

## Romantic Relationships among Young Adults: An Attachment Perspective

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### Abstract

*The present study used adult attachment as a theoretical framework to investigate individual differences in young adults' romantic relationships. Emphasis was put on studying the relational aspects of the self and coping strategies in an attempt to better understand how romantic partners feel about themselves and how they subsequently behave in periods of conflict. The sample comprised undergraduate university students (N=377) who responded to a self report questionnaire in English. Most findings were consistent with the proposed hypotheses. Results indicated that anxious individuals tend to report an ambivalent coping style and that fearful individuals were most vulnerable to health risks such as depression. Gender differences were also explored and results showed for instance that women generally tend to seek more support, and men might be more dismissing than women.*

**Keywords:** Romantic relationships, attachment styles, relational self.

### 1. Introduction

Romantic relationships occupy a major role in the lives of most young adults (Paul & White, 1990) and those perceived as satisfying are believed to promote emotional well-being and physical health (Berscheid, 1999). Nevertheless, all close relationships are exposed to periods of stress and conflict (Brehm et al., 2002) and when these are successfully dealt with, a deep feeling of intimacy is fostered (Gottman, 1994). However, when romantic partners engage in maladaptive coping behaviors, relationship well-being may be impaired (Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) provides a coherent framework to understand individual differences in such relationships. One of the main assumptions of the theory is that adults *“enter relationships with a history of interpersonal experiences and a unique set of memories, beliefs, and expectations that shape how they think and feel about their relationships and how they behave in those relationships”* (Collins et al., 2006, p.201). In order to better comprehend how young adults *think and feel about their relationships*, and how they *behave in those relationships* during stressful times, the present study sought to respectively investigate the relational aspects of the self (Snell & Finney, 2002) and coping strategies in romantic relationships from an attachment perspective.

Although several studies have focused on individual differences in romantic attachment, many used general scales to account for relationship-specific outcomes: For example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is frequently utilized to measure for self-esteem in romantic relationships (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). So as to explore aspects of the self across romantic relationships, measures designed particularly for this context were utilized in the current study. Similarly, numerous studies looked at coping styles from an attachment framework earlier (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 1995; Mikulincer et al., 1993; Simpson et al., 1992) but only few focused on relationship stressors (e.g., Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), and even fewer on stressors specific to intimate relationships (see Feeney, 1998).

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## Attachment Theory and Romantic Relationships

Although attachment theory initially focused on the relationship between infants and their caregivers (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978), Bowlby (1979/1994) believed that attachment was an important component of human experience “*from the cradle to the grave*” (p.129). From this, researchers began to conceptualize romantic love from an attachment framework (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Numerous studies appeared using that frame of reference (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990) and over time, subsequent improvements were made regarding the measurement and understanding of adult romantic attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998), so that attachment theory has now become “*one of the principal theoretical frameworks for the study of intimate relationships in adulthood*” (Fraley & Shaver, 2000, p.149). The attachment system involves behavior organized in a way to maintain proximity with an attachment figure in conditions of perceived threat (Cassidy, 2000), such that a sense of *felt security* (Sroufe & Waters, 1977) is achieved. However, when the attachment figure is seen as unavailable or unresponsive, secondary strategies are used to adjust the attachment system. Main (1990) mentioned two such strategies: *hyperactivating strategies* and *deactivating strategies*.

While hyperactivating strategies emerge from interactions with attachment figures who are generally perceived as unreliable or insufficiently available, deactivating strategies tend to arise from interactions with attachment figures where closeness is normally disapproved, disallowed or even punished. Attachment styles were initially measured in romantic relationships by Hazan and Shaver (1987) based on Ainsworth’s (Ainsworth et al., 1978) typology. Later, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) came to measure attachment style from a four-categorical model, relying on dimensions of dependence, avoidance, and models of self and others. The attachment styles were seen as being prototypes which individuals could approximate to varying extents (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). However, current research began to question the accuracy of typologies in investigating attachment-related measures (e.g., Kurdek, 2002) and some started to encourage a dimensional approach in contrast to a typological approach in measuring attachment (e.g., Fraley & Spieker, 2003; Fraley & Waller, 1998). Yet, it has been observed that despite differences in ways of measuring attachment, studies have found “*theoretically coherent attachment style variations*” (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009, p. 68) in related measures. Building from this, the present study conceptualized attachment style as comprising the following:

The two dimensions of *attachment anxiety* and *attachment avoidance*, so as to conserve power and precision of measurement (see Brennan et al., 1998) and working models of self and others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

### Attachment Theory and Relational Aspects of the Self

As stated above, one of the present aims was to investigate the relational aspects of the self (Snell & Finney, 2002; Snell et al., 2002) from an attachment perspective. Basically, these involve measures of how the individual perceives him- or herself as a relationship partner and how he or she generally feels about the relationship in general.

