Article

JSPR

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships
2021, Vol. 38(2) 648–667

DOI: 10.1177/0265407520969896
journals.sagepub.com/home/spr
SAGE

A combination of insecure attachment patterns in a relationship and its quality: The role of relationship length

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Abstract

Most studies confirm that a combination of insecure attachment patterns in a couple has a negative effect on a romantic relationship. However, some research findings suggest otherwise. It is because they do not take account of relationship length as a moderating variable. The aim of this study was to examine the role of relationship length in predicting the effects of a combination of insecure attachment patterns on different aspects of its quality. The study involved 200 heterosexual couples. We used the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire to measure insecure attachment patterns (anxiety and avoidance) and the Couple Satisfaction Index-32 to determine relationship satisfaction. The other aspects of relationship quality (tenderness, communication, conflict behavior) were examined by means of the Partnership Questionnaire. The key results showed that with time the selected indicators of relationship quality deteriorate in a combination of anxious and avoidant patterns, while they improve in a combination of both anxious patterns.

Keywords

Attachment patterns, couples, psychology, relationship length, relationship quality

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Introduction

We can observe quite a lot of couples that, in spite of constant fights and quarrels, hold together. On the other hand, there are just as many relationships in which partners hardly ever argue and yet split up. Some partners continuously, as if for no apparent reason, complain about or deeply hurt each other but at the same time appreciate each other and do not let others say a bad word about their partners. In such cases it is difficult to unambiguously evaluate the quality of the relationship, or the factors responsible for this quality. They can be analyzed at the intrapsychic level, considering the partners' characteristics, but also interpersonally and systemically—focusing on the specifics of their compatibility and interactions.

In this article, we would like to take a closer look at attachment patterns in a dyad. Their significance for mental health prediction, disorders, and the quality of interpersonal relationships has been widely explored and commented in scientific and clinical literature. Attachment patterns are shaped in childhood in the form of interaction scripts with important—usually parental—objects. They show moderate stability in adulthood, but can be modified to some extent, for example as a result of important life events, or new interpersonal experiences.

Numerous studies confirm a positive contribution of a secure pattern to a relationship and a negative impact of an insecure pattern, i.e. anxious, avoidant and its derivatives (an overview of research—see Li & Chan, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Far fewer studies have focused on the role of combinations and interactions of attachment patterns in a dyad. Their results mostly indicated that a combination of two secure patterns is the most beneficial for different aspects of relationship quality, and a combination of two insecure patterns—the least (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

A combination of insecure attachment patterns and relationship quality

The results of research into the significance of insecure pattern combinations for the quality of a romantic relationship revealed that the negative effects of a combination of anxious and avoidant patterns in one or both partners were relatively common whereas the negative effects of an anxious-anxious combination were less frequent. The impact of a combination of two avoidant patterns was the least frequently reported and was ambiguous.

In particular, a combination of anxious and avoidant patterns: weakened relationship satisfaction (Feeney, 1994; MacLean, 2002); intensified physiological stress response to conflict conversation (Beck et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2018); limited providing effective support to the partner (Taylor et al., 2018, Feeney, 2003; Shallcross et al., 2011); encouraged negative emotion language (Seedall & Lachmar, 2016) and violence in a relationship (Allison et al., 2008).

Like in an anxious-avoidant combination, a constellation of two anxious patterns was accompanied by a lower level of relationship satisfaction (Feeney, 1994; Gallo & Smith, 2001); additionally—a high level of marital conflict, perception of less marital support (Gallo & Smith, 2001), emotional and physical withdrawal from their romantic relationships, power assertion behaviors in conflict interactions (Feeney, 2003), and violence

intensification in a relationship (Allison et al., 2008; Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). A combination of two avoidant patterns has produced an effects only in three studies. This combination, compared to the other possible ones, was associated with lower (MacLean, 2002) or higher satisfaction with a relationship (Banse, 2004) and stronger physiological stress response in a conflict interaction situation (Laurent & Powers, 2007).

The adverse effects of a combination of insecure attachment patterns in a dyad can be explained in terms of the mutual reinforcement of negative strategies—specific to these patterns—for regulating closeness and/or distance (Allison et al., 2008). For example, in an anxious-avoidant couple, an anxious person strives to attract his/her partner's attention, closeness, and care, while an avoidant partner tries to maintain his/her distance and independence, and draw attention away from distress. In the course of interaction between partners, destructive feedback cycles occur ("pursuit-distancing": Allison et al., 2008; "demand-withdrawal": Papp et al., 2009), frustrating the needs of both partners and increasing tension between them. In turn, both partners with an anxious pattern try to win their partners' attention and support and control their behavior. By concentrating mainly on their own attachment needs, they are not able to effectively respond to the corresponding needs of their partners, which, in the course of interaction, intensifies a feeling of incomprehension, rejection, and distance and causes them to make attempts at controlling each other. As a result, also this type of couples experience destructive cycles of feedback, referred to as "mutual attack and retreat" (Feeney, 2003) or "pursuing-pursuing" (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). In turn, the mixed effects of an avoidant-avoidant combination may come from the fact that, on the one hand, avoidant partners tend to keep an emotional distance from each other ("distancing-distancing" pattern), which is "secure" for them, but which, on the other hand, can make it difficult for them to receive support and closeness, which they also need.

