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Attachment in Romantic Couples and Perceptions of a Joint Drawing Session

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Abstract

This study examined the postsession evaluations of romantic partners that engaged in a joint drawing task, which is a commonly used technique in art therapy. The shared nonverbal interaction between partners while drawing together is assumed to elicit tensions between closeness and individuality among the partners. To examine couples' postsession evaluations and their associations to the attachment characteristics of the partners, each of 60 romantic couples drew on one shared sheet of paper and completed the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) and the adult romantic attachment scale. As hypothesized, both attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance were negatively correlated with perceptions of the joint drawing session as smooth and positive. Women evaluated session depth as greater than did men, with the widest gap found in the insecure-insecure couple attachment combination. The importance of evaluating the divergent experiences of participants in a joint drawing session and the interpersonal dynamics in anxious woman-avoidant man couples are discussed.

Keywords

art therapy, attachment, couples, session evaluation questionnaire

The joint drawing technique is commonly used in art therapy for evaluation and intervention with children and adults (Kwiatkowska, 1978; Wadeson, 1973). This technique, which involves two participants drawing together on one shared page, has been implemented with client and therapist in individual therapy, with both members of a couple in couple therapy, with a child and a parent in family therapy, and with two participants in group therapy. The idea underlying the joint drawing process is that working on one shared space reveals interpersonal themes and meaningful features in the participants' relational space (Sharabany, Molad, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1994). The joint drawing, as a "doing together" task, allows the therapist to observe the relational interaction between the participants in vivo; the drawing itself also documents the interaction processes played out in the relationship as expressed in the pictorial product (Wadeson, 1973).

Clinical experience with couples suggests that the relational interaction while drawing together elicits and reflects themes of intimacy (closeness and togetherness) and individuality (autonomy, control, and separateness) and the extent to which these are negotiated successfully between the partners. Thus, although for some couples, drawing together on a shared page can be experienced as a playful task that is enjoyable for both partners, for others, it may elicit tensions between the wish to become intimate and the fear of being lost in the joint space. In other words, while one partner may want the other partner to draw closer (not to be "too distant") the other may want to keep his distance (not to be "too close"). An example of the drawing of a newly married couple that depicts these conflicts

between opposed needs for intimacy versus avoidance of intimacy can be seen in Figure 1. The joint drawing of the couple includes sharp and aggressive objects that appear in a relatively disjointed and incoherent manner.

Art therapists usually discuss the joint artistic product and process with the couple as a way to understand the dynamics that each participant brings to the couple relationship and to the therapy (Ford Sori, 1995; Harriss & Landgarten, 1973; Kwiatkowska, 1978; Wadeson, 1973). As part of the evaluation process, the post-joint drawing discussion may further reveal the opposed needs for intimacy within the couple. This can be illustrated by the postsession discussion with the couple who drew Figure 1. The woman described her efforts to bring her mate to draw with her, using the big circles in which she expected him to draw inside, and expressed anger toward him because he ignored her circles and proceeded to draw the "earth" at the bottom of the page. The man recounted his feelings of being controlled by his mate, and about his need to escape a bit to a hiding place that is his own, and is not touched by anybody "... what is important is that I feel it is mine in the sense that it is not hers" (Snir, 2006).

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Figure 1. The joint drawing of a high-anxiety female with a high avoidance male.

Although art therapists consider the joint drawing technique as an important assessment tool for revealing such couple dynamics and the technique is commonly practiced as part of art therapy sessions, to the best of our knowledge, it has not as of yet been researched. The current study represents a preliminary empirical investigation of the session evaluation ratings of intimate partners following a joint drawing task. Our first aim was to systematically evaluate the joint drawing experience from the perspectives of each of the drawing participants by means of a postsession instrument commonly used in psychotherapy research, the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ; Stiles et al., 1994). The SEQ assesses participants' perceptions of a given session on two factors related to content and flow: depth (how valuable and powerful the session was) and smoothness (how comfortable and pleasant it was), and two factors assessing postsession client mood: positivity (how confident and pleased participants feel) and arousal (how energetic and active they feel).

Given that each partner may experience the joint drawing session differently, we were interested to test the degree of agreement between the separate SEQ ratings of each partner regarding the shared drawing experience. In addition, the possibility of gender differences in the session evaluations was tested. As females tend to be more concerned with relationships than males, who tend to be more oriented toward individuation (e.g., Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; Reis, 1998), females are expected to rate the joint drawing session more favorably than males. Thus, the first aim of the current study was to examine the participants' SEQ ratings in terms of the associations between the SEQ ratings of intimate partners and gender differences.