*Relationship Esteem* is defined as the “*generalized tendency to positively evaluate one’s capacity to relate intimately with another person*”. Secure individuals, as opposed to the other attachment styles, were expected to score highest on this measure since they are most comfortable with intimacy.

*Relationship Satisfaction* is defined as “*the tendency to be highly satisfied with one’s intimate relationship*”. Here too, secure individuals were expected to rate much higher than insecure individuals (anxious, avoidant and fearful) since they are usually the ones to report high levels of relationship satisfaction and adjustment (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

*Relationship Preoccupation* is defined as “*the tendency to become absorbed in, obsessed with, and engrossed with the intimate aspects of one’s life*”. Anxious individuals were likely to score highest on this measure as they show excessive demands for care, demonstrate clinging behavior and have a strong desire for merger (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

*Relationship Anxiety* is defined as “*the tendency to feel tension, discomfort, and anxiety about one’s intimate relationships*”. Here, as for Relationship Preoccupation, anxious individuals were expected to score highly. Nevertheless, some studies reported that avoidant individuals too feel tension but don’t express it. For example, Kim (2006) found that even if avoidant individuals restrict the expressions of their emotions, they still get physiologically aroused in stressful situations. Thus, it was hypothesized that avoidant individuals might relate positively to Relationship Anxiety too.

*Relationship Depression* is defined as “the tendency to feel depressed about the status of one's intimate relationship”. Fearful individuals might score highest on Relationship Depression as compared to others since they are usually the ones who are more vulnerable to depression (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

*Fear of Relationship* is defined as “a fear of engaging in an intimate relationship with another individual”. Individuals with a fearful attachment style tend to avoid engaging intimately as they are inherently uncomfortable with closeness and fear they might be rejected. Therefore, these individuals were expected to relate more to this concept as opposed to others.

Attachment theory is particularly appropriate to understand individual differences in romantic coping since conflict generally acts as a stressor, activating the attachment system and leading to attachment-specific behaviors (Simpson et al., 1996). Coping is defined as an active process of responding to taxing stimuli in an effort to manage psychological stress (Lazarus, 1993).

*Problem-focused* coping involves attempts to directly respond to the stressor (Lazarus, 1993), by seeking others' support for help and guidance for instance. It was found that secure individuals were more likely to use this strategy (e.g., Lussier et al., 1997), perhaps due to their beliefs in being able to handle stressful situations and expectations that others will be available to help (Ognibene & Collins, 1998). Thus, secure individuals are expected to use problem-focused coping strategies more than insecure ones in the current context. Fearful relationship partners were expected to use this coping style the least as they tend to fear rejection by others. Avoidant individuals, due to their negative views of others (and positive views of the self) could also be low on such strategies.

*Cognitive-focused coping* involves conscious reflection about the stressor and ways of solving it (Garnefski et al., 2002; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Since avoidant partners are thought to deemphasize the use of problem-focused strategies, it could be that these partners put greater effort in dealing with the stressor cognitively (see Seiffge-Krenke, 2006).

*Emotion-focused coping* involves attempts to regulate or lessen emotional distress or at discharging it (Lazarus, 1993; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Attempts to lessen emotional distress (e.g., through withdrawal) might be seen more in avoidant and even fearful individuals since both are high on avoidance. As for strategies involving discharge of emotions (e.g., by venting emotions), anxious individuals were expected to be more inclined in using them as such behaviors could increase the probability of catching the partner's attention.

Research using continuous measures of attachment found significant differences between male and female participants (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998): It was observed that men usually tend to be more dismissing (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994) and seek less emotional support when dealing with stressful events (Taylor et al., 2000). However, such findings have been criticized since most of the studies have been conducted in Western cultures. For instance, studies conducted by Schmitt and colleagues (2003) in 62 different cultural regions did find varying degrees of gender differences in attachment depending on the regions being studied. In this view, the present study also attempted to investigate possible gender differences in the attachment-related measures to look for any convergence or inconsistency with earlier findings.