Moderating function of a relationship's length

Some studies have revealed the negative effects of specific combinations of insecure attachment patterns on romantic relationship quality while others have not. An important reasons for this discrepancy may be different relationship lengths of the couples participating in the study, which is rarely included in analysis. It is reasonable to assume that in a student relationship and a 30-year-old marriage compatibility and clashes between the partners presenting an analogous combination of attachment patterns will be different. All the more so, because that time spent together often proves to be both an independent predictor of a decline in relationship satisfaction (see. meta-analysis of 37 studies: Mitnick et al., 2009) as well as a moderator reinforcing a negative impact of anxious or avoidant attachment patterns on relationship satisfaction and commitment (se meta-analysis of 57 studies: Hadden et al., 2014).

It is likely that the relationship length also intensifies the negative effects of a combination of insecure attachment patterns. Initial mutual idealization of the partner and the relationship itself (see honeymoon effect; Lorber et al., 2015) may over time give way to frustration caused by developing destructive patterns of interaction between partners: "pursuit-distancing," "pursuit-pursuit" or "distancing-distancing." The role of relationship length in predicting the consequences of a combination of insecure

attachment patterns on relationship quality is not so obvious. The results of so far the only study (Feeney, 1994) that belongs to this area of research suggest that different combinations of insecure attachment patterns in a dyad may affect relationship satisfaction differently depending on the stage the relationship is at. The negative effect of interaction between an anxious (in a woman) and an avoidant pattern (in a man) on relationship satisfaction occurred merely in couples with a relatively short length (1–10 years) and the negative effect of interaction of anxious patterns was observed only in couples with a relatively long period (over 20 years). By contrast, in couples with a "moderate" length (11–20 years), analogous interactive relationships did not occur.

Relationship quality

The effects achieved by Feeney (1994) relate to only one general dimension of relationship quality—relationship satisfaction. However, it seems legitimate to think that specific combinations of anxious and avoidant attachment patterns in a dyad may affect different aspects of relationship quality in a different way. For example, avoidant-avoidant couples, due to their mutual efforts to maintain an emotional distance, might more often lack intimacy, while anxious partners, due to their competing for attention and support, are more likely to engage in conflict interactions (cf. Li & Chan, 2012).

In order to get a more complete picture of possible long-term consequences of insecure patterns combinations, our study included, in addition to relationship satisfaction, the measurement of more specific aspects of relationship quality. As proposed by Hahlweg (1996), the evaluation of relationship quality was based on two "positive" dimensions, i.e. *tenderness* (caring, emotional and sexual closeness) and *communication* (sincere communication, shared activities) and one "negative" dimension: *conflict behavior* (devaluating and aggressive behavior during quarrels). The three dimensions mentioned above were treated as important aspects of relationship quality also in many other studies, including German (e.g. Hinz et al., 2001), English (e.g. Donato et al., 2014) or Polish (e.g. Janicka, 2008).

Thus, the purpose of our study was to explore the role of relationship length in predicting the effects of a combination of insecure attachment patterns on different aspects of relationship quality. The current progress of research in this area does not allow for the formulation of precise predictions. In particular, we would like to find out if relationship length moderates the associations between insecure attachment patterns in a dyad and: (a) relationship satisfaction, (b) tenderness, (c) communication and (d) conflict behavior.

Method

Participants and procedure

The study involved 200 heterosexual couples (N = 400), aged from 21 to 45 ($M = 29.4$ years; $SD = 5.40$), living together, being in a formal (47% couples) or informal relationship (53%). Relationship length ranged from half a year to 25 years ($M = 6.23$ years; $SD = 5.03$, skewness = 1.55; kurtosis = 2.48). Most (68%) couples had no children,

18%—one child; 13%—two, and one couple had three children. All the participants were of Polish nationality and lived in Poland. 64% of the participants had higher education, 19% were university students, 15% had general secondary or post-secondary education, and only 2% were vocational school graduates. The majority (63%) of the respondents lived in a major city (over 500,000 inhabitants), 18% in a medium-sized city (100,000–500,000), 12% in a small town (up to 100,000 people) and 7% in rural areas. The recruitment for the study was carried out as part of an on-line study or an e-mail contact. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Measures

Anxious and avoidant attachment. Both attachment patterns in a romantic relationship were measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998; Polish adaptation: Stawska, 2011). The ECR has 36 items, 18 on the Anxiety (they emphasize fear of abandonment and separation) and Avoidance subscale (they emphasize discomfort in closeness and dependence on others).The participants respond to the statements on the 7-point response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ECR is characterized by high internal consistency—in 503 published studies around .90 for both the Anxiety and Avoidance subscales (Graham & Unterschute, 2015). In our study, the alpha coefficients were .86 for Anxiety and .85 for Avoidance.

Relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction measurement in a romantic relationship, as the most basic dimension of relationship quality, was made using the Couple Satisfaction Index-32 (CSI-32; Funk & Rogge, 2007; Polish adaptation: Stawska, 2011). The CSI-32 consists of 32 items, isolated from six other scales measuring relationship satisfaction by means of principal component analyses and the IRT (item response theory) analyses. The participants respond to the first global item ("Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship") on a 7-point scale from 1 (extremely unhappy) to 6 (perfect). The other items are rated on the 6-point scales, using a variety of response anchors. The reliability of the original version of CSI-32 was .98, and 97 for the one used in our study.

