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Insecure Attachment Predicts History of Divorce, Marriage, and Current Relationship Status

Melissa McNelis* and Chris Segrin*

*Human Communication Studies, Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, USA; and Department of Communication, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT
The goal of this research was to test the predictive ability of attachment styles and dysfunctional relational communication patterns to predict adults’ relationship status (i.e., single/partnered and ever-married/ever-divorced). Anxious and avoidant attachment styles and dysfunctional relational communication patterns (i.e., criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling) were predictors of relationship status in 413 adults who participated in an online survey. The results indicated that anxious and avoidant attachment styles significantly predicted both history of divorce and single versus partnered relationship status. The dysfunctional communication patterns did not explain a great deal of variance in relationship history and status above and beyond insecure attachment, although dysfunctional communication was significantly and consistently associated with insecure attachment. These results indicate that some of the individual characteristics that generate a risk for divorce might also pose a barrier to repartnering after a divorce.

KEYWORDS
Attachment; communication; divorce; repartnering

The risk of experiencing divorce is increased by individual traits and qualities that interfere with the development and maintenance of close relationships. In fact, many of these features such as a difficult personality and verbally aggressive interaction styles could be doubly detrimental to close relationships, as they not only predict divorce, but the ability to get back into a close relationship after a divorce, or even to get into a close relationship at all. Prior research suggests that insecure attachment styles and dysfunctional communication practices generate both a risk for divorce and a barrier to entry into, or maintenance of, close relationships. Therefore, the specific aim of this investigation was to test attachment styles and dysfunctional communication practices as simultaneous predictors of experience with divorce and current involvement in a marriage or other close relationship.

Across various union transitions (e.g., marriage, divorce, cohabitation), attachment is the foundation for communication in relationships throughout
the life span. Communication is a medium that provides an opportunity to develop internal working models from young infancy to adulthood (Domingue & Mollen, 2009) and can be viewed as a tool used by romantic dyads to navigate tensions, cultivate intimacy, and manage conflict. Intimate communication creates a secure base with an individual (caregiver, attachment figure, romantic partner) and affords an arena to build and adapt internal working models or attachment styles through communication that can persist over the life span. This is why insecure attachment styles and dysfunctional relational communication practices might work hand in hand to dismantle already-established relationships and inhibit entry into close relationships after previous ones have ended.

Attachment theory focuses on active cognitive processing (Bowlby, 1980) of repeated interactions and the consistency of attentiveness and responsiveness over time between a primary caregiver and child. The processing of these interactions is theorized to create representational models for expectations for interactions with an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1973) that serve evolutionary needs that persist throughout the life span and promote development (Bowlby, 1951). The internal working model developed in infancy, mainly with a primary caregiver, can extend and influence future interactions with others such as teachers and peers, that later cultivate bonds within social circles or intimate relationships such as a romantic partner as an adult (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1951; Karen, 1994). Attachment styles have explanatory power for analyzing adults’ orientation toward forming and maintaining relationships with intimate partners.

Mikulincer and Shaver (2012) developed a three-category system of describing attachment styles, that includes avoidant, anxious, and secure attachment. Attachment-related avoidance is “discomfort with closeness and dependence on relationship partners, a preference for emotional distance and self-reliance and the use of deactivating strategies to cope with insecurity and distress,” whereas attachment-related anxiety is “a strong desire for closeness and protection, intense worries about a partner’s availability and responsiveness and one’s own value to the partner” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012, p. 12). The final dimension is secure attachment, which describes individuals who score low on attachment-related avoidance and anxiety. According to Shaver and Mikulincer (2006), internal working models provide a foundation for how infants attach with caregivers and how adults function in romantic relationships. Previous research shows that attachment styles predict relational maintenance, satisfaction, communicating emotions, and commitment, which are closely linked with relational duration and stability (Guerrero, Farinelli, & McEwan, 2009; Morgan & Shaver, 1999; Simpson, 1990). Furthermore, both anxious and avoidant attachment have been demonstrated to be detrimental to the formation of intimate relationships (McClure & Lydon, 2014; Schindler, Fagundes, & Murdock, 2010).
Although attachment is developed during infancy, communication styles are socially learned during childhood, reenacted in later adult relationships, and influence adults’ attitudes toward marriage and divorce (Flora & Segrin, 2015; Whitton et al., 2008). Gottman’s (1994b) cascade model of marital dissolution describes the detrimental progression of negative communication in what he characterized as “the four horsemen of the apocalypse” (i.e., criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling). According to Gottman, the presence of the four horsemen in premarital and newlywed couples predicts greater likelihood of divorce within the first 15 years of marriage (Gottman, 1994a, 2000).