## **2. Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were 377 (239 females and 138 males) undergraduate university students representing different courses of all faculties so as to increase the likelihood of a representative sample. Participants were either currently in an intimate relationship or have been in one in the past.

### **Measures and Procedure**

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000) was used to measure the attachment dimensions. A modified version of the Multidimensional Relationship Questionnaire (MRQ; Snell et al., 2002) was used to measure the relational aspects of the self in romantic relationships. To investigate coping strategies in intimate relationships, a modified version of the Multidimensional Romantic Coping Questionnaire (MRCQ; Snell, 2002) was utilized. Modified versions were employed since there was a need to reduce the number of subscales into a more appropriate number (the original questionnaires comprised 12 and 25 subscales respectively) and also more importantly, to focus only on those measures deemed to be more coherent with the present aims.

A pilot study was therefore set up to filter the original measures to a more fitting number. 14 other participants were asked to rank, in order of preference (I) the characteristics they identified most with, and (II) the coping strategies they most frequently used in times of stress. Scoring for each questionnaire was reverse-based, i.e., measures ranked first scored higher than those ranked last. Total scores for each measure were computed by summing the respective scores of the 14 participants. In this way, the measures that were retained were those which (a) were seen as more consistent with present objectives, and (b) had the highest total scores. Hence, out of the original measures, 6 were retained from MRQ and 10 from MRCQ.

### **Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000)**

The questionnaire consists of 36 items which describe feelings generally experienced in intimate relationships. Participants were asked to respond to each by indicating how much they agreed or disagreed on a 7-point Likert scale (1= *Strongly Disagree*; 7= *Strongly Agree*). The ECR-R measures two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (18 items each). Items measuring for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance include “*I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me*” and “*I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down*” respectively. The scores for both dimensions were computed by averaging the 18 items respectively. For the current study, the internal consistencies for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were .85 and .84 respectively.

### **Multidimensional Relationship Questionnaire (MRQ; Snell et al., 2002)**

The modified version of the MRQ consists of 30 items. Each item is a statement describing how an individual perceives him- or herself in an intimate relationship. Participants were asked to respond to each statement by indicating the extent to which these were characteristic of themselves in an intimate relationship on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all like me*; 5 = *Very like me*). The 6 subscales which were retained are: (i) Relationship Esteem, (ii) Relationship Satisfaction, (iii) Relationship Preoccupation, (iv) Relationship Anxiety, (v) Relationship Depression and (vi) Fear of Relationship. The internal consistency for the modified questionnaire was .74.

### **Multidimensional Romantic Coping Questionnaire (MRCQ; Snell, 2002)**

The modified version of the MRCQ comprises 40 items, each describing ways people generally deal with stressful situations in romantic relationships. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they usually depicted such behaviors in their own relationships on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *I never do this*; 5= *I usually do this*). The 10 subscales that were retained are: (1) Seeking of Social Support for Emotional Reasons, (2) Seeking of Social Support for Instrumental Reasons, (3) Self Criticism, (4) Positive Reinterpretation and Growth, (5) Self Bolstering, (6) Active Coping, (7) Suppression of Competing Activities, (8) Focus on and Venting of Emotions, (9) Problem Avoidance and (10) Social Withdrawal. The internal consistency of the modified questionnaire was .84.

## **3. Results**

Principal components analyses, with varimax rotation and initial eigenvalues greater than 1 were used to explore constructs of both the modified versions of MRQ and MRCQ separately. Since there were structural changes in some of the initial measures, relevant hypotheses were revised accordingly to fit the new extracted constructs.

Relationship Esteem and Relationship Satisfaction loaded onto a single factor, which was eventually labeled *Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction*; the new construct was assumed to relate positively to individuals who perceive themselves as capable relationship partners and who feel relatively satisfied about their relationships. Therefore, based on initial hypotheses, secure individuals were expected to score higher as opposed to the other attachment styles. Relationship Anxiety and Fear of Relationship too loaded onto one factor labeled thereafter *Relationship Discomfort*. The latter was thought to measure the feeling of being tense in an intimate relationship while at the same time feeling uncomfortable with, or even fearing intimacy. Hence, fearful individuals were expected to rate highest here. As Relationship Preoccupation and Relationship Depression loaded each onto separate factors, their respective hypotheses were unchanged.