Tenderness, communication and conflict behavior. These three dimensions of relationship quality were measured with the three 10-item Partnership Questionnaire subscales (PQ; Hahlweg, 1996; Polish adaptation: Janicka, 2008). The Tenderness subscale (T) includes, among others, expressing closeness by touch and words, tenderness, a caring attitude, and positive response to the partner's emotional and sexual needs; Communication (C) is related to the mutual honest communication of thoughts, feelings and needs, as well as joint activities, including discussing everyday matters. The Conflict Behavior subscale (CB) refers to aggressive and depreciating verbal communications made during an argument, for example malicious remarks, accusations, ridicule, or getting easily offended. The participants respond to the statements using a 4-point response scale from 0 (never) to 3 (always). The subscales' reliability of the original PQ version was .91 (T); .88 (C) and .93 (CB); and the one used in our study was .84; .80; .85 respectively.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations for analyzed variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	M	SD
1. Anxiety	—	.06	−.27***	.37***	−.26***	−.31***	−.04	3.84	1.05
2. Avoidance	−.01	—	−.45***	.21**	−.30***	−.31***	−.09	1.99	.77
3. Satisfaction	−.09	−.48***	—	−.59***	.62***	.58***	−.04	4.14	.81
4. Conflict behavior	.26***	.28***	−.48***	—	−.44***	−.44***	−.03	.62	.49
5. Tenderness	−.12	−.41***	.65***	−.46***	—	−.63***	−.15*	2.35	.48
6. Communication	−.17*	−.40***	.67***	−.48***	.75***	—	−.09	2.14	.49
7. Relationship	.04	.04	−.07	.05	−.23**	−.22**	—	74.77	60.55
8. length (mths)									
M	3.39	2.14	4.15	.82	2.26	2.13	74.77		
SD	1.01	.76	.72	.58	.51	.50	60.55		

Note. Upper diagonal: correlations, *M*, *SD* among women; lower diagonal: correlations, *M*, *SD* among men.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for the analyzed variables and the correlation coefficients between them, separately in the groups of women and men.

Both sexes revealed the same negative correlation pattern (mostly p's $< .001$) between anxious and avoidant attachment and the positive dimensions of relationship quality (or a positive correlation pattern with its negative dimension). The relationship length in men negatively correlated ($p < .01$) with tenderness and communication, whereas in women only with tenderness ($p < .05$). Moreover, women reported a higher level of anxiety (t (398) $= -4.84$; $p < .001$), while men—a higher level of avoidance (t (398) $= -2.15$; $p < .05$) and quarreling in a relationship (t(398) $= -3.60$; $p < .001$).

Analytic strategy

To analyze the data, we fit two-level hierarchical linear models for each of the four outcomes (satisfaction, tenderness, communication and conflict behavior), which allowed to take account of non-independence in couples data. We used R (R Core, 2019) with lme4 library (Bates et al., 2015) to fit the models, using model building strategies presented by Nezlek (2011). All four analyses modeled individual responses (Level 1 of measurement) nested within couples (Level 2 of measurement). In order to model separate equations for males and females, we restructured our data to allow a cross-sectional multivariate model analysis. As recommended by Nezlek (2011), we tested our models in steps: first an unconditional model was set to assess between and within couples' random variances. Next, we introduced all Level-1 predictors, attachment scores for anxiety and avoidance, as well as all theoretically relevant interactions between them (i.e., Actors' Avoidance × Partners' Anxiety, Actors' Avoidance × Partners' Avoidance, Actors' Anxiety × Partners' Anxiety, Actors' Anxiety × Partners' Avoidance for both Female and Male Actors'). Lastly, we introduced a Level-2 predictor of relationship length with all cross-sectional interactions. All predictors were grand mean centered.

Additionally, relationship length was transformed with a square root transformation in order to reduce both skew and kurtosis observed in raw measurement. Due to limited degrees of freedom at Level-1, slopes were modeled as fixed effects across couples (Campbell & Kashy, 2002). All presented analyses used full maximum likelihood estimation.

In terms of sample size, using the techniques described by Nezlek and Mrozinski (2020), the present design provided a post-hoc power of .94 to detect a moderated interaction term (three-way interaction) between actor and partner attachment patterns. The minimum required sample size to detect an effect of similar size as in present study was N = 140.

Predicting satisfaction with the couple's attachment styles and relationship length

Analyses with Level-1 predictors only revealed negative and significant effects for female satisfaction predicted by actor anxiety ($b = -.11$, $SE = .04$, $p = .014$), actor avoidance ($b = -.42$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) and partner anxiety ($b = -.13$, $SE = .04$, $p = .002$). The slope for partners' avoidance was negative but not significant ($b = -.11$, $SE = .06$, $p = .570$). We also found a significant interaction between actor anxiety and partner anxiety ($b = .07, SE = .04, p = .049$), indicating that female anxiety was negatively related with their satisfaction when their partner anxiety was low ($b = -.18$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$), but was not significant when their partner anxiety was high ($b = -.07, SE = .05, p = .230$). Male satisfaction was negatively related to actor anxiety ($b = -.11$, $SE = .04$, $p = .016$), actor avoidance ($b = -.35, SE = .06, p < .001$) and partner avoidance ($b = -.07, SE = .04$, $p = .014$). The slope for partner anxiety was negative but not significant ($b = -.07$, $SE = .04$, $p = .099$). Moreover, a significant interaction of actor avoidance and partner anxiety ($b = -.11, SE = .07, p = .001$) revealed that the negative slope of actor avoidance on male satisfaction was only significant for couples with high anxiety partners ($b = -.18$ $SE = .05, p < .001$). Females partner anxiety did not affect the male satisfaction for male actors low on avoidance ($b = .02$ $SE = .06, p < .750$).

Next, we added relationship length as a Level-2 predictor for male and female satisfaction predicted by all attachment styles and their interactions (see Table 2).

