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Attachment and Positive Engagement Following Relationship Conflict

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ATTACHMENT AND POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT
FOLLOWING RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

A Thesis Presented

by

JANA M. LEMBKE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

ATTACHMENT AND POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT
FOLLOWING RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

MAY 2015

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We investigated spouses' ability to engage in a positive interaction following relationship conflict, a process that involves skills in *recovering* from distress and *reconnecting* with one's partner. The quality of positive interactions was hypothesized to vary as a function of attachment and have implications for marital satisfaction. Newlywed couples discussed a conflict in their relationship followed by a discussion of positive aspects of their relationship. We hypothesized and found that greater attachment avoidance in husbands predicted less positive behavior in both partners during the positive interaction. Additionally, wives' positive behavior predicted both partners' relationship satisfaction, even above and beyond caregiving and careseeking behavior during the conflict. The findings point to the importance of examining not only how couples discuss conflicts, but also how they behave in the aftermath of those discussions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF TABLES	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Attachment as an Affect Regulation System	2
Positive Interactions and Marital Satisfaction.....	6
The Present Study	8
Hypotheses	10
2. METHOD	12
Participants	12
Measures	12
Study Procedure	15
3. RESULTS	16
Analytic Procedure	16
Descriptive Statistics	16
Hypothesis Testing	17
4. DISCUSSION	20
Interpretation of findings	20
Contributions	22
Limitations	25

Future Directions	25
Conclusion	27
REFERENCES	37

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Intraclass correlations for positive behavior subscales	28
2. Means and standard deviations for predictors and outcome variables	29
3. Correlations among predictors	30
4. Summary of results	31

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Positive Behavior Coding Scheme.....	32

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The need to form and maintain bonds with others – the process of attachment – is evident throughout the human lifespan and serves important psychological functions (Bowlby, 1979; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In adults, the attachment system helps romantic partners regulate negative feelings in the face of real or perceived attachment threats (Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015), and empirical work provides support for affective processes in developing attachment bonds (Beckes, Simpson, & Erickson, 2010). The ability to regulate affect in the context of relationship interactions is considered adaptive because it promotes emotional and behavioral responses (e.g., effective coping with distress) that should benefit the individual and the relationship as a whole. In fact, insecure attachment, which is characterized by dysregulated reactions to distress and suboptimal strategies of soliciting and providing care (Beck et al., 2013), consistently predicts lower relationship satisfaction¹ (e.g., Simpson, 1990).

A primary objective of this work is to examine the association between newlywed couples' positive behavior following a relationship conflict and both partners' attachment styles. We conceptualize attachment as an index of affect regulation *within a dyadic context*, a distinction that is important because relationship interactions may require self-regulation as well as understanding and managing the partner's emotions and overarching relationship goals. Secondly, we aim to analyze the contribution of post-conflict positive behavior to relationship satisfaction after taking into account related variables such as

¹ The association between attachment insecurity and dissatisfaction is robust and holds over time (Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999) and above and beyond the influence of other personality characteristics (Nofle & Shaver, 2006; Shaver & Brennan, 1992).

attachment and behavior during the conflict itself. This objective is important because relationships research tends to focus on *either* how couples discuss conflicts *or* how they show love and support, but little research has studied the quality of behavior post-conflict as a predictor of marital satisfaction.

Attachment as an Affect Regulation System

Individuals differ in their affective responses to relationship stressors depending on their underlying beliefs and relationship goals, which are indicated by attachment style (see Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015). People with a more anxious attachment style desire closeness and reassurance in their relationships, but often fear that others will be rejecting or unavailable. As a result, they tend to be hypervigilant to potential relationship threats and show intense and exaggerated emotional reactions in response to distress. On the other hand, more avoidantly-attached people are not comfortable depending on or opening up to their partners and try to protect themselves from negative feelings by maintaining independence. Their distancing goals are associated with dampened emotionality and a deactivation response to the threat (for instance, withdrawing from a stressful discussion and overly relying on the self). Individuals with secure attachment – low anxiety and low avoidance – are able to use their partner as a “safe haven” during times of stress and apply different regulation strategies flexibly and in alignment with what the situation requires (Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015). Attachment orientations, therefore, serve as an indicator of how people will construe and respond to stressful relationship situations.

Affect regulation during couples’ interactions. The attachment system primarily functions to regulate negative affect during times of social distress, such as

when close others are perceived as unapproachable or their responsiveness is uncertain. As a result, most of the research linking attachment to behavior patterns in couples has focused on conflict interactions, where the source of distress (interpersonal conflict) directly activates the attachment bond. For instance, Beck and colleagues (2013) found that the ways in which partners seek and provide support during a conflict discussion are associated with the different affect regulation strategies implicated in attachment, and that the *combination* of attachment styles within the dyad mattered in terms of interaction quality. In fact, conflict resolution and communication styles have been found to partially mediate the association between attachment insecurity and relationship dissatisfaction (Cann, Norman, Welbourne, & Calhoun, 2008; Sierau & Herzberg, 2012; Brassard, Lussier, & Shaver, 2009).

Fewer studies have considered connections between attachment-related affect regulation and positive interactions in romantic relationships. The process of capitalization (sharing a personal success and receiving an enthusiastic response) is one type of positive interaction harmed by distancing regulatory strategies, such as those that characterize avoidantly-attached individuals. Specifically, individuals higher in avoidance tend to underestimate their partner's responsiveness to their own disclosures of good news (Gosnell and Gable, 2013). Furthermore, avoidantly-attached individuals act less interested when hearing their *partner* share good news, especially if the disclosing partner is more anxiously attached (Shallcross et al., 2011). We posit that capitalization interactions threaten avoidant people's need for independence, and so they avoid getting too close by downplaying their partner's responsiveness as well as behaving less responsively. These behaviors may help avoidant people regulate their emotions and

maintain their relationship goals; however, given that active and constructive responding is linked to greater intimacy and daily marital satisfaction (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004), avoidant people's regulatory strategies can ultimately harm the relationship.

