefore to be more affected by psychological aggression (i.e., to report lower satisfaction and a lower willingness to invest in the relationship). However, it is possible that the lack of moderation reflects opposite relational tendencies in individuals with high degrees of attachment anxiety: these individuals might be more affected by negative behaviors (Campbell et al., 2005; Sadikaj et al., 2011; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008) while also being more accepting of them. In line with this hypothesis, research has shown that individuals with attachment anxiety are more likely to stay in unhappy relationships than secure individuals (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Also, considering that individuals with attachment anxiety have a negative model of self, they might be more likely to blame themselves to justify their partner's aggressive behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Future studies will be needed to better understand these results.

Strengths, limitations and future directions

This study has many strengths such as the use of a dyadic design and a large sample of clinically distressed couples seeking treatment in a naturalistic setting. This sample increases the clinical representativity of the results and the variance in study variables—attachment insecurities and psychological aggression being less prevalent in happy couples (Breiding et al., 2015; Mondor et al., 2011). The large sample allowed us to examine the concurrent and relative contribution of both positive and negative partner behaviors, which has rarely been done. Moreover, the inclusion of attachment anxiety as a moderating factor allowed us to present a more nuanced analysis of how perceived partner support and psychological aggression contribute to relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest in the relationship in distressed couples. From a clinical standpoint, getting a better understanding of how perceptions of partner behaviors relate to relationship outcomes, as well as the role of attachment anxiety may help clinicians to use more targeted and effective interventions.

Nonetheless, our study had some limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, even though the participation rate was very high, thus increasing the representativeness of the sample to couples seeking therapy, the sample lacked diversity because it included mostly White individuals with a high socio-economic background and only included mixed-sex couples. Thus,

it might not generalize to distressed partners with diverse sociocultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities. It might also not generalize to couples who do not seek treatment or do not have sufficient financial resources to pay for private couple therapy services. Future studies should try to recruit couples outside private clinical settings and target different minority groups. Second, participants might have been subject to a desirability bias considering that they knew that their therapist would have access to their responses. Because psychological aggression is socially proscribed, such behavior might be difficult to reveal at the beginning of the therapy. However, research has shown that sustained psychological aggression is less likely to be underreported than perpetrated psychological aggression (Simpson & Christensen, 2005). Nonetheless, replicating this study in a context where participants' answers remain confidential and are not shared with a therapist would help to assess the impact of our research design on individuals' willingness to report aggressive behaviors. Third, this study relied on a cross-sectional correlational design. Hence, it is not possible to infer causality nor to be sure about the direction of the associations that were found. Longitudinal designs could help clarify the temporal associations between perceptions of partner behaviors and relationship outcomes.

There were also limitations related to the choice of the measures. First, due to the limited number of items that we could administer in a clinical context, only one item was used to measure the willingness to invest in the relationship. This item was chosen for its high clinical usefulness and face validity. However, considering that this item is also part of the original *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976), there might be a certain overlap with relationship satisfaction, the other outcome measured in this study. Considering that the correlations between relationship satisfaction and the willingness to invest were .41 for men ($p < .001$) and .29 for women ($p < .001$) in our overall model, however, we believe that these variables were different enough to be considered as two distinct outcomes in our study. Nonetheless, future studies should use validated questionnaires to assess relationship commitment or relationship investment more thoroughly. Second, there are also certain limitations regarding the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* (Straus et al., 1996) because it does not assess all types of psychological aggression. Therefore, it could limit the results if some partners experienced other types of psychological aggression behaviors not included in that measure (e.g., controlling behaviors, monitoring the partner's phone). Also, unlike the *Partner Support Scale*, which assesses the subjective perception of support (Brassard et al., 2011), the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* measures the frequency of a limited set of behaviors considered to be psychologically aggressive in an objective manner (Straus et al., 1996). However, these behaviors might not be interpreted as an aggression by all participants, therefore altering the results. Future studies should assess the subjective perception of psychological aggression. They could also include a wider range of positive and negative behaviors that could affect couples' satisfaction and relationship stability.

Clinical implications and conclusion

When accounting for both positive and negative partner behaviors, as well as attachment insecurities, our findings suggest that perceiving support from a partner contributes uniquely to relationship satisfaction and to the willingness to invest in the relationship in couples experiencing significant relationship distress. More importantly, we found that the association between perceived partner psychological aggression and relationship satisfaction was no longer significant once we considered the contribution of perceived partner support. This suggests that supportive behaviors are key to foster relational well-being and stability and should systematically be assessed in couple therapy (Gere et al., 2013; Rivers & Sanford, 2018).

Our results also suggest that attachment anxiety could be an obstacle for men to fully benefit from their partner's support. Thus, therapy could focus on reducing men's attachment anxiety and promoting acceptance of their reassurance needs. Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy could be particularly useful in this respect (Johnson, 2019). It could also be helpful to encourage men to embrace their sensitivity and attachment needs, and to challenge the

traditional view of masculinity. Conversely, it might be appropriate to assist and guide men's partner in showing understanding and avoiding judgements toward men's need for reassurance in the relationship. For women, our results suggest that higher perceived partner support could be beneficial for their relationship satisfaction (irrespective of their level of attachment anxiety) and could also possibly contribute to the willingness to invest in the relationship in women with attachment anxiety. Thus, clinically it might be useful to help women recognize and accept their partner's gestures of support throughout the therapy process. It could also be relevant to encourage their partner to provide more positive and sensitive partner support.

Overall, our findings stress the importance of studying and intervening on positive relationship behaviors in addition to negative relationship behaviors, and underscore the need to consider attachment anxiety, because these variables uniquely contribute to relational well-being. Future research should continue to investigate the relative contribution of positive and negative behaviors, as well as attachment anxiety, rather than considering these constructs separately.

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ORCID

Thalie Labonté  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0271-1255>

Caroline Dugal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9488-6962>

Marie-France Lafontaine  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4185-6326>

Audrey Brassard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2292-1519>

Katherine Péloquin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2680-3197>

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