While relationship length did not predict male and female satisfaction, it did moderate the male satisfaction for actor avoidance and partner anxiety and the female satisfaction for actor anxiety and partner avoidance. For couples with shorter relationship male satisfaction was negatively related with male avoidance, but this effect was not qualified by female partner anxiety. Simple slope analysis revealed that the actor avoidance slope was negative and significant at two focal values of partner anxiety ($b_{-1SD} = -.36$, $p < .001$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.29$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, for couples with longer relationship status negative slope for male avoidance was only significant for couples with high anxiety female partners ($b_{-1SD} = -.10, p = .390$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.67, p < .001$).

The interaction of Female Actor Anxiety and Male Partner Avoidance was also moderated by relationship length (see Table 2). A simple slope analysis revealed that for shorter relationship status, negative slope of actor anxiety on female satisfaction was significant for couples where partner was low on avoidance but was not significant,

Table 2. Results of moderated models for all four outcomes.

Attachment style and relationship length prediciting female satisfaction outcomes																
	Satisfaction				Conflict Behavior				Tenderness				Communication			
Predictors	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*
Female (intercept)	**4.12**	**0.05**	**4.04 to 4.21**	**<0.001**	**0.60**	**0.04**	**0.53 to 0.67**	**<0.001**	**2.35**	**0.03**	**2.29 to 2.41**	**<0.001**	**2.18**	**0.03**	**2.12 to 2.25**	**<0.001**
Female Anxiety	**−0.11**	**0.04**	**−0.19 to −0.03**	**0.010**	**0.15**	**0.03**	**0.08 to 0.22**	**<0.001**	**−0.09**	**0.03**	**−0.15 to −0.03**	**0.003**	**−0.10**	**0.03**	**−0.15 to −0.04**	**0.001**
Female Avoidance	**−0.40**	**0.06**	**−0.53 to −0.28**	**<0.001**	**0.12**	**0.05**	**0.02 to 0.22**	**0.016**	**−0.20**	**0.04**	**−0.28 to −0.11**	**<0.001**	**−0.19**	**0.04**	**−0.27 to −0.10**	**<0.001**
Male Anxiety	**−0.14**	**0.04**	**−0.22 to −0.05**	**0.001**	0.06	0.03	−0.01 to 0.12	0.098	−0.05	0.03	−0.10 to 0.01	0.132	−0.01	0.03	−0.06 to 0.05	0.858
Male Avoidance	−0.11	0.06	−0.22 to 0.01	0.077	0.06	0.05	−0.04 to 0.15	0.223	**−0.12**	**0.04**	**−0.20 to −0.03**	**0.005**	**−0.13**	**0.04**	**−0.21 to −0.04**	**0.002**
Female Anxiety × Male Anxiety	**0.08**	**0.04**	**0.01 to 0.15**	**0.028**	0.05	0.03	−0.01 to 0.11	0.091	0.01	0.03	−0.04 to 0.06	0.756	0.05	0.03	−0.00 to 0.10	0.071
Female Anxiety × Male Avoidance	−0.08	0.05	−0.19 to 0.02	0.130	0.03	0.04	−0.06 to 0.11	0.496	−0.05	0.04	−0.13 to 0.02	0.165	**−0.08**	**0.04**	**−0.16 to −0.01**	**0.027**
Female Avoidance × Male Anxiety	−0.05	0.07	−0.18 to 0.08	0.426	0.00	0.05	−0.11 to 0.10	0.961	−0.06	0.05	−0.15 to 0.03	0.212	−0.07	0.05	−0.16 to 0.02	0.119
Female Avoidance × Male Avoidance	−0.11	0.08	−0.26 to 0.05	0.173	0.03	0.06	−0.09 to 0.16	0.608	−0.01	0.06	−0.12 to 0.10	0.839	−0.02	0.06	−0.13 to 0.09	0.724
Length × Female Anxiety × Male Anxiety	0.02	0.01	−0.00 to 0.04	0.107	−0.01	0.01	−0.03 to 0.01	0.156	0.00	0.01	−0.02 to 0.01	0.717	0.00	0.01	−0.02 to 0.02	0.999
Length × Female Anxiety × Male Avoidance	**−0.05**	**0.02**	**−0.09 to −0.02**	**0.005**	0.00	0.01	−0.03 to 0.03	0.870	**−0.04**	**0.01**	**−0.07 to −0.01**	**0.002**	−0.01	0.01	−0.03 to 0.02	0.641
Length × Female Avoidance × Male Avoidance	0.03	0.02	−0.02 to 0.07	0.203	−0.02	0.02	−0.06 to 0.02	0.259	0.03	0.02	−0.00 to 0.06	0.077	0.03	0.02	−0.00 to 0.06	0.084
Length × Female Avoidance × Male Anxiety	0.01	0.02	−0.02 to 0.05	0.494	−0.01	0.01	−0.04 to 0.02	0.359	0.00	0.01	−0.03 to 0.02	0.705	−0.01	0.01	−0.03 to 0.02	0.556