Beyond capitalization, new research points to how attachment influences positive behavior directly following relationship conflict. Salvatore and colleagues (2011) found that in a "cool down" task following a conflict discussion, more insecurely attached individuals had trouble recovering from the conflict. In other words, they were more likely to reengage in negative behavior or passively sabotage the interaction by failing to interact with the partner. Conversely, individuals rated as securely attached recovered from conflict better and tended to have partners that recovered better (i.e., they frequently initiated or elaborated on a discussion of positive relationship aspects). This finding suggests a contagion effect whereby a secure partner's positive actions may be adopted by the other partner. Importantly, one's partner's ability to recover from conflict had implications for one's *own* feelings about the relationship. When partners of insecurely attached individuals recovered from conflict better, the insecure individuals felt more positive about their relationship and those couples were less likely to have broken up two years later, even after controlling for both partners' relationship commitment, observer-rated dyadic negative affect, and relationship length. These findings demonstrate that partners who enact positive behaviors can buffer against negative outcomes – such as relationship unhappiness and dissolution – that insecurely attached people may experience more often.

Salvatore and colleagues (2011) conceptualized conflict recovery as a self-regulatory process involving the ability to effectively disengage from or

compartmentalize conflict discussions. We extend this present definition, which focuses on the regulation of one's inner thoughts and emotions, by emphasizing the dyadic regulation component of conflict recovery. Specifically, it is important for couples not only to downregulate negativity following a conflict, but also to actively restore love and harmony. We propose that transitioning from conflict discussions to relationship-enhancing discussions draws on two types of affect regulation skills: a) calming down from the conflict (conflict recovery), and b) approaching the partner in a positive way (reconnecting). We expect that this process varies both within individuals (e.g., depending on the distress associated with a given conflict) as well as between individuals (e.g., as a function of affect regulation skills and strategies).

Attachment and the “recover and reconnect” process. Conflict recovery – and by extension, reconnecting after conflict – is a self-regulatory process that should be related to patterns of dyadic regulation, which comprise the attachment system (Salvatore et al., 2011). The process of transitioning from conflict to positive interactions is underexplored yet important in the context of attachment theory. First, this process may activate different aspects of attachment goals and regulatory strategies than those used solely in positive or negative contexts. Second, various attachment behaviors are likely to be involved, and theory suggests that the distinct affect regulation strategies used by anxious and avoidant individuals will interfere with recovering, reconnecting, or both. For example, more avoidantly-attached individuals – due to their preferences for self-reliance and avoiding distress – may be less effective at reconnecting. That is, they may have difficulty approaching and responding to their partner positively following conflict. On the other hand, individuals with a more anxious orientation may struggle with the

recovery aspect, or self-soothing their distress. Considering these theoretically-expected attachment behaviors, along with patterns observed in positive and negative contexts studied separately, I expect that more avoidant individuals will show less positive behavior in the positive interaction. The deficits in responsiveness and emotional openness that are associated with attachment avoidance would seem to counteract the goal of reconnecting and interacting positively with one's partner following a relationship stressor. I expect no association between attachment anxiety and behavior during the positive interaction, as attachment theory suggests that anxious individuals are motivated to regain a "safe haven" within the relationship and thus are more likely to engage in positive behaviors that elicit the partner's attention and reaffirm the relationship².

Positive Interactions and Marital Satisfaction

Given that interpersonal conflicts are common and the most distressing daily events in spouses' lives (Bolger, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989), there is merit in understanding why some people can more effectively heal their negativity and reconnect after instances of conflict. We propose that poor affect regulation (i.e., attachment insecurity) contributes to relationship dissatisfaction by undermining the potential for restoring felt security and intimacy when opportunities for positive connection occur shortly after conflict. As Salvatore and colleagues (2011) showed, it was the partners of well-regulated individuals that experienced positive relationship emotions. While the mechanisms responsible for this association have yet to be tested, there is theoretical

² Research on dating couples by Collins and Feeney (2000) has shown that greater attachment anxiety is associated with more negative behavior and reduced responsiveness and support in response to disclosures of a personal problem. However, I do not expect a statistically significant effect of anxiety on behavior in positive contexts, where the goal is not to provide care but rather to connect with the partner.

support for why behavior post-conflict should impact relationship satisfaction. Theory on positive emotions states that positive affect can undo the damaging effects of negative affect while also lessening the impact of future distress, such as distress that arises during conflict (Garland, Fredrickson, Kring, Meyer, & Penn, 2010). In fact, Johnson and colleagues (2005) found that husbands' positive affect (humor, affection, interest/enthusiasm) during a marital problem-solving discussion buffered against the adverse effect of his negative communication skills on wives' satisfaction. These results highlight positive emotions and behavior as a protective factor for relationships because they may help to remedy residual negativity (Fredrickson, 1998) and even lead to enhanced relationship satisfaction as partners make an effort to recognize each others' strengths. Conversely, a failure to "recover and reconnect" following conflict may hamper people's ability to affirm the relationship when needed most, ultimately harming the relationship.

Everyday positive interactions, such as conflict recovery, are a major avenue by which couples can build intimacy and strengthen their relationships. In fact, minor daily positive engagement also serves as a resource for couples to tap into more positive affect during conflict when it occurs (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Some evidence even suggests that positive interactions contribute more to relationship satisfaction than behavior in negative, conflictual interactions. Graber and colleagues (2011) found that displays of affection during a conversation where partners shared loving feelings uniquely predicted marital satisfaction 15 months later, rather than behaviors displayed during a conflict resolution task. Furthermore, showing love and support in positive contexts may be even more important than how couples support each other during the bad times: one study

found that supportive capitalization exchanges were more strongly related to relationship stability and well-being than providing support in the context of negative events (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2007). Collectively, these findings point to the importance of expressing positive relationship emotions and behaviors for marital satisfaction.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which own and partner attachment predict positive behavior following relationship conflict. Furthermore, we examine the relative contribution of post-conflict positivity to marital satisfaction, even after taking into account individual differences in attachment orientation and attachment behavior during conflict, both of which have been shown to be associated with relationship satisfaction (Brassard, Lussier, & Shaver, 2009; Cann, Norman, Welbourne, & Calhoun, 2008; Sierau & Herzberg, 2012).