For the MRCQ, the two coping strategies involving seeking of social support loaded both onto a single factor, labeled *Seeking Support*, which was deemed to be measuring general support seeking in times of stress.

Also, both the Positive Reinterpretation and Growth and Self Bolstering subscale loaded onto one single factor, renamed *Positive Attitude*. The new construct was thought to relate to a tendency to hold positive thoughts and feelings of efficacy during stressful events. Items from the Suppression of Competing Activities and Active Coping too loaded onto a single factor, named *Active Problem Solving*. It was assumed that the latter involved direct attempts at solving a problem even if this could mean losing grip on other activities. Lastly, the construct *Venting of Emotions* was labeled so as only items which reflected expression or venting loaded onto it.

The new coping strategies were grouped based on the different coping styles. Problem-focused coping therefore included Seeking Support and Active Problem Solving; cognitive-focused coping consisted of Positive Attitude, and emotion-focused coping comprised Self Criticism, Venting of Emotions, Problem Avoidance and Social Withdrawal. Respective hypotheses for the coping styles were maintained.

**Table 1: Descriptive for the factors extracted from modified versions of the MRQ and MRCQ (N=377).**

	M (SD)	No. of Items	$\alpha$	Variance Explained (%)
<b>MRQ</b>				
Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction	3.10 (1.88)	10	.89	27.25
Relationship Discomfort	2.40 (1.83)	8	.86	15.29
Relationship Preoccupation	2.55 (1.82)	5	.82	7.04
Relationship Depression	1.87 (1.47)	5	.81	4.72
				Total =54.30
<b>MRCQ</b>				
Seeking Support	3.10 (1.71)	8	.85	15.41
Self Criticism	2.81 (1.73)	4	.78	10.59
Positive Attitude	3.64 (1.40)	6	.77	7.71
Active Problem Solving	3.41 (1.32)	4	.69	5.38
Venting of Emotions	2.90 (1.96)	3	.68	3.89
Problem Avoidance	2.72 (1.54)	4	.57	3.50
Social Withdrawal	2.46 (1.62)	3	.56	3.05
				Total = 49.54

### Hierarchical Regression Analyses

According to Fraley (2010), hierarchical regression allows for a methodological rapprochement between continuous and prototypical measures of attachment: Depending on how attachment dimensions relate to an outcome variable, it becomes possible to predict which attachment style is more positively associated to that outcome variable.

Series of hierarchical regression analyses were thus carried out for each outcome variable in the present study. Results are presented in Table 2. Squared, semi-partial correlations ( $sr^2$ ) were also reported to indicate the amount of variance in the outcome variable uniquely accounted for by each predictor variable (see Ognibene & Collins, 1998).

**Table 2 Hierarchical regression analyses predicting relational aspects of the self and coping strategies (N = 377)**

Outcome Variable	Step 1		Step 2			Total R <sup>2</sup>
	Sex	$\Delta R^2$	Attachment Anxiety	Attachment Avoidance	$\Delta R^2$	
<b>Relational Aspects of the Self</b>						
Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction	-.17*	.04*	-.19*	-.41*	.23*	.27*
Relationship Discomfort	.00	.00	.28*	.38*	.27*	.27*
Relationship Preoccupation	-.21*	.05*	.30*	-.22*	.12*	.17*
Relationship Depression	-.16**	.02**	.31*	.26*	.19*	.21*
<b>Coping Strategies</b>						
Seeking Support	.20*	.04*	.18*	-.09†	.04**	.08**
Self Criticism	.08†	.00	.40*	-.04	.16*	.16*
Positive Attitude	-.04	.00	-.07	-.02	.01	.01
Active Problem Solving	-.05	.00	.00	-.13***	.02***	.02***
Venting of Emotions	.17**	.03**	.21*	-.13***	.05*	.08*
Problem Avoidance	.02	.00	-.09	.14**	.02***	.02***
Social Withdrawal	-.04	.00	.22*	.12***	.07*	.07*

Note: All values are beta values (standardized regression coefficients) except otherwise labeled. Sex is coded as 0 = Male; 1 = Female.

\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .05$ ; †  $p < .1$ .