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Attachment style and relationship length prediciting female satisfaction outcomes																
	Satisfaction				Conflict Behavior				Tenderness				Communication			
Predictors	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*	*Estimate*	*SE*	*95% CI*	*p-value*
Male (intercept)	**4.20**	**0.05**	**4.11 to 4.29**	**<0.001**	**0.82**	**0.04**	**0.75 to 0.89**	**<0.001**	**2.28**	**0.03**	**2.22 to 2.34**	**<0.001**	**2.15**	**0.03**	**2.08 to 2.21**	**<0.001**
Male Anxiety	**−0.11**	**0.04**	**−0.19 to −0.03**	**0.010**	**0.17**	**0.03**	**0.10 to 0.23**	**<0.001**	−0.05	0.03	−0.11 to 0.01	0.095	**−0.07**	**0.03**	**−0.12 to −0.01**	**0.028**
Male Avoidance	**−0.16**	**0.06**	**−0.28 to −0.04**	**0.012**	−0.01	0.05	−0.11 to 0.09	0.838	−0.02	0.04	−0.11 to 0.07	0.652	−0.07	0.04	−0.16 to 0.01	0.089
Female Anxiety	−0.08	0.04	−0.17 to 0.00	0.052	**0.08**	**0.03**	**0.01 to 0.14**	**0.025**	0.00	0.03	−0.05 to 0.06	0.872	−0.02	0.03	−0.08 to 0.03	0.412
Female Avoidance	**−0.34**	**0.06**	**−0.46 to −0.22**	**<0.001**	**0.15**	**0.05**	**0.05 to 0.24**	**0.002**	**−0.26**	**0.04**	**−0.34 to −0.18**	**<0.001**	**−0.24**	**0.04**	**−0.32 to −0.16**	**<0.001**
Male Anxiety × Female Anxiety	0.00	0.04	−0.07 to 0.07	0.997	0.03	0.03	−0.03 to 0.09	0.340	−0.01	0.03	−0.06 to 0.04	0.672	−0.01	0.03	−0.06 to 0.04	0.706
Male Anxiety × Female Avoidance	−0.08	0.07	−0.21 to 0.04	0.197	0.02	0.05	−0.08 to 0.12	0.690	0.00	0.05	−0.09 to 0.09	0.983	−0.01	0.05	−0.10 to 0.08	0.754
Male Avoidance × Female Anxiety	**−0.17**	**0.05**	**−0.28 to −0.06**	**0.002**	**0.13**	**0.04**	**0.04 to 0.21**	**0.003**	−0.01	0.04	−0.09 to 0.06	0.734	−0.01	0.04	−0.08 to 0.07	0.885
Male Avoidance × Female Avoidance	−0.07	0.08	−0.23 to 0.08	0.349	−0.04	0.06	−0.17 to 0.08	0.493	0.08	0.06	−0.03 to 0.19	0.159	0.08	0.06	−0.03 to 0.18	0.172
Length × Male Anxiety × Female Anxiety	0.01	0.01	−0.01 to 0.04	0.270	**−0.02**	**0.01**	**−0.04 to −0.00**	**0.031**	0.02	**0.01**	**0.00 to 0.04**	**0.021**	0.01	0.01	−0.01 to 0.02	0.312
Length × Male Anxiety × Female Avoidance	−0.01	0.02	−0.04 to 0.03	0.631	−0.01	0.01	−0.04 to 0.01	0.321	0.01	0.01	−0.01 to 0.04	0.321	0.02	0.01	−0.01 to 0.04	0.126
Length × Male Avoidance × Female Avoidance	0.01	0.02	−0.04 to 0.05	0.704	0.00	0.02	−0.03 to 0.04	0.847	0.00	0.02	−0.03 to 0.03	0.84	−0.02	0.02	−0.05 to 0.01	0.190
Length × Male Avoidance × Female Anxiety	**−0.07**	**0.02**	**−0.10 to −0.03**	**<0.001**	0.02	0.01	−0.01 to 0.05	0.250	**−0.03**	**0.01**	**−0.06 to −0.01**	**0.017**	−0.01	0.01	−0.04 to 0.01	0.292

Note. Theretically irrelevant interaction terms have been omitted.

although still negative for couples with high avoidance partners ($b_{-1SD} = -.15, p = .049$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.06, p = .460$). An opposite effect was found for couples with longer relationship status—that is: with highly avoidant male partners, female slope for their satisfaction and anxiety was negative and significant, when partners avoidance was low, the relationship between female actor anxiety and their satisfaction was no longer significant ($b_{-1SD} = -.00, p = .970$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.28, p < .001$).

Predicting tenderness with the couple's attachment styles and relationship length

Following the same analytical procedure as with satisfaction, we first describe results for a model of tenderness with only Level-1 predictors and then move to the model, with relationship length added as a Level-2 moderator.

With only attachment styles at Level-1 overall levels of tenderness were higher for women than for men ($b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p = .031$). Women's tenderness was negatively related to their anxiety ($b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p = .013$), avoidance ($b = -.16$, $SE = .04, p < .001$) and their partners' avoidance ($b = -.14$, $SE = .04, p = .002$), but not their partners' anxiety ($b = -.05$, $SE = .03$, $p = .141$). None of these effects was qualified by an interaction (p's > .1). On the other hand, men's tenderness was negatively related only to their avoidance ($b = -.27$, $SE = .04, p < .001$). All the other effects were not significant (p's > .1).

Adding relationship length at Level-2 yielded a couple of new effects. First, the interaction between a woman's anxiety and her partner's avoidance was moderated by relationship length. Simple slope analyses revealed that for couples with shorter relationship status female tenderness as a function of female anxiety was not moderated by male avoidance ($b_{-1SD} = -.04, p = .510$ and $b_{+1SD} = .05, p = .360$). On the other hand, for couples with longer relationship status, female tenderness was negatively related do their anxiety when a male partner was high on avoidance, but was not related to their anxiety when the male partner was low on avoidance ($b_{-1SD} = -.09, p = .080$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.29, p < .001$).