Distinctions from prior work. In our study, newlywed couples engage in a conflict interaction (a negative context that threatens relationship security) followed by a positive interaction during which they discuss what they like about each other and their relationship as a whole (a positive context with potential to restore love and felt security). Our design differs from the small number of studies that include both positive and negative relationship interactions because our task stipulates greater and more active positive engagement than simply “cooling down” from conflict (Salvatore et al., 2011). Moreover, the fact that no instruction is given to mentally prepare participants for the positive task (as in Graber et al., 2011) allows us to observe their naturally occurring recovery from the conflict and spontaneous positive behavior as they interact. Our

unobtrusive method allows us to capture partners' behavioral and emotional portraits that likely reflect those present in their real-world discussions.

Our study extends Salvatore and colleagues' pioneering work on conflict recovery in several ways. First, it is important to recognize that their assessments of attachment were behavioral observations in infancy, which were available only for one partner in each dyad. In other words, their work examined the extent to which one partner's *infant-caregiver* attachment bond shaped his or her interactions in an adult romantic relationship. In the present study, we extend this earlier work by examining adult attachment, specifically, attachment towards the current partner (spouse). Furthermore, we examine attachment not as a continuum from "secure" to "insecure," as was done in the Salvatore et al. study, but instead distinguish between avoidant and anxious attachment insecurity. Distinguishing between these two types of insecurity will provide a finer-grained picture of how the affect regulation strategies associated with each attachment style contribute to positive behavior. In addition, the present work moves beyond the earlier study by taking into account both partners' attachment styles. Attachment processes operate within a dyadic context, and therefore the partner's attachment (and associated ability to regulate affect) is also likely to contribute to relationship behavior and outcomes (Beck et al., 2013).

The present work adds new knowledge regarding behavioral factors that contribute to relationship quality. Using the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), Salvatore and colleagues found that having a partner better at conflict recovery was associated with the other partner feeling more satisfied in the relationship, and we expect to find similar results using a different measure of satisfaction (the Dyadic

Satisfaction subscale of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976). Most notably, the present study examines the degree to which positive behavior following conflict was associated with relationship satisfaction *over and above the degree to which constructive behavior occurred during the conflict*, an aspect not included in Salvatore and colleagues' work. Understanding the relative impact of partners' behavior in positive versus conflictual contexts on satisfaction is valuable for informing marital interventions, which might achieve greater success by teaching couples to better cultivate and express positive feelings towards each other following disagreements.

Hypotheses

During a conflict discussion, better affect regulation (secure attachment) is associated with the ability to turn to one's partner for support and also to provide support to a distressed partner (Beck et al., 2013). Likewise, in the instances *following* conflict, we propose that secure individuals will capitalize on their regulatory competencies to achieve more effective recovery and reconnection with their partner. Couple members' behaviors in both the conflict and positive interactions are conceptualized as observable correlates of affect regulatory ability within a relationships context. I use behavioral coding schemes to capture these manifestations of affect regulation in real-time. Below I summarize the hypotheses for this study:

H1: Due to their self-protection goals and tendency to mentally disengage from distress, individuals higher in attachment avoidance (but not anxiety) will display less positive behavior in the post-conflict positive interaction. It is also expected that individuals who have partners who are higher in attachment avoidance will display less

positive behavior, given the difficulty of responding to and engaging with avoidant partners.

H2a: Given that positive interactions appear to be an important pathway for maintaining satisfied relationships, I hypothesize that greater positive engagement in the positive interaction will predict greater relationship satisfaction in both partners.

H2b: In alignment with findings that behavior in positive contexts may be even more important than behavior in negative contexts (Graber et al., 2011; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2007), I hypothesize that positive behavior in the positive interaction will predict relationship satisfaction above and beyond the effects of both partners' attachment-related caregiving and careseeking during the actual conflict. In other words, positive engagement in the aftermath of the conflict will explain variability in couples' satisfaction beyond that explained by more (or less) positive attachment behaviors during the conflict.

H2c: Positive interaction styles during conflict resolution and recovery have been found to buffer against the negative effects of attachment insecurity on relationship outcomes (Sierau & Herzberg, 2012; Salvatore et al., 2011). Extending these findings, I hypothesize that positive behavior in the positive interaction will predict satisfaction above and beyond the effects of both partners' self-reported attachment.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study came from a larger sample of 225 newlywed heterosexual couples in the Massachusetts area. Individuals were selected to participate if they were between the ages of 18 and 50, in their first marriage, and did not have children at the time of their initial lab visit. The larger study consisted of three lab visits 12-18 months apart, though these analyses are concerned only with the first lab visit (“Time 1”) which occurred no more than 7 months from a couple’s date of marriage. Participants for these analyses ($n = 175$) were selected from the larger group if they had completed a positive interaction at both the first and second lab sessions. Within this sample, couples’ average relationship length from the time they began dating was 62.06 months ($SD = 37.02$ months). The sample was predominately white (93% of wives and 95% of husbands).

Measures

Attachment style. Partners completed the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) with respect to their spouse (instead of romantic partners in general). This measure serves as a self-reported index of attachment-related affect regulation strategies. The measure includes a subscale for attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry that my spouse won’t care about me as much as I care about him or her”) as well as avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show my partner how I feel deep down”). All items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly).

Marital satisfaction. We used the 10-item Dyadic Satisfaction subscale³ of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Partners indicate their agreement (0 = always disagree, 5 = always agree) on various relationship aspects such as handling family finances, household tasks, and amount of time spent together. Scores are summed across items, where higher values indicate greater relationship satisfaction.