As shown in Table 2, both attachment anxiety ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $t(372) = -4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and avoidance ( $\beta = -.41$ ,  $t(372) = -9.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ) negatively predicted Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction, indicating that, as hypothesized, secure individuals tend to rate highest on the outcome variable. Interestingly, attachment avoidance ( $sr^2 = .16$ ) predicted much more variance than anxiety ( $sr^2 = .04$ ), implying that individuals low on avoidance, i.e. anxious individuals would score higher than avoidant individuals and fearful individuals. There was also a significant gender effect ( $sr^2 = .03$ ), with males scoring higher than females.

Attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $t(372) = 6.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and avoidance ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $t(372) = 8.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were both positively related to Relationship Discomfort, signifying that the fearful attachment style was most closely related to the variable. Also, attachment avoidance ( $sr^2 = .14$ ) predicted about twice as much variance than anxiety ( $sr^2 = .08$ ), implying that avoidant individuals rated higher than anxious individuals.

The anxious attachment style was closely associated to Relationship Preoccupation as attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $t(372) = 6.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $sr^2 = .09$ ) was positively related, and attachment avoidance ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $t(372) = -4.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $sr^2 = .05$ ) negatively related to the variable. Sex was also a significant predictor ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(374) = -4.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $sr^2 = .04$ ), with males being more preoccupied in their romantic relationships.

As in the case of Relationship Discomfort, both attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(372) = 6.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and attachment avoidance ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(372) = 5.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) positively predicted Relationship Depression, signifying that fearful individuals tend to rate highest here too. Males were also more likely to be depressed in their relationships ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t(374) = -3.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Nevertheless, the gender effect was still relatively marginal ( $sr^2 = .02$ ).

As shown in the lower portion of Table 2, of the attachment dimensions, only attachment anxiety predicted Seeking Support significantly ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $t(372) = 3.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $sr^2 = .03$ ). Contrary to expectations, this means that anxious individuals are more likely to seek support. There was a significant gender effect ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $t(374) = 4.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $sr^2 = .04$ ), with females seeking more support. Interestingly, attachment anxiety also predicted Self Criticism significantly,  $\beta = .40$ ,  $t(372) = 8.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, it was observed that attachment anxiety was a far better predictor for Self Criticism ( $sr^2 = .16$ ) than for Seeking Support ( $sr^2 = .03$ ).

Surprisingly, neither sex nor the attachment dimensions provided a significant model in predicting for Positive Attitude,  $F(3, 372) = .91$ ,  $p = .34$ . Secure (and even anxious) individuals tend to score higher on Active Problem Solving as only attachment avoidance was a significant predictor,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t(372) = -2.42$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, the amount of variance predicted was still weak ( $sr^2 = .02$ ).

Anxious individuals were likely to vent their emotions most since attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .21, t(372) = 4.05, p < .001; sr^2 = .04$ ) predicted Venting of Emotions positively while attachment avoidance was negatively related ( $\beta = -.13, t(372) = -2.60, p < .05; sr^2 = .01$ ). Women were found to report a higher frequency in venting their emotions during stressful times ( $\beta = .17, t(374) = 3.36, p < .01; sr^2 = .03$ ).

Only attachment avoidance significantly predicted Problem Avoidance,  $\beta = .14, t(372) = 2.63, p < .01$ . Nevertheless, the amount of variance predicted was quite weak ( $sr^2 = .02$ ).

For Social Withdrawal, there was a significant positive relationship with both attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .22, t(372) = 4.35, p < .001$ ) and attachment avoidance ( $\beta = .12, t(372) = 2.34, p < .05$ ). However, since there was a marginal amount of variance predicted by attachment avoidance ( $sr^2 = .01$ ), it could be assumed that Social Withdrawal was mainly predicted by attachment anxiety so that both fearful and anxious individuals would tend to rate high compared to others.

### Partial Correlations

Partial correlations (controlling for sex of participant) were computed to better understand the interrelationships between the study variables. Relationships between attachment dimensions and the other variables were not included since these have already been reported above.