Two three-way interactions were observed when predicting a man's tenderness. First, relationship length moderated the interaction of male anxiety and a female partner's anxiety. Interestingly, for couples with shorter relationship status, the slope of male anxiety on male tenderness was not significant when a female partner was low on anxiety, but was negative and significant when a female partner was high on avoidance ($b_{-1SD} = .01$, $p = .790$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.10$, $p = .040$). An opposite effect was found within couples with longer relationships, that is, the negative slope of male anxiety on male tenderness was significant for partners low on anxiety, but not significant for partners high on anxiety ($b_{-1SD} = -.10, p = .049$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.02, p = .610$).

Second, relationship length moderated the interaction of male avoidance and female partner anxiety. For couples with shorter relationship status, male tenderness was negatively related with male avoidance for female partners with both low and high anxiety ($b_{-1SD} = -.38, p < .001$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.25, p < .001$). For couples with longer relationship status male tenderness was negatively related to male avoidance for partners high on anxiety, but not for partners with low anxiety ($b_{-1SD} = -.13, p = .100$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.30, p < .001$)

Predicting communication with the couple's attachment styles and relationship length

Analyses of communication as an outcome with no relationship length at Level-2 yielded couple of significant effects. Male communication was negatively related to male anxiety ($b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $p = .021$) and male avoidance. ($b = -.24$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). No main effects for the effect of female anxiety and avoidance on male communication were found. Female communication was negatively related with female anxiety ($b = .09$, $SE = .03$, $p = .003$), avoidance ($b = .16$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) and male avoidance ($b = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .002$) but not with male anxiety. A significant interaction between female actor anxiety and male partner avoidance was found ($b = -.08$, $SE = .04$, $p = .024$): the negative slope of female anxiety on values of female communication was significant for high avoidance male partners but not significant for low avoidance male partners ($b_{-1SD} = -.05$, $p = .170$ and $b_{+1SD} = -.15$, $p < .001$).

Introducing relationship length at Level-2 of analysis did not show any significant cross-level interactions. However, there was a significant and main effect of relationship length.

Predicting conflict behavior with the couple's attachment styles and relationship length

With predictors at Level-1 only, estimates of mean conflict behavior differed across sex ($b = .22$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) with males scoring higher than females. Males conflict behavior was positively related to male anxiety ($b = .14$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$) and avoidance ($b = -.16$, $SE = .05$, $p = .019$). Relationships with female partners' anxiety ($b = .07$, $SE = .03$, $p = .055$) and avoidance ($b = -.02$, $SE = .05$, $p = .686$) were not significant. Moreover, males' levels of conflict behavior were qualified by a significant interaction between actor avoidance and partner anxiety ($b = .13$, $SE = .04$, $p = .002$). From a simple slope perspective, this interaction effect showed that male actor avoidance positively predicted male conflict behavior for couples with high anxiety female partners ($b = .28$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) but not for couples with low anxiety female partners ($b = .07$, $SE = .06$, $p = .210$). On the other hand, female levels of conflict behavior were positively related to female anxiety ($b = .14$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$) and avoidance ($b = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .019$). Relationships of female conflict behavior with male anxiety ($b = .06$, $SE = .03$, $p = .068$) or avoidance ($b = .08$, $SE = .05$, $p = .094$) were not significant as were all interaction effects (p's $> .100$)

Introducing relationship length as Level-2 predictor yielded a cross-level interaction effect between male actor anxiety, female partner anxiety and relationship length (see Table 2) on men's level of conflict behavior. Simple slope analysis showed that for couples with shorter relationship length the positive slope of male anxiety on male levels of conflict behavior was significant when partners were high on anxiety but not significant for low anxiety partners ($b_{-1SD} = .09$, $p = .180$ and $b_{+1SD} = .23$, $p < .001$). Slopes for couples with longer relationship status where both positive and significant ($b_{-1SD} = .21$, $p < .001$ and $b_{+1SD} = .15$, $p < .001$), with no indication of the female partner anxiety effect.

Discussion

The results at the individual (actor effects) and dyadic level (partner effects) showed that a higher level of anxious or avoidant attachment pattern coexists with poor relationship quality (lower satisfaction level, tenderness and communication and higher quarreling level. These correlations concern both sexes and are consistent with previous reports (for reviews, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Moreover, less numerous, but also consistent with previous knowledge (Ibid.; Feeney, 1994), interaction effects occurred in relation to a specific combination of anxious female and avoidant male patterns. A higher level of these complementary attachment patterns in a couple was associated with a lower level of relationship satisfaction in both partners and lower communication in men. Contrary to the findings about the negative consequences of an anxious-anxious combination for relationship quality (e.g. Feeney, 1994; Gallo & Smith, 2001), women reported less satisfaction only when they were higher and their male partners were lower (not higher!) in anxiety. This effect will be commented together with the effects of the second-order interactions.

The main purpose of our study was to explore the role of relationship length in predicting the effects of a combination of insecure attachment patterns on relationship quality. The results of the analyses revealed a different role of relationship length in explaining the respective effects of anxious-avoidant ("eroding effect") and anxious-anxious combinations ("buffering effect") on selected aspects of relationship quality.

Anxious-avoidant combination and eroding effect of relationship length

In a combination of anxious and avoidant patterns with relationship length, four effects of second-order interactions occurred. Only in longer relationships, men demonstrated less satisfaction and tenderness when they were higher in avoidance and their female partners were higher in anxiety. Also, only in longer relationships, women showed less satisfaction and tenderness when they were higher in anxiety and their male partners were higher in avoidance.