Gottman (1994a) described the first horseman, the complain/criticize stage, as one spouse critically identifying a partner or a partner’s behavior as defective. Critical behavior during the complain/criticize stage can damage the self-esteem of the receiver. More critical partners will often provoke the second stage, defensiveness, in their partner. Defensiveness occurs when a self-protective partner who is the target of criticism denies responsibility, cross-complains, or counterblames the attacking partner. The third horseman, contempt, occurs when spouses insult, put down, or mock a partner, or engage in sarcasm, disapproval, or express hatred toward a partner. Of the four horsemen, contempt best predicts poor well-being, illness, and divorce within the following 6 years of marriage (Gottman, 1994a). Once a partner stonewalls/withdraws from conflict, defined as communication with little to no feedback, eye contact, or contribution to the conversation, the final step toward marital dissolution is evident. Stonewalling communicates that neither the relationship nor the partner is worth time or effort to fight for the relationship. The presence of one or more of the horsemen (i.e., criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling) does not predict divorce on its own, but it is the frequency of Gottman’s destructive communication practices and cascade-like progression that is predictive of divorce within the first 6 years of marriage (Gottman, 2000). Although these dysfunction patterns of relational communication have proven to be reliable predictors of divorce proneness, they have never been studied as potential barriers to the development of new relationships. This might be especially problematic for divorced people because the same communication patterns that animated the demise of their marriage might also prevent them from forming new relationships after the divorce.

Different attachment styles lead to varied communication patterns in romantic dyads that can be predictive of divorce (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Johnson, 2003). Securely attached individuals engage in more positive communication, such as mutuality, reciprocal caregiving, and support, and comfort with closeness and intimacy are evidence of happy marriages. Insecurely attached individuals lack disclosure and responsive interactions causing dissatisfaction, conflict, and distress (Domingue & Mollen, 2009).
Attachment styles can also predict communication practices during conflict (i.e., mutual constructive, demand-withdraw, mutual avoidance, and withholding). Constructive positive dialogue is a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction, that can contribute to relational stability, as communication is a vehicle that nurtures intimacy and dependence in relationships (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Additionally, Johnson (2003) found secure adults communicate more self-disclosure, participate in direct and open communication, and develop and maintain relationships naturally with ease. Insecure adults have ambivalent evaluations of others and the self, resulting in dependence (preoccupied), withdrawal (dismissing), extreme autonomy (fearful-avoidant), and often communicate through making demands, stonewalling, and withdrawing (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Due to positive views of the self and others, securely attached individuals have positive relational evaluations and remain married rather than separated or divorced. If secure attachment styles predict positive interpretations of communication, and insecurely attached adults engage in the destructive communication practices that are predictive of divorce (Gottman, 1994a), it is plausible that attachment styles are associated with the specific four horsemen, that in turn, are associated with risk for divorce. Therefore the following hypotheses are predicted.

H1. Insecure attachment styles will be positively associated with Gottman’s four horsemen (i.e., criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling).

H2. Insecure attachment styles will be positively associated with a history of divorce.