**Table 3 Partial correlations (controlling for sex) between the study variables (N = 377)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction	-										
2. Relationship Discomfort	-.39*	-									
3. Relationship Preoccupation	.38*	.06	-								
4. Relationship Depression	-.31*	.50*	.24*	-							
5. Seeking Support	-.04	.14**	.12***	.07	-						
6. Self Criticism	-.16**	.29*	.19*	.25*	.22*	-					
7. Positive Attitude	.13**	-.04	-.04	-.12***	.14**	-.09	-				
8. Active Problem Solving	.25*	-.02	.16***	-.05	.21*	.09	.51*	-			
9. Venting of Emotions	.03	.10	.17**	.13**	.47*	.38*	-.05	.16**	-		
10. Problem Avoidance	.03	.02	-.01	.07	.11***	.03	.18*	.01	.06	-	
11. Social Withdrawal	-.04	.24*	.17**	.22*	-.07	.40*	-.14**	.06	.21*	.06	-

\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .05$

As shown in Table 3, Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction was negatively associated to Relationship Depression ( $r = -.31, p < .001$ ) but positively associated to Relationship Preoccupation ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ). This is surprising since there was a positive association between Relationship Preoccupation and Relationship Depression ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ), even if that relationship is comparatively weaker than in the case of Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction. Furthermore, while there was a significant positive association between Active Problem Solving and Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction ( $r = .25, p < .001$ ), the latter did not associate significantly with Seeking Support ( $r = -.04, ns$ ).

A strong relationship between Relationship Discomfort and Relationship Depression ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ) was observed; also, both variables were significantly associated with Self Criticism and Social Withdrawal ( $ps < .001$ ). Seeking Support significantly associated with both Self Criticism ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ) and Venting of Emotions ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ). Moreover, even if Seeking Support was not related to Social Withdrawal ( $r = -.07, ns$ ), it is worth noting that Social Withdrawal too was significantly associated with Self Criticism ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ) and Venting of Emotions ( $r = .21, p < .001$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

Results from the present study support the view that attachment theory provides a coherent framework to study young adults' romantic relationships and indicate that individual differences in relational aspects of the self and coping strategies are indeed present. In general, most of the hypotheses were supported. The results are discussed below, with findings relating to each attachment style presented first followed by those relating to interesting interactions between the study variables.

Secure individuals scored highest on Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction, supporting the hypothesis that those with a secure attachment style tend to view themselves as capable romantic partners and are usually satisfied with their relationships. Low scores on Relationship Discomfort and Relationship Depression provide additional support to this view. Secure individuals were also expected to use problem-focused strategies most. Results provided only partial support for this. Indeed, they were likely to use Active Problem Solving in times of stress but interestingly anxious individuals were also found to utilize the latter. Moreover, anxious individuals were even more prone to seek support when compared to secure individuals. These findings are further supported by the following: A significant association was observed between Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction and Active Problem Solving ( $r = .25, p < .001$ ) but no such association was found between the former and Seeking Support ( $r = -.04, ns$ ). Finally, results also indicated that secure individuals displayed low tendencies in using emotion-focused coping. Thus, findings seem to indicate that even if secure individuals tend to use problem-focused strategies in coping with relationship stressors, anxious individuals display an equally high tendency to do so. Possible reasons for this are discussed below.

Consistent with hypotheses, anxious individuals were found to score highest on Relationship Preoccupation and displayed high likelihood in using coping strategies involving discharge of emotions. Along with fearful individuals, they were also found to score highly on Self Criticism. This could be due to the negative models of the self held by those individuals. Contrary to initial expectations, anxious individuals (together with fearful individuals) showed a higher tendency to use Social Withdrawal as a coping strategy as compared to avoidant individuals. This observation becomes even more intriguing since anxious individuals were also the ones to show high tendencies in seeking support and use Active Problem Solving. Even if these findings do not meet initial predictions, they do point towards the view that anxious individuals seem to depict an ambivalent coping style. Such a way of coping does not appear to be unusual in this case since some studies have also been reporting such a trend (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; Torquati & Vazsonyi, 1999). Present findings also provide additional support to this ambivalent coping style: Results showed that even if Social Withdrawal and Seeking Support were conceptually unrelated, both were significantly associated with Self Criticism and Venting of Emotions (two coping strategies anxious individuals tend to use).

