

The Effect of Gender & Attachment Style on Conflict Communication in Relationships

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Abstract

This study examines how gender and attachment style influence communication during conflict within heterosexual romantic relationships of young adults between the ages of 18 and 28. Based on attachment and genderlect theories, this research examines whether males and females with various attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized) display distinct communication patterns during conflict. A mixed-methods approach combines surveys and interviews, providing quantitative and qualitative insights. Findings are expected to clarify the way gender and attachment styles affect relationship satisfaction while providing insights for improving conflict resolution in young adult couples.

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Introduction

Communication significantly affects satisfaction within romantic relationships, and when couples experience communication difficulties, the relationship is more likely to deteriorate. (Jolin et al., 2024). An individual's attachment style can affect communication with a romantic partner negatively or positively (Weger & Tang, 2022). Further, research has pointed to differences in the way men and women communicate (Heyman et al., 2009). Due to their personal experiences, the researchers for this study are motivated to investigate communication differences in conflict dynamics based on individuals' gender and attachment styles. These experiences have inspired a deeper inquiry into how these factors shape interpersonal conflicts within heterosexual romantic relationships.

This study analyzes prior research and scholarly articles to explore the differences in varying communication patterns during conflict. Ultimately, this specific research question is: How do gender and attachment styles shape conflict communication among young adults in heterosexual relationships? This study seeks to address this question, consequently aiding in a better understanding of the dynamics between different attachment styles and enhancing communication effectiveness between males and females.

Attachment and genderlect theories are the two leading theories that frame this research. Attachment theory is a psychological framework concerning human relationships, particularly the importance of early bonds between infants and their primary caregivers (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Genderlect theory is a communication and sociolinguistic theory that theorizes that male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication. Masculine and feminine discourse

styles are best viewed as two distinct cultural dialects rather than inferior or superior speaking methods (Tannen, 1990).

Literature Review

A previous study found that secure individuals had a greater mean relationship length than the other styles, which implies the possibility that secure styles may be more “successful” in their romantic relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Although these results only provided indirect evidence of relationship satisfaction, it would be surprising if the patterns of scores were not reflected in relationship quality (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Another study examined the way that conversations about desired change within established heterosexual relationships are linked with gender and relationship adjustment. Women endorsed higher amounts of desired change than men did. Specifically, women, compared with men, wanted significantly greater increases in their partners’ emotional and companionate behaviors, while men, compared with women, wanted significantly greater increases in sex (Heyman, 2009). Additionally, there is a demand/withdrawal pattern associated with poor relationship adjustment, with women generally being the “demanders” and men being the “withdrawers.” (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). The study revealed a significant main effect of gender and a significant interaction of gender and conflict structure, highlighting that, despite similar levels of demand from the party that initiated the confrontation, regardless of gender, men were overall more withdrawn than women (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Therefore, it is important to recognize which party is more greatly invested in the issue surrounding the conflict since they will likely initiate and control the conversation while also noting the broad tendency of men to be withdrawers and women to be demanders (Heyman, 2009).

Individuals with a secure style report higher levels of satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment in their relationships, whereas individuals with an avoidant style report lower levels of these characteristics (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Anxious relationship partners report less satisfaction and more conflict and ambivalence. Findings in another study suggest that gender moderates some of these associations (Collins & Read, 1990). For men, security (i.e., comfort with closeness) was more predictive of positive relations than was their level of anxious attachment (i.e., concern about abandonment), but for women, the opposite was true: The more anxious the woman, the less satisfied and the less trusting she was (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). In one study, partner attachment anxiety correlated positively with their partner's disconfirming communication. (Weger & Tang, 2022).

John Bowlby's attachment theory postulates that attachment styles developed in childhood serve as a framework for understanding romantic relationships (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Specifically, relationship dynamics between heterosexual couples wherein each individual exhibits characteristics of a non-secure attachment style warrant exploring how communication and conflict resolution function within the relationship, based on both attachment theory and genderlect styles. Genderlect theory examines the differences in communication styles between men and women. Author Deborah Tannen coined the term "genderlect," using the premise that male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication (Tannen, 1990).

Effective communication is crucial for relationship satisfaction, as unaligned communication often leads to relational decline (Jolin et al., 2024). Attachment theory suggests that individuals' attachment styles, whether secure, anxious, or avoidant, can significantly influence the manner in which each individual communicates within romantic relationships, which may foster or hinder connections (Weger & Tang, 2022). Furthermore, previous studies

highlight gender-based differences in communication, with men and women adopting distinct conversational styles during conflict (Heyman et al., 2009). Recent research focuses on the way gender and attachment styles interact to shape conflict communication, especially among younger adults in long-term romantic relationships. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge regarding communication within romantic relationships according to attachment styles. The findings may benefit young adult couples looking to gain insight into how their attachment styles play into effectively resolving conflict in their relationship. In summary, this research intends to develop the understanding of attachment theories and gender influence regarding communication within the young adult, heterosexual couples, allowing valuable insights to help young couples improve their relational dynamics and communication during conflict.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby and expanded upon by Mary Ainsworth in the 1900s. This theory explores the bonds between infants and caregivers, which can significantly impact adulthood (Goldberg et al., 1995). Ainsworth proposed that infants become attached to a caregiver or caregivers within the early months of life (Ainsworth, 1973). Four main attachment styles emerged from attachment experiments: secure, avoidant, ambivalent/anxious, and disorganized (Goldberg et al., 1995). These styles developed in response to the level of attention infants received (Ainsworth, 1979).