H3. Gottman’s four horsemen (i.e., criticism, defensiveness, contempt, stonewalling) will be associated with a history of divorce.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in this investigation were 413 adults over the age of 18. Their mean age was 50.10 ($SD = 16.57$), with 56% women and 44% men. The ethnic and racial composition of the sample was 1% American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander; 2% other; 6% Black or African American; 11% Hispanic or Latina/o; and 79% White or Caucasian. Participants reported their highest level of education as 1% less than high school, 14% high school, 37% some college or associate’s degree, 33% bachelor’s degree, 11% master’s degree, and 4% PhD or professional degree (e.g., JD, MD).
The sample reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual in 97% of the cases; 2% lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ); and 1% other or preferred not to say. The current marital status of the sample was 17% single and never married, 39% single and previously divorced, 6% separated, 6% currently married and previously divorced, 17% currently married and never divorced, 4% currently in a nonmarried relationship and never divorced, and 10% currently in a nonmarried relationship and divorced. The majority (69%) of participants were parents.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited as part of a larger investigation on divorce and only those details and measures relevant to this report are presented here. Because of the nature of the larger investigation, purposive quota sampling techniques were used with three avenues to participation. These included a small group of undergraduate students at a large Southwestern university (n= 30), people referred from undergraduate students (n = 144), and participants recruited through Qualtrics panels (n = 239), which is a national survey research firm. After the first two waves of recruitment were completed, the remainder of the sample was recruited through Qualtrics with parameters designed to ensure that the final combined sample would contain at least 50% with a history of divorce and at least 33% currently in a marriage or close relationship. Student participants (those who participated directly or those who referred a married or divorced person to participate) received extra credit toward their course grade and those who participated through Qualtrics panels were paid $7.50 for their participation. Qualtrics provides a more representative sample (e.g., sex, education, race) of the larger national population compared to in-person and convenience samples, standard Internet samples, and college samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012).

**Measures**

Participants completed a survey containing the following measures.

**Demographics**
Participants were asked to provide information on their gender, sexual orientation, age, race or ethnicity, and education, as well as a variety of details on their current and past marital and relationship status, including history of divorce.

**Attachment**
The Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, and Vogel (2007) Experiences in Close Relationships Scale–Short Form (ECR–S) uses 12 items to measure how participants generally experience relationships. Participants were asked to recall their
most recent or current romantic relationship to rate statements concerning feelings in romantic relationships on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ECR–S includes two factors, anxiety and avoidance, and has comparable results in relation to the original version of the ECR (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Example items from the Avoidance subscale include, “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner,” and “I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.” Sample items from the Anxiety subscale include, “I find that my partner(s) don’t want to get as close as I would like,” and “My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.” For this study, the coefficient alpha was .74 for the anxiety subscale and .74 for the avoidance subscale.

**Dysfunctional communication**
Participants’ dysfunctional communication styles were measured with Fowler and Dillow’s (2011) attachment dimension and the four horsemen of the apocalypse instrument that included four subscales to measure criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. Fowler and Dillow (2011) adapted most of the items from Gottman’s (1994b) self-test for the four horsemen of the apocalypse, as the original measure referenced the perceived behavior of a partner. In each case, higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to engage in that behavior. In this study criticism (α = .84) was measured with seven items that included, “When I complain about something to my partner, the issue is often some kind of problem with his/her character that I need to point out,” and “When my partner and I disagree, it is important to me to show them that he/she is at fault.” The Defensiveness scale (α = .92) included seven items such as, “I feel unfairly attacked when my partner is negative towards me,” and “If my partner complains about something I’ve done or said, I feel I have to ‘ward off’ those attacks and defend myself.” Contempt (α = .91) was measured with eight items including statements such as, “Some of the things my partner does or says makes it hard for me to show respect for them,” and “When we disagree, I try to point out ways in which my partner is inadequate.” The Stonewalling scale (α = .90) contained eight statements such as, “When my partner complains, I feel that I just want to get away from the situation,” and “I’d rather withdraw from an argument or conflict with my partner than get my feelings hurt.”

**Results**

**Attachment and Dysfunctional Communication**
A correlation matrix of the attachment dimensions and four types of dysfunctional communication appears in Table 1. As evident in Table 1, both avoidant and anxious attachment were positively and significantly correlated with all four of the types of dysfunctional communication, confirming Hypothesis 1.
Participants’ marital biography data were used to create four groups by crossing two variables: current involvement in a married or romantic relationship and history of divorce. Thus, the four groups included participants who were single and never divorced \((n = 72)\), in a relationship and never divorced \((n = 90)\), single and previously divorced \((n = 185)\), and in a relationship and previously divorced \((n = 66)\). Those participants who indicated that they were separated but not previously divorced \((n = 26)\) were included in the single and previously divorced group. Because marriage and subsequent divorce take time to occur, the four groups varied substantially on participants’ age, \(F(3, 409) = 277.10, p < .001\). The single and never divorced group was the youngest \((M = 22.96, SD = 3.45)\), followed by the in a relationship and never divorced \((M = 46.19, SD = 14.51)\), the in a relationship and previously divorced \((M = 57.68, SD = 16.53)\), and finally the single and previously divorced \((M = 59.86, SD = 8.53)\) group. For this reason, age was included in the subsequent model to control for variation in group membership that could be attributable to age.