The second aim of the current study was to examine the relationship between attachment characteristics and the joint drawing experiences of intimate couples. We assumed that an individual's post-drawing session experiences can be understood with respect to his or her interpersonal characteristics in the couple relationship. The theoretical framework

that seemed most suitable for this purpose was Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988), which has been central in understanding and empirically investigating close relationships throughout life, including couple relations (Feeney, 2002a, 2002b). In the most recent reviews of the impact of client variables on psychotherapy, client attachment patterns have become a growing focus of study (Clarkin & Levy, 2004; Mallinckrodt, 2000). These authors state that "since psychotherapy involves the creation and use of a relationship between two or more individuals (i.e., client and therapist, client, spouse/family, and therapist), it is plausible that the clients' history of attachments to others and the quality of these attachments will have a predictive effect on the process and outcome of treatment" (Clarkin & Levy, 2004, p. 209). Hence, examining the relationship between participants' attachment characteristics and their self-reported evaluations of their perceptions and emotions in a joint drawing session can advance art therapists' understanding of couples' interpersonal processes in the joint drawing task. An overview of adult attachment dimensions and couple relationships is provided below.

Attachment Dimensions

Adult attachment theoreticians and researchers have studied individual differences in attachment characteristics and in individual and relational behaviors (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Feeney, 2004). The attachment theory contends that the overall goal of the attachment system is to maintain felt security. Nevertheless, people differ in their history of achieving or failing to achieve this goal, leading to individual differences in cognitive and emotional processes, in behavior and in affect-regulation strategies (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Feeney, 2004). The two-dimensional space underlying attachment styles is defined conceptually and empirically by two dimensions: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

Individuals low on both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (classified as secure) have learned, through sensitive caregiving, to trust the responsiveness and good intentions of others as well as their own capacity for problem solving. They activate the attachment system using a constructive approach to the regulation of affect, and their confidence in their skilled regulation of distress allows them to open themselves to new information and to deal realistically with environmental demands (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Secure partners seek and maintain close proximity with each other and provide and ask for reassurance when threatened. Their ability to serve as a secure base for each other (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) helps them create positive interactions and satisfying close relationships (Roberts & Greenberg, 2002).

Individuals characterized by high levels of attachment-related anxiety (classified as preoccupied) based on their attachment history of insensitive or inconsistent caregiving tend to hyperactivate the attachment system to attain proximity to the attachment figure. Their positive model of others,

combined with a negative model of themselves and their own efforts to feel secure in the context of incessantly questioning the availability of the attachment figure, result in an overly dependent style. When they feel the attachment figure is not being responsive, they experience anxiety and respond with high levels of attachment behaviors (e.g., clinging) in an attempt to have their need for support met (Bartholomew, Henderson, & Dutton, 2001). Their excessive need for love and approval causes them to focus on relationships and on negative emotions and thoughts (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Their rejection-oriented attentional focus keeps them vigilantly looking for signs of disapproval in interpersonal interactions (Collins & Read, 1994).

Individuals characterized by high attachment-related avoidance (classified as avoidant) based on an attachment history of parental rejection protect themselves against the anxiety aroused by rejection by deactivating the attachment system (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). They contend with the absence of a secure base and the need to avoid rejection using strategies of cognitive or behavioral distancing from the source of distress, for example, by diverting attention and inhibiting deep encoding of information that might activate the attachment system. These strategies help avoidant individuals avoid attachment-related emotions from the outset. They repress other thoughts and feelings that might activate the system, and dissociate emotional memories from other memories, thereby keeping the attachment system relatively inactive (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988).

Individuals who have experienced unresolved fear with their attachment figure score high on both the anxiety attachment dimension and the avoidance attachment dimension (classified as fearful avoidant). These individuals are characterized by negative models of self and others. Like those classified as preoccupied, they are highly dependent on the acceptance and affirmation of others. However, because of their negative expectations that others will reject them and be unreliable, they avoid intimacy to avert the pain of loss or rejection and are unable to develop self-reliance strategies when dealing with distress (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998).