Using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), a 20-question interview that aids in discovering an individual's attachment style by asking questions about their childhood experiences with their primary caregiver, Mary Main found that adults are affected by the attachment style developed in infancy (Plotka, 2011). Adults were categorized into the same four

attachment styles. Securely attached adults view stress as manageable, have confidence in regulating emotions, are open to their feelings, and have no problem expressing them. Avoidant adults suppress their emotions, are defensive, feel overly independent, and can dismiss others' emotions. Anxiously attached adults can be needy, highly sensitive, people-pleasing, and afraid of abandonment or rejection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017).

Feeney and Noller (1990) found that attachment style influences romantic relationships. Their research revealed that secure individuals are confident in the security of their relationship and may be more "successful" in relationships; anxious individuals can be overly dependent on their partner, insecure in the relationship, and strongly desire commitment, and avoidant individuals avoid intimacy and can be distrustful of their partner.

Genderlect Theory

According to Griffin et al. (2019), Deborah Tannen developed the concept of Genderlect styles in the early 1990s. The theory proposes that males and females have different conversational styles (Tannen, 1990). Tannen argued that these conversational styles are so distinct that they can be understood as separate cultural dialects; further, the theory emphasizes that women seek human connection and men seek status (Griffin et al., 2019). Tannen found that in group settings, women speak to build community while men talk to build status, even in storytelling; the communication differences between the genders are also evident in their listening styles because women are more vocal in active listening, expressing agreement to show support, but men stay quiet, as interruption is regarded as a power move in their world (Tannen, 1990). She believed these separate styles develop early in childhood due to observing the differences in communication between second-grade boys and girls; despite this, Tannen suggested that men and women can learn each other's communication styles (Griffin et al.,

2019). Seeking to explain why men and women often talk past each other, she wrote that messages sent between them should not be categorized as right and wrong or superior and inferior; instead, they are different (Tannen, 1990). The theory's main idea is that men and women utilize different conversational scripts and communication patterns to fulfill their needs for connection or status.

Theories and Current Research

The theories of attachment styles and Genderlect styles are vital in answering the current research question of whether attachment style and gender impact conflict communication in relationships. Past research has suggested that securely attached individuals maintain the healthiest relationships regarding their attitudes about the relationship. Anxious and avoidant individuals display traits that harm their relationship (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Genderlect theory suggests that men and women communicate in such different ways that their styles can be seen as separate cultural dialects (Griffin et al., 2019). The researchers seek to explore communication conflict through the lens of these theories.

This paper's research focus is on gender differences and attachment styles in conflict communication within heterosexual romantic relationships. Since all the researchers are in romantic relationships, it was intriguing to understand and try to improve relationships continuously. Relationships during conflict can quickly turn to anger, fights, hurt either emotionally or physically, and even broken hearts, so understanding that genders differ and the effects of attachment styles can be crucial in saving a relationship and a person from pain. Previous research (Weger & Tang., 2022) states that men and women communicate very visibly differently during conflict according to their attachment styles, upbringing, and the culture

surrounding them. Other research from (Heyman et al., 2009) states that findings revealed that women tended to exhibit more negative responses during conversations, regardless of the conversation's initiator. Some research gaps include how the two factors, gender differences and attachment styles, interact and the line within. The paper plans to address that line and fill in the gaps to create a fuller understanding of conflict communication. Understanding the importance of studying these varying dynamics is crucial for improving and maintaining relationships.

Hypothesis and Research Question

This research will benefit all individuals seeking to understand their attachment style and communication tendencies and researchers seeking to learn more about attachment styles within relationships. The researchers hypothesize that our target population will communicate differently during conflict based on gender and attachment style. This research will attempt to answer the following questions: 1) What are the different types of attachment styles, and how can an individual identify with one? 2) Do young adult individuals in heterosexual romantic relationships communicate differently during conflict based on their gender and attachment style? Furthermore, 3) What are the similarities amongst the attachment styles and forms of conflict within the relationship?

RQ: Do young adult individuals in heterosexual romantic relationships communicate differently during conflict based on their gender and attachment style?

H: Individuals in heterosexual romantic relationships communicate differently during conflict based on their gender and their attachment style.

Methods

The current research employs a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative methods such as surveys and qualitative methods, including interviews and participant observations. This mixed-method approach provides a broad range of data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' behaviors. Quantitative data allows for measuring and testing specific variables, while qualitative methods offer insights into the context and interpretations of these behaviors. By using both methods, the study aims to develop a complete analysis of heterosexual romantic relationships based on gender and attachment style.

The participants will include 100 heterosexual couples within Chattanooga, Tennessee, between 18 and 28, who have been in a relationship for at least one year. This research will investigate whether these young adults exhibit distinct communication behaviors during conflict based on gender and attachment style. This study will be advertised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, through general emails sent to the mailing lists of local universities, social media posts, and flyers posted across public areas. Potential participants will complete a short survey online, answering questions regarding the individual's age, gender, relationship status, attachment style, and levels of conflict within their relationship. Researchers will analyze the data and select the final participants based on the responses where individuals are between the ages of 18 and 28 and have been in a heterosexual relationship for at least a year. Each selected individual will then participate in solo interviews with a researcher, lasting thirty minutes, followed by a second, thirty-minute interview with their partner. The interviewer will observe how each couple interacts when given a scenario that entices conflict and will analyze if their reactions match their responses from the surveys and solo interviews. Each participant shall be compensated \$10 for their time in the hour-long study.

Researchers anticipate the study's findings to show a correlation between difficulty communicating during conflict among non-secure attachment styles. This difficulty in communication is amplified by the idea that male and female individuals express themselves differently.

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