### Group Modeling

Insecure attachment styles and dysfunctional relational communication patterns were hypothesized to be associated with a lower propensity to be currently involved in a close relationship and a higher propensity to have been divorced. These predictions were tested in a multinomial logistic regression model. The model was built by first entering age as a covariate, followed by the two dimensions of insecure attachment (i.e., avoidant and anxious), and the four dysfunctional relational communication patterns (i.e., complain, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling). Group membership was the dependent variable.

The results indicated that the model provided a good fit to the group membership data, \(-2 \log\text{-likelihood} = 627.50, \chi^2(21) = 437.50, p < .001\), Nagelkerke pseudo \(R^2 = .71\). Overall, the model classified 68.3% of the

| Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Major Study Variables |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 5. Contempt                 | .02            | —              | 6. Defensiveness | .08            | —              | 7. Stonewalling | .19*          | —              |
| 6. Defensiveness            | .08            | 7. Stonewalling | .19*           | .27***         | .25***         | —              | 7. Stonewalling | .19*           |
| 7. Stonewalling             | —              | 8. Stonewalling | −.02           | .42***         | .34***         | .67***         | —              | 8. Stonewalling | —              |

\(M\)  | 50.10 | 2.79 | 3.63 | 3.35 | 3.19 | 3.84 | 3.70 |

\(SD\) | 16.57 | 0.94 | 1.12 | 1.11 | 1.45 | 1.68 | 1.33 |

\(*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.\)
cases correctly, where 25% would be chance alone. The predictors identified the single and never divorced (93.1% correctly classified) and the single and previously divorced (92.4% correctly classified) groups with high precision. The in a relationship and never divorced group was classified with 45.6% accuracy and the in a relationship and previously divorced group was predicted with only 4.5% accuracy.

Likelihood ratio tests for individual predictors appear in Table 2. As evident from Table 2, age was the most powerful discriminator among the four groups. However, above and beyond the effect for age, avoidant and anxious attachment were both significant predictors of group membership (confirming Hypothesis 2), as well as criticism and contempt (partially confirming Hypothesis 3). The remaining two predictors, defensiveness and stonewalling, did not contribute significantly to the prediction of group membership.

Table 3 presents parameter estimates by group. For these analyses, the in a relationship and never divorced group was selected as the reference category against which the other three groups were individually compared. This reference group was 80% married people and 20% people in a close non-married relationship (half of whom were cohabiting). The odds ratios (ORs) in Table 3 indicate the probability of being in a particular group, relative to the reference group, for each additional scale point in the predictor variable. For example, in the single and previously divorced group, the OR for avoidant attachment was OR = 2.32. This means that every additional point on avoidant attachment increases the odds of being in the single and previously divorced group relative to the in a relationship and never divorced group by 132% (where an OR of 1.00 would imply an equally likely membership in the two groups). In another example, in the single and never divorced group, the OR for stonewalling was OR = 0.56. This indicates that every additional point on the Stonewalling scale is associated with a 44% (i.e., 1.00 – 0.56) lower probability of being in the single and never divorced group.