Positive interaction. A novel behavioral coding scheme was developed to assess positive behavior during a positive interaction following conflict. In this study, positive behavior serves as an index of spouses' ability to recover from distress and restore relationship well-being; in other words, it is a behavioral correlate of affect regulation. In constructing this measure, we drew from several existing coding schemes in order to capture positive interpersonal behavior in the unique context of a positive interaction occurring shortly after a negative one. The coding schemes that informed our work included Maisel, Gable, & Strachman's (2008) Responsive Behaviors coding scheme; the Specific Affect Coding Scheme (SPAFF; Coan & Gottman, 2007); and Salvatore and colleagues' (2011) Conflict Recovery coding scheme. The present coding scheme (see Figure 1) assesses the extent to which couple members evidence *validation* (e.g., recognizing positive qualities in the partner/relationship); *responsiveness* (e.g., building on the partner's statements and conveying appreciation of compliments); and *affection* (e.g., physical affection such as holding hands and nonverbal affection such as saying "I love you"). Negative behavior, such as bringing up relationship problems or malicious sarcasm, was also coded.

³ According to Spanier (1976), the subscales of the DAS can be used without compromising reliability and validity.

Positive interactions were coded by two research assistants trained in the coding scheme. To determine agreement between coders, the intraclass correlation coefficients (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) were calculated for each positive behavior subscale using the scores of one-third of the interactions coded. In general, there was high reliability between coders at both time points (see Table 1 for interclass correlation coefficients).

Each of the behavior subscales was scored on a 0-4 scale, where higher scores indicated greater *meaningfulness* and *frequency* of the behaviors. In the analysis, validation, responsiveness, and affection were grouped together to form a “total positivity” variable in which the scores for each subscale were summed and averaged for each person. Negativity was not included in the analysis given its low rate of occurrence and inherent difference from the positive behaviors that were of primary interest.

Conflict interaction. Attachment-related caregiving and careseeking behavior during the conflict were coded using the Secure Base Scoring System (SBSS; Crowell et al., 1998, 2002). Five subscales captured caregiving, or secure base support: interest in the partner; recognition of distress; interpretation of distress; responsiveness to distress; and a summary score of global quality of caregiving. Careseeking was likewise assessed via five subscales: strength and clarity of the distress signal; maintenance of a clear distress signal; approach to the attachment figure; ability to be comforted; and a summary score of global quality of careseeking. All subscales were scored from 1 to 7, with lower scores indicating poorer demonstrations of the behavior and higher scores reflecting better caregiving or careseeking.

In the analyses we averaged participants’ scores across the 5 subscales for caregiving as well as for careseeking to create a composite measure of their overall score

for each. For all caregiving subscales, interrater reliability was high (across all 5 subscales, intraclass correlation coefficients ranged from .94 to .87). There was also consistent agreement between raters on the careseeking subscales (intraclass correlation coefficients ranging from .92 to .94 across all subscales).

Study Procedure

Couples attended their Time 1 lab visit within the first 7 months of their marriage. Sessions lasted about 3.5 hours. Couple members completed questionnaires and engaged in a 15 minute discussion of an important area of unresolved disagreement in their relationship⁴. Approximately 1 hour after the conflict discussion, they also were asked to talk for 6 minutes about what they liked about their partner and their relationship. Before the positive interaction, the experimenter administered the following instructions: “We would like you to have a discussion about positive aspects of your relationship. I’m going to leave the room, and we would like you to take turns sharing what you like about your partner and your relationship. Because this discussion is only 6 minutes long, please be sure both of you have a chance to talk.” Both the conflict and positive interactions were videotaped for future coding.

⁴ Participants also provided saliva samples during the session, a component that is not a focus of the current study (see Beck et al., 2013).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

To test hypotheses regarding links between attachment and positive behavior, as well as links between positive behavior and relationship satisfaction, I used hierarchical linear modeling to take into account the nonindependence of couple members' responses, with separate equations for husbands and wives (Lyons & Sayer, 2005).

Analytic Procedure

For each hypothesis test, a two-level model was used to take into account individual responses (Level 1) nested within couples (Level 2). All models controlled for both actor and partner effects. For example, in testing attachment as a predictor, we included husbands' and wives' avoidance and anxiety in the model.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 reports the means and standard deviations of the focal variables, and Table 3 reports correlations among variables.

Attachment style. As a whole, this sample showed relatively low levels of attachment avoidance ($M = 1.82$, $SD = .65$ for husbands; $M = 1.58$, $SD = .56$ for wives) and anxiety ($M = 2.52$, $SD = .86$ for husbands; $M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.01$ for wives), indicating relatively secure attachment across the sample.

Marital satisfaction. Overall, couple members reported high satisfaction within their marriage ($M = 42.50$, $SD = 3.66$ for husbands; $M = 42.60$, $SD = 3.42$ for wives).

Behavior during the positive interaction. On average, husbands and wives engaged in similar levels of positive behavior: scores were highly correlated between

partners, $r(174) = .648, p < .001$ and were similar for husbands and wives ($M = 3.57, SD = 2.07$ for husbands; $M = 4.06, SD = 2.19$ for wives).

Behavior during conflict. Overall, husbands and wives displayed constructive caregiving behavior ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.08$ for husbands; $M = 6.04, SD = .86$, for wives). Similarly, on average, husbands and wives were fairly constructive in how they sought support from their partner ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.18$, for husbands; $M = 5.55, SD = .94$, for wives). Partners' scores were moderately correlated for caregiving, $r(171) = .373, p < .001$, and highly correlated for careseeking, $r(171) = .612, p < .001$.

Hypotheses Testing

See Table 4 for a summary of all effects.

H1: Is avoidance associated with less positivity following conflict? I

hypothesized that even when taking both partners' attachment styles into account, greater avoidance in one partner would be uniquely associated with dampened positive engagement in both individuals. Results for husbands supported our predictions: husbands' avoidance was associated with less positivity in his own behavior, $B = -.326, t(169) = -3.482, p < .001$, and in his wives' behavior, $B = -.271, t(169) = -2.808, p = .006$. Wives' avoidance, however, did not significantly predict her own or her husband's positive behavior.

H2a: How is behavior in the positive interaction related to satisfaction? I

hypothesized that greater positive behavior in the aftermath of a conflict would be associated with higher relationship satisfaction for both partners. This hypothesis was supported for wives – her positive behavior in the post-conflict interaction was significantly related to her own satisfaction, $B = .05, t(172) = 3.288, p = .001$, as well as

her husband's satisfaction, $B = .047$, $t(172) = 2.897$, $p = .004$. Husbands' positive behavior did not predict their own or their wives' satisfaction. There was only one effect that was unexpected but did not reach a conventional significance level: husbands' positive behavior showed a nonsignificant tendency to predict *less* satisfaction in wives, $B = -.030$, $t(172) = -1.844$, $p = .067$. These results indicate that wives' ability to show validation, responsiveness, and affection post-conflict was highly linked to both partner's feelings of satisfaction.