As predicted, avoidant individuals rated relatively low on Relationship Preoccupation since they strive to keep their attachment system deactivated. However, the hypothesis that avoidant individuals would display greater use of cognitive-focused coping strategies could not be verified since Positive Attitude was not significantly accounted for by the attachment dimensions. The hypothesis that avoidant individuals would be more prone to use coping strategies involving attempts to lessen emotional distress was in turn only partially supported: Avoidant individuals (along with fearful individuals) indeed tend to make more use of Problem Avoidance. However, avoidant individuals were not the ones who scored highest on Social Withdrawal. Such an observation might be accounted for by the positive model of self held by avoidant individuals. It could be that avoidant individuals make use of Problem Avoidance as a defensive strategy by avoiding situations which may prove threatening to the self. This could in turn be a potential reason why avoidant individuals display low tendencies for Social Withdrawal: Even if they tend to evade threatening situations, they might not want to withdraw from people because such behavior could be negatively appraised by others. Finally, there is also some evidence indicating that avoidant individuals tend to display more Relationship Discomfort than anxious and secure individuals (but not more than fearful individuals). This is consistent with literature which shows that avoidant individuals do feel tension in stressful relationship situations (e.g., Kim, 2006) even if they tend to restrict its expression.

Congruent with proposed hypotheses, individuals with a fearful attachment style scored highest on Relationship Discomfort and Relationship Depression. The strong association between the two constructs ( $r = .50, p < .001$ ) provides additional support for the above.

Moreover, the association of both of these measures with Self Criticism and Social Withdrawal leads to infer that fearful individuals might also be more inclined to use these coping strategies. Fearful individuals (along with anxious individuals) were also prone to use Problem Avoidance in coping with stress. Such usage of both hyperactivating and deactivating strategies is coherent with existing literature: Fearful individuals tend to vacillate between the two secondary strategies since none of them succeeds in achieving a sense of felt security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Furthermore, results also indicate that fearful individuals might be most vulnerable to health risk; they tend to be more prone to depression and show the greatest need to withdraw socially. This observation is in line with, and provides additional empirical support to current literature on the fearful attachment style (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Partial correlations indicated a significant association between Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction and Relationship Preoccupation ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ). While the former was negatively associated to Relationship Depression ( $r = -.31, p < .001$ ), Relationship Preoccupation had a significant positive association ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ) with Relationship Depression. A possible explanation for such interrelations is discussed as follows: Since attachment avoidance was a better predictor than anxiety for Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction, this leads to suggest that anxious individuals tend to score higher than avoidant and fearful on the above measure. Therefore, anxious individuals still seem to score relatively high on Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction, implying that they too tend to view themselves as capable romantic partners and report being relatively satisfied with their romantic relationships. Such a view that anxious individuals have of themselves is not rare and on the contrary has been reported in many self-reports studies (see Pietromonaco et al., 2004). Consequently, this provides reliable support to the association reported between Relationship Preoccupation and the latter.

However, such a possibility cannot explain why Relationship Depression was negatively associated to Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction while being also positively associated to Relationship Preoccupation.

Results indicate that, in general, men tend to score higher on Relationship Esteem and Satisfaction, Relationship Preoccupation and Relationship Depression while women had a higher tendency to use Seeking Support and Venting of Emotions as coping strategies. Such findings are in line with studies in which women are reported to seek more support in stressful situations (e.g., Taylor et al., 2000), and men portrayed as less emotional (Bem, 1993) and more dismissing (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). However, present findings also indicate that men tend to show more Relationship Preoccupation and are also more likely to feel depressed in their romantic relationships than women. This is inconsistent with classical social roles since women are the ones who are usually more prone to depression and for whom relationships carry special significance (see Carnelley et al., 1994). Yet, one possible explanation for such observations could be that men may be preoccupied about their relationships (thus feeling depressed too) but nonetheless tend to restrict their emotional expressions, resulting in being seen as more dismissing by their relationship partners.

Even if much care was taken to obtain a relatively representative sample of the university's young adult population, the extent to which the present findings can be generalized to a broader population of young adults is debatable.

Self-reports on coping strategies are limited as people have to consciously calculate their coping behaviors: Their report may not always reflect actual coping tendencies. Furthermore, reporting might be further crippled by social desirability of participants (see Pietromonaco et al., 2004). However, though findings may not be totally safe from response bias, many outcomes were in line with earlier research and the attachment literature, providing partial support for the results of the current study. Also, since the attachment dimensions failed to provide an accurate model to measure Positive Attitude, the hypotheses regarding avoidant individuals' inclination to use cognitive-focused coping strategies could not be verified. There is a need to investigate the ambivalent coping style observed in anxious individuals at a deeper level. More empirical evidence is also required to understand why avoidant individuals show a tendency to avoid threatening situations but still do not prefer to withdraw socially. Finally, even if the gender differences in the present study were only exploratory, interesting and contrasting findings were reported and these might as well require more research attention.

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