### Table 2. Summary of Multinomial Regression Analysis Predicting Relationship Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>−2LL</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole model</td>
<td>627.50</td>
<td>437.50***</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual predictors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>935.59</td>
<td>308.08***</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant attachment</td>
<td>649.03</td>
<td>21.53***</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious attachment</td>
<td>640.32</td>
<td>12.82**</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>645.29</td>
<td>17.79***</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contempt</td>
<td>635.67</td>
<td>8.17*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>632.56</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonewalling</td>
<td>632.41</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. −2LL = −2 log-likelihood, for whole model, compared to a model with the intercept only; for individual predictors, compared to a reduced model with that predictor omitted.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
There are several notable features apparent in the parameters in Table 3. First, anxious and avoidant attachment were significant predictors in all three of the group comparisons. In all cases, the ORs were greater than 1.00, indicating that increases in anxious or avoidant attachment increase the odds of being in a group other than in a relationship and never divorced. Stated differently, anxious and avoidant attachment appears to be a characteristic of people who are divorced or not presently in a close relationship. Second, once age and attachment style were accounted for, the dysfunctional relational communication patterns (i.e., the four horsemen) were only sporadic predictors of group membership, but more so for the never divorced versus ever divorced groups (recall that membership in the in a relationship and previously divorced group was very poorly predicted by this model). Although contempt and stonewalling discriminated between the two never divorced groups, they were not significant predictors of membership in either of the divorced groups, relative to the in a relationship and never divorced group. However, criticism was a significant predictor of membership in the single and previously

### Table 3. Multinomial Regression Parameter Estimates by Group Compared to Married, Never Divorced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>OR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single, never divorced</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.24***</td>
<td>19.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant attachment</td>
<td>.72*</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious attachment</td>
<td>.60*</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contempt</td>
<td>.76*</td>
<td>5.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stonewalling</td>
<td>−.58*</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, prior divorce</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>37.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant attachment</td>
<td>.84***</td>
<td>16.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious attachment</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>8.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>−.72**</td>
<td>11.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contempt</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stonewalling</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In relationship, prior divorce</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.09***</td>
<td>22.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant attachment</td>
<td>.57*</td>
<td>6.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious attachment</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contempt</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>−.21</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stonewalling</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** OR = odds ratio (i.e., likelihood of being in the specified group relative to the reference group [married, never divorced]).

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
divorced group (OR = 0.49). Note that this relationship is in the opposite
direction as would be predicted. In other words, each additional point on
the Criticism scale was associated with a 51% (i.e., 1.00 – 0.49) lower
probability of being in the single and previously divorced group relative
to the in a relationship and never divorced group.

**Discussion**

This research was designed to test the ability of insecure attachment and
dysfunctional relational communication practices to discriminate among
groups of people defined by a history of divorce and current involvement
in a close relationship. The results indicated that dimensions of insecure
attachment were strong predictors of group membership. Specifically, inse-
cure attachment was most evident in groups that had a history of divorce and
were not presently involved in a close relationship. Once insecure attachment
was accounted for, the dysfunctional communication practices were only
sporadic predictors of group membership, and only for criticism and con-
tempt; defensiveness and stonewalling did not predict group membership.

Attachment styles are predictive of long-term relational outcomes, relation-
ship quality, and satisfaction (Cooper, Totenhagen, McDaniel, & Curran,
2018), relational maintenance, communicating emotions, and commitment,
which are closely linked with relational stability (Guerrero et al., 2009;
Morgan & Shaver, 1999; Simpson, 1990). The correlation matrix in Table 1
clearly shows that insecure attachment, both anxious and avoidant, is posi-
tively correlated with each of the dysfunctional relational communication
practices measured in this study. This provides some insight into how and
why insecure attachment can be so detrimental to the health and mainte-
nance of close relationships. The shared variance between insecure attach-
ment and dysfunctional communication is important to keep in mind when
interpreting the remaining results of this investigation.

The results of this study confirm that individuals with an insecure attach-
ment style (i.e., anxious or avoidant) have a much greater likelihood of
a history of divorce, even after controlling for age. The results of this study
also confirm that individuals with low anxious or avoidant attachment styles
(i.e., secure attachment) are more likely to be currently involved in a close
relationship, regardless of history of divorce. This is consistent with related
research showing more positive relationships and relational outcomes
throughout the life span for those with secure compared to insecure attach-
ment styles (Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000; Li & Chan, 2012; Simpson &
Overall, 2014).