H2b and H2c: Positive behavior will uniquely predict satisfaction. I

hypothesized that positive behavior in the positive interaction would predict relationship satisfaction above and beyond the effect of caregiving and careseeking during the conflict (H2b). Caregiving and careseeking were run in separate equations because an individual's behavior as either a support provider or recipient may differentially affect own or partner satisfaction. Both husbands' and wives' variables were included in the models ($n = 171$ couples for both models – four couples had missing or incomplete conflict behavior data). Results showed that even after accounting for the effect of caregiving during conflict, wives' positivity was significantly related to both her own and her husbands' relationship satisfaction, $B = .044$, $t(165) = 2.925$, $p = .004$, for wives' satisfaction; $B = .043$, $t(165) = 2.624$, $p = .010$, for husbands' satisfaction. The same findings emerged when taking careseeking into account: wives' positivity was associated with her own satisfaction, $B = .042$, $t(165) = 2.805$, $p = .006$, as well as her husband's, $B = .039$, $t(165) = 2.406$, $p = .017$. We found an unexpected result when looking at husbands' positivity as a predictor of satisfaction: controlling for either caregiving or careseeking, greater positivity in husbands was related to significantly less satisfaction in

wives (for caregiving, $B = -.038$, $t(165) = -2.406$, $p = .017$; for careseeking, $B = -.036$, $t(165) = -2.266$, $p = .025$). These findings suggest that independently of how spouses interacted during a conflict, wives' ability to reengage positively afterwards is strongly related to both partners' feelings of satisfaction.

I also hypothesized that positive behavior would predict satisfaction over and above both partners' attachment (H2c). We found mixed support for this hypothesis. In alignment with our predictions, wives' greater positivity did predict her satisfaction above and beyond both partners' attachment, $B = .026$, $t(168) = 1.972$, $p = .05$. Mirroring results found in our other analyses, husbands' positive behavior had a significant but unexpectedly negative effect on wives' satisfaction when taking attachment into account, $B = .022$, $t(168) = -2.140$, $p = .034$.

Given the numerous mechanisms that may contribute to the robust association between attachment and relationship quality, it is not surprising that attachment insecurity had greater bearing on satisfaction than did positive behavior. Controlling for positive behavior, husbands' satisfaction appears sensitive to attachment avoidance in the dyad: both husbands' and wives' avoidance were significantly associated with less satisfaction in husbands, $B = -.199$, $t(168) = -4.898$, $p < .001$, for husbands' avoidance; $B = -.136$, $t(168) = -2.996$, $p = .003$, for wives' avoidance. While husbands' anxiety marginally predicted his own dissatisfaction, $B = -.056$, $t(168) = -1.923$, $p = .056$, there was no significant effect of husbands' attachment style on wives' satisfaction. Instead – controlling for the effect of both partners' positive behavior – wives' greater attachment anxiety, $B = -.090$, $t(168) = -3.690$, $p < .001$, and avoidance, $B = -.220$, $t(168) = -5.185$, $p < .001$, predicted her decreased satisfaction.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Individuals differ in the types of strategies used to cope with relationship stressors. Attachment style accounts for some of those differences, with noticeable consequences for how couple members engage with one another during conflict and their success at downregulating distress (Beck et al., 2013). Building on this idea, we aimed to understand the role of attachment-related regulatory strategies in helping partners move towards recovering and reconnecting in the aftermath of conflict. Secondly, we aimed to examine the link between partners' positive behavior and marital satisfaction.

Interpretation of Findings

Attachment styles and positive behavior. We hypothesized that attachment would play a role in the recover and reconnect process, given its implications for partners' relationship goals, strategies for regulating distress, and ways of communicating. Specifically, we expected that attachment avoidance would have an adverse effect on spouses' post-conflict positivity. Results for husbands supported this hypothesis: the more avoidantly-attached husbands were, the less positive behavior both partners showed. Given that neither wives' avoidance nor either spouses' attachment anxiety predicted positive behavior, these results point to the unique risk that avoidance in men poses to both spouses' ability to capitalize on positive interactions following a relationship conflict.

Our findings map onto theory-based expectations about male attachment avoidance as well as research that shows a negative effect of avoidance in positive interactions (e.g., capitalization exchanges). Perhaps wives' avoidance did not significantly predict positive behavior because avoidant tendencies in women are

balanced by female gender expectations or inclinations to share positive emotions to a greater extent.

Relative contribution of positive behavior to marital satisfaction. Despite its underrepresentation in published research, the process of transitioning from negative to positive relationship interactions is an arguably ordinary and widely experienced process, with potential to shape relationship quality. We hypothesized that positive behavior following conflict would be associated with greater relationship satisfaction for both partners. We found some support for this hypothesis: wives' positive behavior in the aftermath of conflict significantly predicted both partners' relationship satisfaction, even above and beyond behavior during the conflict itself. Perhaps wives' ability to reconnect with her partner following a relationship threat plays a greater role in restoring the felt security that both partners need to feel satisfied. In other words, it may be that wives' positive actions signal that "all is well", which reassures husbands and contributes to harmony in the relationship. Alternatively, it could be that wives' positivity elicits behaviors from her husband that cultivate an upward spiral of satisfaction for both spouses. More work is needed to pinpoint the specific mechanisms by which wives' ability to recover and reconnect shapes relationship outcomes. In any case, these findings do support other research (i.e., Graber et al., 2011; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2007) that demonstrates that how couples show love and responsiveness in positive interactions is more important to relationships than how they behave in negative contexts.

We also hypothesized that positive behavior would predict satisfaction above and beyond attachment. Results supported this prediction for wives: her positive behavior was significantly associated with her satisfaction, controlling for both partners'

attachment. Still, attachment insecurity remained a robust predictor of dissatisfaction, suggesting that many pathways from attachment to relationship outcomes exist.