The results indicating a greater destructiveness of an anxious-avoidant combination for satisfaction and, based on physical contact, tenderness at a later stage of a relationship can be explained in terms of an unsolvable, growing conflict between two opposite motives (see Beck et al., 2013). An anxious partner chronically seeks physical and emotional closeness, whereas an avoidant one chronically shuns it and tries to increase his/her independence (see "pursuit-distancing" pattern; Allison et al., 2008; see "demand-withdrawal" pattern; Papp et al., 2009). The conflict cannot be resolved because each partner strives for exactly what the other wants to avoid. Over time, negative experiences in the relationship accumulate, which results in the conflict taking on extreme forms (Christensen et al., 2006) and deepens both partners' mutual frustration.

An alternative line of explanation is based on the view that initially partners with anxious and avoidant attachment patterns are attractive to each other as mutually reinforcing their attachment-related expectations (Holmes & Johnson, 2009; Kirkpatrick &

Davis, 1994). Responding negatively to the intimacy-seeking anxious partner, an avoidant partner is attractive to him/her because such a partner confirms his/her negative expectations of others as distant and rejecting, while an anxious partner, striving for closeness, is attractive to an avoidant partner because the former confirms the latter's negative expectations of others as clingy and dependent. According to the self-verification theory (Swann, 2012), people tend to interact with those who fit into their long-held expectations in order to maintain predictable social reality in their own minds and thus confirm their self-conceptions. Thus, the avoidant and anxious partners can "attract" each other having an unconscious impression that this type of relationship is familiar to them, thus in a sense "safe" (Holmes & Johnson, 2009; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). However, fearing the fulfilment of negative expectations (based on all the negative relationship scenarios they know) as a threat to the "self," they may deny them and strongly idealize their relationship and partner. Over time, as idealization subsides, the partners gradually confront themselves with the fact that their negative expectations are nevertheless fulfilled. In desperation, the anxious partner further "clings" to the avoidant one, while the avoidant one, for fear of being "absorbed," further distances himself/herself from the anxious one (see Allison et al., 2008), which significantly impairs the quality of the relationship.

Although the aim of our study was not to explore sex differences, it should be noted that relationship satisfaction and tenderness gradually diminished in both partners only when a higher level of anxiety was manifested by a woman and a higher level of avoidance by a man (see Beck et al., 2013; Feeney, 1994; MacLean, 2002). The leading explanations of the sex effect on a combination of anxious and avoidant patterns indicate an interplay between attachment dimensions and evolutionarily and/or socio-culturally determined gender roles (e.g., Del Giudice, 2009). According to them, the anxious attachment pattern in women intensifies their—specific for gender or social expectations—desire for emotional contact and closeness, while the avoidant pattern in men sharpens their emotional self-restraint and individualism. This line of interpretation is supported by the sex differences observed in our sample, according to which a higher level of anxiety was observed in women and a higher level of avoidance in men, as well as by similar results of other studies (e.g. Brennan et al., 1998; Schmitt et al., 2003).

The results suggesting that in a combination of anxious and avoidant patterns the quality of a relationship is gradually eroded do not have to be inconsistent with Feeney's results (1994), indicating that this combination is unfavorable only for couples with a shorter relationship length. The "shorter" relationship length in Feeney's study was between 1 and 10 years. This is, however, quite a long span, which can accommodate both the passionate phase of "falling in love and romantic beginnings" (according to various estimates, from 7 to 28 months; for a review: Fisher, 2006) and the difficult phase of getting to know each other and taking on parental roles. The negative effects of the anxious-avoidant combination in couples with 1–10 relationship length in Feeney's study (1994) reflect the process of disillusionment with the relationship after its idealization has ceased, which in our study refers to couples with a so-called "longer" relationship length.

Anxious-anxious combination and buffering effect of relationship length

The remaining two effects of second-order interactions occurred for relationship length and a combination of both anxious patterns. Only in shorter relationships men demonstrated more conflict behavior and less tenderness when both they and their female partners were higher in anxiety. Moreover, only in longer relationships, men showed less tenderness when they were higher and their female partners were lower in anxiety. These findings actually concern two different variants: anxious-anxious and anxious–low-anxious, which, together with relationship length getting longer, may imply different consequences for its quality.

The anxious-anxious combination proved to be more destructive for men living in shorter relationships. In longer ones, anxious men in relationships with their anxious partners experienced relatively less aggressive and devaluing communications and more physical and emotional closeness. Perhaps this is because over time the cycles of conflicting interactions ("pursuing-pursuing"; Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; "mutual attack and retreat"; Feeney, 2003), involving anxious partners who try to attract the attention and care of the other party, provide indirect benefits (cf. Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Permanent quarreling of anxious partners seems to be an attempt to control the partner who is not accessible or responsive enough. Besides, it gives a chance to vent pent-up frustration. Also, it allows partners to "cling" to each other, which is a negative equivalent of the desired intimacy. If the relationship is still ongoing, the mutual conviction about the accessibility of the partner, as well as the fact that perhaps in some way they care, can gradually strengthen and thus mitigate this conflictual "clinging to each other" and give more opportunities to experience tenderness.

The buffering effect of relationship length occurred only in men. It is worth recalling that the men in our study demonstrated a lower level of anxiety than the women (see also Brennan et al., 1998), whose anxiety pattern, due to interplay with gender-specific characteristics and/or social expectations, may be more acute (e.g. Del Giudice, 2009). Perhaps the "milder" version of the male anxious pattern allows men to deal with conflicting relationship tensions more flexibly and non-stereotypically (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, p. 239), and over time, adapt better to it.