It is interesting to note that there was a somewhat stronger association
between avoidant compared to anxious attachment and the experience of
divorce. Relational partners with a high anxious attachment style experience
emotional hypervigilance, which is a heightened awareness to others’ social and emotional cues (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009). Individuals with anxious attachment styles perceive more conflict, escalate relational conflict, and experience lower relational quality (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Cooper et al., 2018). Those with a higher avoidant attachment style tend to be emotionally disabled, have dull social responsiveness (Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002; Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006), participate less in support-seeking and disclosure, create relational distance, and are extremely self-reliant (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009, 2012). The findings from this study suggest that avoidant attachment might pose a slightly greater risk for experiencing relationship disruption than anxious attachment does.

Insecurely attached adults battle ambivalent evaluations of others and the self, resulting in dependence, withdrawal, and extreme autonomy, and they often engage in destructive communication patterns (e.g., making demands, stonewalling, and withdrawing) that are predictive of divorce (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Gottman, 1994a). This study complements previous research (Fowler & Dillow, 2011) with the finding that both anxious and avoidant attachment styles are predictive of Gottman’s four horsemen (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling). It appears, however, that once the variance in relational outcomes (i.e., history of divorce) attributable to insecure attachment is accounted for, the dysfunctional relational communication patterns identified by Gottman do not add a considerable amount of predictive power to the model. In fact, it was only criticism and contempt that explained additional variance in group membership above and beyond that explainable by insecure attachment. Furthermore, contempt was a discriminator between the two groups without a history of divorce, and contempt operated in a direction opposite to prediction. Specifically, criticism was lower in the single and divorced group than the group in a relationship with no history of divorce. It is at least possible that involvement in a marriage or close relationship creates more opportunities for criticism relative to those who are not in a close relationship. A related possibility is that the experience of divorce has taught people about the harmfulness of criticism, which they have since toned down in their daily communication practices.

Finally, it is worth revisiting a rather unique group in this study, namely those who are currently in a close relationship with a history of divorce. This group was something of an anomaly among the four groups studied, at least in terms of the model’s predictive ability to identify participants’ membership in this group. These people were one third remarried and two thirds in a romantic nonmarried relationship. Participants in this group were also substantially older than those in the two never-divorced groups. Many of the people in this group (56%) had been married two or more times. The preponderance of currently unmarried people in this group might reflect disillusionment with marriage after a history of divorce(s). In any event, membership in this unique group was not predicted well by the combination of attachment and dysfunctional communication. What
is unique about this group relative to the others is that these participants went through the experience of marital dissolution but still found their way back into a close relationship. This could at least partly explain why the attachment and communication predictors did not function well to identify these people. It is possible that their divorce history occurred despite relatively secure attachment or modest levels of dysfunctional communication.

There are several important limitations of this study that must be considered when interpreting its findings. First, group membership was defined at a particular point in time, rather than over a lifetime. However, group membership (i.e., single, married, divorced) is not a static phenomenon. Single people get married and married people get divorced. It is this later phenomenon—the right censoring of divorce—that is particularly likely to reduce the predictive power of the independent variables in this study. Some of the currently married participants might eventually divorce. In such cases, a valid and useful statistical model might predict their membership in the “divorced” group, even though they are presently in the “married” group. If that is the case, then the results of this study are very likely understating the predictive power of attachment and dysfunctional communication to foreshadow the experience of a longer term marriage or eventual divorce. Second, the dysfunctional communication practices were assessed via self-report rather than observation. Because of the nature of these practices (e.g., expressing contempt), the responses could be influenced by social desirability.

**Conclusion**

This research investigated the role of attachment and dysfunctional communication practices in romantic relationship status. Observed associations between insecure attachment styles (i.e., anxious or avoidant) and Gottman’s four horsemen (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling) show that these two phenomena go hand in hand, perhaps compounding the risk for divorce. However, when both were entered into the model predicting group membership, it was attachment far more than dysfunctional communication that predicted whether people were currently married or divorced. One particular group of people with a history of divorce, sometimes repeatedly, who were back into a romantic relationship were very difficult to identify with attachment and dysfunctional communication practices. These results highlight the deleterious nature of insecure attachment on both dysfunctional communication practices and the risk for divorce. Dysfunctional relational communication patterns and insecure attachment styles might pose a risk for divorce and barrier to repartnering after divorce.
References