Specifically, we found that controlling for the effect of both partners' positive behavior, wives' greater attachment anxiety and avoidance predicted her decreased satisfaction.

This result may be because insecure wives misread their husbands' behavior, contributing to her lower satisfaction. Alternatively, it could be that husbands' positive behavior (at least in this one interaction) is not enough to buffer against wives' attachment insecurity.

Unexpectedly, more positive behavior in husbands was related to less satisfaction in wives. This effect held across three different models controlling for either caregiving, careseeking, or attachment. It is possible that an extraneous variable is contributing to this result. Alternatively, because this result did not replicate in an exploratory analysis predicting Time 2 satisfaction from Time 2 positive behavior, it may be due to chance.

Contributions

In predicting relationship outcomes from behavior, research tends to focus on either positive or conflictual contexts. However, there is more to the story than just knowing how couples manage conflict and how they show love and support in positive interactions. In reality, relationship interactions are fluid and interconnected: how partners behave in a given context may depend on what happened in a prior interaction.

We sought to expand theory on relationship processes by examining how couple members move from conflict to positive interactions. Salvatore and colleagues' (2011) work was the first to examine the link between attachment and romantic partners' post-conflict "cool down" discussions. Unlike the present study, their research utilized attachment ratings in early childhood assessed via the Strange Situation procedure

(Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), and these measures were only available for only one partner in each dyad. Despite these differences, our results for attachment converge with their findings. Specifically, they found that greater attachment insecurity in target participants predicted worse recovery in terms of their own behavior and their partners' behavior, and we found the same pattern of results with husbands' avoidance predicting decreased positivity in both partners.

Given that anxiety and avoidance are characterized by different physiological and behavioral reactions to relationship distress (e.g., Beck et al., 2013), distinguishing between these two types of insecurity is important for understanding individual differences in the ability to recover and reconnect following conflict. Salvatore et al. did not find participant sex to moderate the link between attachment insecurity and conflict recovery, and this may be because any unique effects of gender were lost in combining attachment avoidance and anxiety as "attachment insecurity". Indeed, we found that male avoidance (but not any other gender/attachment combination) was associated with dampened positivity in both partners, suggesting that the regulatory strategies characterizing avoidance interact with or exacerbate male behavior tendencies in ways that uniquely predict less positivity.

In alignment with the prior work, we did find that the degree to which one's partner recovers from conflict predicts one's own relationship satisfaction. However, Salvatore and colleagues found this effect for both members of the dyad, and in our study it was only wives' greater positivity that predicted husbands' greater satisfaction. The difference in findings may be due to the different samples: while the prior work utilized a sample of young dating couples, participants in the present study are married couples in

which male and female behavior in relationship interactions may be more distinct and differentially important for satisfaction. Another way in which our findings diverge from the prior work is that, in addition to the partner effects, we found an actor effect such that the more positive wives were, the greater satisfaction they reported. This effect held when controlling for both partners' conflict behavior and attachment styles. The fact that we found an actor effect where Salvatore and colleagues did not may be due to differences in the goal of each interaction task (cooling down versus actively reconnecting). It may be that wives' satisfaction comes not from disengaging from conflict, but from her ability to positively reconnect with her spouse, an aspect emphasized in our study.

In addition to expanding Salvatore and colleagues' work on conflict recovery, we build on the adult attachment literature by examining the affect regulation function of attachment in the specific context of a positive interaction preceded by conflict. The link between different attachment styles and conflict recovery is underexplored and lacks theoretical development. To address this gap, we discuss how the regulatory strategies characterizing avoidant and anxious individuals might differentially influence their positive behavior following conflict. We also extend theory on conflict recovery itself, which presently excludes the reconnecting component. The ability to reconnect appears critical for healthy relationships: perseverating on conflicts when it is no longer appropriate to do so – for example, when the timing is bad or the problem is unfixable – may encourage conflict spillover, or additional negative behaviors that sour subsequent interactions and ultimately harm the relationship. In fact, even short-term spillover has negative effects on relationship outcomes (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). The recover and

reconnect process serves a regulatory function by minimizing conflict spillover and helping partners to approach each other with loving hearts, which our research shows predicts relationship benefits when enacted by wives.

Limitations

In any research where people know they are being observed, there is some concern that their behavior might not correspond to how they would actually act in private. However, feigning positivity when one has not fully recovered from the conflict would require high self-control, a limited mental resource (Baumeister, Bratlavsky Muraven, & Tice, 1998). In other words, trying to engage positively in the positive interaction when one has not fully regulated conflict-related negative emotions is likely to sap self-control, eventually producing behaviors that sabotage the interaction (e.g., regressing to the topic of conflict) or, at best, inhibit maximum positivity (e.g., begrudgingly offering compliments; having little to say). Therefore, behaviors observed in the positive interactions should reflect couple members' genuine feelings and serve as a true reflection of their affect regulatory ability.

Other limitations include the correlational nature of results. It is impossible to say, for example, whether wives in more satisfied relationships find it easier to interact positively following a conflict, or whether positive engagement nurtures and sustains satisfaction over time. Future research should investigate causal mechanisms by which behavior during positive and conflict interactions relate to satisfaction.

Future Directions

We chose attachment style as an index of affect regulation in order to match the domain-specificity of the stressor. An interesting question that follows is whether broad,

domain-general regulatory skills play a part in the interpersonal process examined here. Self-regulation is involved in inhibiting undesirable behavior to avoid negative consequences or to approach positive goals. Unlike attachment style, these approach-avoid aspects are not unique to interactions with close others; however, they can be applied to the demands of transitioning from positive to negative relationship interactions (e.g., controlling impulses to linger on negativity; focusing on relationship-enhancing goals). Given that aspects of self-regulation can be learned and improved with practice, even on broad and unrelated domains (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006; Oaten & Cheng, 2006; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1999), it may be possible for individuals who possess poor affect regulation tendencies or insecure attachment to become better at managing their own and their partner's distress during conflict interactions, and as a result, experience relationship-relevant gains.