Contrary to our findings, in Feeney's study (1994), the negative effects of a combination of both anxious patterns occurred only in couples with the longest relationship length (above 20 years). This discrepancy is apparent because the couples whose relationship length exceeded 20 years represented a very low percentage (only 2%) of all the participants in our study. We may have found that Feeney's results relate to a stage in a relationship at which its length no longer serves as a buffer for the negative consequences of an anxious-anxious combination, because the substitute for closeness, obtained through grueling quarrels, is no longer sufficient. More than 20 years of accumulated negative experiences may lead to a midlife crisis (see Wethington, 2000) and excaberating disillusionment with the relationship.

An alternative explanation as to why a greater length of an anxious-anxious relationship contributed to better indicators of its quality in our study and to weaker indicators in Feeney's (1994) study, carried out in Australia, is based on cultural differences. The results of the IBM Study (Hofstede, 2001) showed that Poland is a less

individualistic country than Australia (like the U.S.). Despite the major socio-cultural changes in the last two decades, which emancipated an individual from traditional group affiliations and ties (see e.g. an increase in cohabitation, divorces, patchwork or alternative family models; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Wrochna, 2018), Poland still remains a rather conservative country (Ibid.). Not so much in a political perspective, but in a deeper social sense, perpetuated by generations and manifested in the language and the meanings of the words. For example, in the Polish word *rodzina* ("family"), the emphasis is placed more on its roots (parents, grandparents, past generations), and in Anglo-Saxon culture on progeny (Wierzbicka, 1997). The Polish phrase *mieć do kogoś żal* ("have a grudge against someone") combines emotional closeness with legitimate expectations from loved ones, which in the Anglo-Saxon culture sounds distinctly negative and is tantamount to "emotional blackmail" (Besemers, 2007). In the Polish cultural context, which is more collectivist, extreme closeness and clinging to the partner, so characteristic of the anxious attachment pattern, do not have to be experienced as totally negative (cf. Harma & Sümer, 2016). It applies especially to those who grew up at the end of the last century and who are currently in relationships of a relatively greater length.

In the "anxious–low-anxious" variant, in which men were higher and their female partners were lower in anxiety, men demonstrated less tenderness, but only in long-term relationships. In the same variant, but reversed by sex, in which women were higher and their male partners were lower in anxiety, women presented less satisfaction regardless of the relationship length. Both results correspond to each other, indicating that an anxious partner is generally likely to badly tolerate a relationship with a low-anxious partner, i.e. one that is not clinging nor seeking attention and care. The latter's autonomic way of functioning can be misinterpreted by the anxious partner, according to his/her close others as distant and rejecting working model (e.g. Holmes & Johnson, 2009), as a rejection. Interestingly, anxious men reported less tenderness only in longer relationships with low-anxious partners. Perhaps at first it is easier for them to idealize an autonomous partner because they perceive women through the prism of gender-specific or social expectations as more sensitive and supportive.

Effects of relationship length and different aspects of relationship quality

The most numerous effects (both "eroding" and "buffering") of relationship length manifested themselves in relation to *tenderness*. It is probably because this very dimension of relationship quality, more than the others, includes nonverbal behaviors like seeking and maintaining physical contact, which constitute the primary attachment motivations for getting support and regulating emotions (Milkulincer & Shaver, 2016). Tenderness may therefore be relatively the most sensitive marker in the process of increasing (in an anxious-avoidant combination) or decreasing (in an anxious-anxious combination) of the conflict between these primary attachment motivations in a relationship.

The above explanation corresponds to the fact that least numerous or no effects of relationship length occurred in the *conflict behavior* and *communication* dimensions of relationship quality, focused mainly on verbal interactions. They may be more influenced by factors not directly related to primary attachment motivations (e.g. verbal

communication skills), and thus be a weaker marker of a couple's conflicts resulting from them.

In relation to *satisfaction*, effects ("eroding") of relationship length only appeared in an anxious-avoidant combination. A decrease in the satisfaction level—the most basic determinant of relationship quality (Funk & Rogge, 2007)—seems to indicate fundamental negative changes in the relationship. In the anxious-avoidant relationship they may result from a generally unresolvable, and thus "doomed" to escalation, conflict of opposite pursuit-avoidant attachment motivations (e.g. Allison et al., 2008).

Main conclusions, limitations and future directions

Key results have shown that relationship length moderates the impact of a combination of insecure patterns on relationship quality. The clearly different—due to relationship length—consequences of the anxious-avoidant ("eroding effect") and anxious-anxious combinations ("buffering effect") on the quality of a relationship may result from the specific interactions of attachment patterns and/or the cultural context in which they manifest themselves.

Reliability of concluding about the role of relationship length in predicting the effects of a combination of attachment patterns is limited, however, by the cross-sectional character of our study. Moreover, relying on a usual relationship length to explore the developmental aspects of the impact of a combination of insecure attachment patterns in a dyad on relationship quality entails also some simplification. For various reasons, a close relationship may develop faster or slower, differently before and differently after taking on parental roles. It should be also noted that each partner was assigned only to one attachment dimension; either anxious or avoidant. Variations in which each partner's attachment pattern would be defined simultaneously by both anxiety and avoidance dimensions were not taken into account.

In the future both the longitudinal studies and more complex analysis on a much larger sample of couples should be performed. More conclusive explanations might require "operationalizing" relationship length by dividing it into stages, according to the romantic relationship phases model (e.g. Reese-Weber, 2015) and applying a broader typology of insecure attachment patterns.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities under Grant WP/2018/A/02.

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Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research can

be publicly posted. The data can be obtained by emailing dkuncewicz@swps.edu.pl. The materials used in the research can be publicly posted. The materials can be obtained by emailing dkuncewicz@swps.edu.pl.

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