Another next step is to examine the physiological changes that occur during the positive interaction, as research suggests distinctive stress response patterns for certain attachment pairings before, during, and after conflict (Beck et al., 2013). Future research should also employ longitudinal methods to determine whether post-conflict positivity is associated with changes in relationship quality over time. Finally, research in this line of work should take care to represent different types of relationships. For instance, dating relationships, which are typically characterized by a lesser degree of commitment than marital relationships, may be especially volatile and/or sensitive to the consequences of poor affect regulation strategies.

Conclusion

This research has relevance for helping clinicians prescribe marital interventions tailored to husbands and wives, as gender moderates the association between attachment and positive behavior in some cases. Our research also suggests that counseling aimed at helping partners (especially wives) capitalize on opportunities for positive connection can provide greater benefit to relationship well-being than a purely conflict-management approach. Applying these findings to clinical settings may lead to new, maximally beneficial marital therapies.

Put simply, it's not just how couples fight or how they show love that predicts relationship satisfaction, but also how well they transition from the bad times to the good. In merging literatures on attachment, marital satisfaction, and conflict recovery, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of positive relationship interactions and hope to inspire future research in this area.

Table 1

Intraclass correlations for positive
behavior subscales

	Husbands	Wives
Validation	$\alpha = .98$	$\alpha = .99$
Responsiveness	$\alpha = .96$	$\alpha = .97$
Affection	$\alpha = 1.00$	$\alpha = .99$

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for predictors and outcome variables

	Husbands				Wives			
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Attachment Avoidance	1.82	.65	1.00	4.78	1.58	.56	1.00	3.61
Attachment Anxiety	2.52	.86	1.00	5.28	2.76	1.01	1.06	6.17
Positive Behavior	3.57	2.07	0.00	10.00	4.06	2.19	0.00	12.00
Caregiving	5.75	1.08	2.25	7.00	6.04	.86	3.19	7.00
Careseeking	5.23	1.18	2.30	7.00	5.55	.94	2.25	7.00
Satisfaction	42.50	3.66	28.00	50.00	42.60	3.42	31.00	49.00

Table 3

Correlations among predictors

Predictor	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attachment Avoidance	.21**	.41***	-.20**	-.13	-.10
2. Attachment Anxiety	.34***	.24**	-.23**	-.24**	-.01
3. Positive Behavior	-.30***	-.01	.65***	.27***	.27***
4. Careseeking	-.19*	-.05	.32***	.61***	.76***
5. Caregiving	-.18*	-.12	.28***	.87***	.37***

Note. Wives' correlations appear above the diagonal, husbands' correlations appear below the diagonal, and correlations between husbands and wives appear on the diagonal in bold. Correlations involving caregiving/careseeking utilize 171 couples, for everything else $n = 174$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Summary of results

	Outcome			
	Husbands		Wives	
	Satisfaction	Positive Behavior	Satisfaction	Positive Behavior
Husband Avoidance	$B = -.199,$ $p < .001^*$	$B = -.362,$ $p < .001$	ns.*	$B = -.271,$ $p = .006$
Wife Avoidance	$B = -.136,$ $p = .003^*$	ns.	$B = -.220,$ $p < .001^*$	ns.
Husband Anxiety	$B = -.056,$ $p = .056^*$	ns.	ns.*	ns.
Wife Anxiety	ns.*	ns.	$B = -.090,$ $p < .001^*$	ns.
Husband Positive Behavior	ns.	--	$B = -.030,$ $p = .067$	--
Wife Positive Behavior	$B = .047,$ $p = .004$	--	$B = .05,$ $p = .001$	--

* = The effect presented is controlling for positive behavior. Analyses using attachment variables included 174 couples (one participant had incomplete attachment data).

Figure 1: Positive Behavior Coding Scheme

Positive Behaviors Subscales and Examples

Validation

- Agreeing with partner or validating their nominations
 - E.g., Partner 1: “We get along really well.” Partner 2: “I think so too/Yeah, we do/I agree/I think you’re right/I was going to say that/nods AND makes a ‘hmm’ vocalization.
 - Has to be *active/self-generated*, not simply as an expected response
 - E.g., Partner 1: “We get along really well, you know?” Partner 2: “Yeah” ← Doesn’t count!
- Acknowledging partner effort/trying
 - (e.g., one partner says they are trying to do better at something, and the other agrees or says “I know”).
- Affirming partner’s desired identity
 - Pointing out positive qualities
 - Complimenting abilities, attributes, accomplishments
 - Expressing pride or admiration in partner

Summary: Speaker expresses that he/she values and respects partner; communicates acceptance and support for partner; agrees with partner; offers reassurance or encouragement; validates partner’s emotions, efforts, and identity. *In terms of compliments/pointing out positive qualities, validating statements generally convey something specific about or directed toward the partner (“you” statements—what is liked about the partner), not about the relationship as a whole (“we”—what is liked about the relationship).

- 0) Target rarely validates the partner (e.g., 0-1 instances). Nominations may not be very meaningful or enthusiastic. This is the least validating the target can be without being negative—they are minimally following the task.
- 1) Target makes minor validating contributions. Nominations are somewhat meaningful but not particularly enthusiastic (e.g., listing a few general compliments + 1 instance of agreeing with partner). This should be the ‘baseline’ (i.e., they are following the task but not considerably validating).
- 2) Target actively validates partner. He/she is engaged in the task and validates the partner on several occasions. Nominations may be regular but not very meaningful (e.g., listing some general compliments + agreeing 1-2 times) OR may be meaningful but not frequent (e.g., 2-3 very sincere, specific instances of validation). Target may not seem particularly enthusiastic.
- 3) Target is consistently validating. He/she is engaged in the task and regularly

validates the partner. Nominations are meaningful AND frequent, but less so than in (4). Nominations may be somewhat enthusiastic, but less so than in (4).

- 4) Target is consistently validating AND builds upon his/her partner's nominations. Nominations are enthusiastic, meaningful, AND frequent (e.g., effusive gushing about partner; often will include very specific comments). He/she is highly validating, embodying validation to its maximum potential in this task.

Responsiveness

- Verbal and nonverbal indications that the individual values the partner's contribution
 - Building off of partner's contributions
 - elaborating and extending; may include agreeing
 - Behaviors that reflect an interpretation of the partner's contributions as sincere, positive, and meaningful
 - E.g., aww/that's sweet/I'm happy to hear that/that means a lot
 - E.g., tears of happiness; appearing to "beam" when partner discusses positive aspects; appearing touched
 - E.g., nodding, smiling, or other nonverbal signs of acknowledging the contribution
- Conveying appreciation for the partner's nominations
 - E.g., I appreciate you saying that/thank you (for a compliment)
 - E.g., I like when you tell me that

Summary: extent to which there is a dialogue; building on and elaborating nominations; behaviors that indicate the individual recognizes and values partner's contributions.

- 0) Target is rarely responsive to partner's nominations (e.g., 0-1 instances). Responses may not be very meaningful or enthusiastic. E.g., the individual lists compliments but does not build on partner's statements; little or no dialogue.
- 1) Target makes minor responsive behaviors. Responses are somewhat meaningful but not particularly enthusiastic. This should be the 'baseline' (i.e., they are following the task but not considerably responsive).
- 2) Target actively responds to partner. He/she is engaged in the task and displays several instances of responsive behaviors. Responses may be fairly frequent but not very meaningful or genuine (e.g., saying 'aw' a few times; occasionally building off partner's responsiveness) OR may be meaningful but not frequent (e.g., "that is SO sweet" and "I really appreciate that")
- 3) Target is consistently responsive. He/she is engaged in the task and regularly responds to partner's nominations. Responses are meaningful AND frequent, but less so than in (4). Responses may be somewhat enthusiastic, but less so than in (4).

- 4) Target is consistently responsive AND builds upon his/her partner's responsiveness. Responses are enthusiastic, meaningful, AND frequent. He/she is highly responsive, embodying responsiveness to its maximum potential in this task.

Affection

- Verbal
 - Affectionate, lighthearted teasing or joking (not maliciously-intended)
 - Flirting with or communicating desire for partner
 - Reminiscing; sharing warm memories (e.g., "Remember when we went scuba diving together?")
 - Direct statements indicating love, care, or concern for partner
 - E.g., Saying I love you (or talking about love for each other)
 - Communicating appreciation for the relationship
 - I'm glad we're together, I'm so glad I'm with you, I'm happy you're in my life, I'm so happy about our relationship, etc
 - Playfulness
- Nonverbal/Physical
 - Holding hands, putting arm around partner, cuddling, kissing, tender touches, feeding partner, etc

Summary: verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate love and/or desire.

- 0) Target rarely or not at all engages in affectionate behaviors (e.g., 0-1 behaviors). Displays of affection may not be very meaningful or enthusiastic (e.g., briefly touches arm).
- 1) Target shows minor displays of affection. Behaviors are somewhat meaningful (e.g., feeds a snack; affectionately teases partner; sits very close to partner for whole task). This should be the 'baseline' (i.e., they are following the task but not considerably affectionate).
- 2) Target actively shows affection for partner. He/she is engaged in the task and displays several affectionate behaviors or instances of affectionate behaviors. Displays of affection may be regular but not very meaningful (e.g., several little touches) OR may be meaningful but not frequent (e.g., says two sincere affectionate statements; kisses partner).
- 3) Target is consistently affectionate. He/she is engaged in the task regularly affectionate. Displays of affection are meaningful AND frequent, but less so than in (4). Affections may be somewhat enthusiastic and longer-lasting, but less so than in 4 (e.g., sits close and holds partner's hand for most of the interaction)
- 4) Target is consistently affectionate AND builds on partner's affection. He/she makes frequent, meaningful, AND enthusiastic displays of affection. Displays of affection

may be long-lasting (e.g., holds partner's hand and stays cuddled with them for most of the interaction; frequent caressing). He/she is highly affectionate, embodying affection to its maximum potential in this task

NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS SCALES AND EXAMPLES

- Invalidating partner. Failing to reassure or support partner's emotions, efforts, abilities, attributes, accomplishments, or identity when appropriate or expected.
 - Putting down the other person
 - E.g., partner says he/she is good at 'x' or trying to do better at 'x' and the other person rejects it
 - E.g., partner is having a difficult time thinking of positive things and the other person seems impatient or upset about it
- Refusing to give compliments
- Being unsatisfied with compliments
 - Undermining the partner's contributions
 - Becoming annoyed with the partner's contributions
- Backhanded compliments
- Malicious sarcasm, teasing, or joking
- Arguing
- Bringing up divorce/likelihood of staying together
 - E.g., "Do you think we'll be together in 20 years?"; "Have you ever thought about getting a divorce?"
- Disagreeing with partner (in an impolite, unconstructive way)
- Undermining the task/interaction
 - Rushing; saying they feel "forced"
- Significantly imbalanced contributions (e.g., not putting in effort when partner is)
- Mismatched affect (e.g., laughing when partner is serious)
- Atmosphere of tension
- Any comments that indicate doubting of the partner or not trusting the partner

- Criticizing or complaining about partner
- Pursing the conflict or other problem areas or areas of dislike in the relationship/partner
 - Simply referring to the conflict (e.g., "we talked about that before) is not the same as trying to re-initiate a discussion about it. 0) No instances of negativity towards partner are allowed for this score.

1) Target is minimally or rarely negative, and may make one or two small negative comments. This would be considered the baseline—they are following the positive interaction task but let a little negativity 'slip'.

2) Target evidences minor negative behaviors (e.g., 2-3 instances). Alternatively, target

may evidence more severe behaviors (e.g., criticize partner or re-initiate conflict discussion) but qualifies the negativity with some positive aspects

E.g., “The fact that you think you can do it all is something I like about you, but it also gets in the way sometimes...”

3) Target doesn't explicitly sabotage the interaction, but actively displays several negative behaviors. Alternatively, target re-initiates conflict discussion or other problem areas in the relationship.

4) Target is consistently negative. He/she shows several instances of intentional negativity; attempts sabotage the interaction.

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