In the current study, we hypothesize that the attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance of each member of the romantic couple will affect perceptions and feelings about the joint drawing experience. Previous studies on joint interactions (e.g., Collins, 1996; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997; Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005; Shaver, Schachner & Mikulincer, 2005) found that adults who lack a secure base report fewer positive relational experiences and less satisfaction in relationships than those who are securely attached. The internal relational representations developed by insecure individuals sensitize them to negativity because of their tendency to confirm expectations that close partners will be undependable and untrustworthy (Feeney, 2002a). The intense need for closeness and reassurance among individuals high in attachment-related anxiety, and the difficulty with closeness and dependency among individuals high in attachment-related avoidance, make it hard for them to create a healthy and satisfying balance between intimacy and

individuality in their relationships. Thus, we expect that a joint drawing task, which requires balancing between intimacy and individuality, will be experienced less positively by individuals high in attachment-related anxiety and/or attachment-related avoidance.

Attachment Combinations Within Couples

Although the consequences are not yet clear, many attachment theorists agree that the impact of working models within relations is affected not only by representations of early relations but also and no less importantly by the reactions of each partner to the other (e.g., Alexandrov, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005). Given that the joint drawing task reflects not only the individual's emotions, cognitions and behavioral tendencies but also the relational dynamics of the partner, we aimed to explore the relatively less studied issue of different attachment combinations within couples. Accordingly, we examined the differences in the joint drawing evaluations of individuals in various combinations of secure and insecure attachment styles within couples (i.e., both secure, secure with insecure, and both insecure). Some empirical and clinical reports suggest that in couples where one partner is avoidant and the other is anxious, one member's pattern of relating exaggerates the other's use of defense mechanisms (Feeney, 2002b). Hence, we expected that the postsession evaluations of each partner would differ as a function of the attachment style combination of the couple.

Research Hypotheses

The following specific hypotheses and questions were formulated with respect to intimate partners' evaluations of their experience of the joint drawing task: (a) The association between the SEQ ratings of the members of an intimate couple regarding their shared experience of the joint drawing task will be positive. (b) Females will evaluate the joint drawing experience as more smooth and positive and as marked by greater depth and arousal, compared to the males. (c) Individuals' attachment-related anxiety will be negatively correlated with an evaluation of the session as smooth and positive (i.e., enjoyable interaction with partner) but will be positively correlated with experiencing greater depth in the joint experience. (d) Individuals' attachment-related avoidance will be negatively correlated with evaluating the session as smooth and positive and also negatively correlated with experiencing greater depth in the joint experience. (e) Finally, the depth, smoothness, and positivity ratings within partners as a function of the different couple combinations of attachment style (i.e., within couple by couple attachment combination interaction) will be explored.

Method

Participants

Participants comprised 60 heterosexual couples (60 men and 60 women) who were either married or romantically involved and living together for 6 months or more. Their ages ranged from

19 to 36 years ($M = 26.61$, $SD = 3.19$) and the relationship duration ranged from 10 months to 12.5 years ($M = 45.01$, $SD = 30.42$, in months). At least one partner in most of the couples was a university undergraduate or graduate student (see Procedure section). Years of education ranged from 10 to 20 ($M = 14.8$, $SD = 2.28$).

Measures

SEQ (Stiles et al., 1994). The SEQ is a self-report instrument used to assess the reactions of clients and therapists to specific counseling or psychotherapy sessions. The SEQ has two parts, each consisting of 12 bipolar adjectives presented in a 7-point semantic differential format. The first part assesses participants' perceptions of the session using two evaluative dimensions: depth and smoothness. The depth scale measures the session's perceived power and value (e.g., valuable–worthless; shallow–deep), and the smoothness scale measures the session's comfort, relaxation, and pleasantness (e.g., difficult–easy; unpleasant–pleasant). On this part of the SEQ, respondents were instructed to rate their evaluation of the joint drawing session. The second part of the SEQ assesses participants' postsession mood on two dimensions, positivity and arousal. The positivity scale refers to feelings of confidence and clarity as well as happiness and the absence of fear or anger (e.g., confident–afraid; happy–sad), and the arousal scale refers to feeling active and excited as opposed to quiet and calm (e.g., quiet–aroused; wakeful–sleepy). We adapted the instructions for this second part of the SEQ in that the respondents were instructed to rate their mood *during* the joint drawing session. Internal reliabilities for the SEQ scales were depth $\alpha = .82$, smoothness $\alpha = .79$, positivity $\alpha = .83$, and arousal $\alpha = .64$. It should be noted that as there is no sufficient previous research on which to base hypotheses on the arousal scale of the SEQ and attachment characteristic, this scale was not included in the part of the study on attachment and the SEQ.

Adult romantic attachment (Brennan et al., 1998). The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECRS) was used to assess adult romantic attachment dimensions. This is a self-report multi-item measure of attachment based on factor analysis of 14 different self-report attachment measures. The 36-item scale consists of two 18-item subscales: anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety scale assesses fear of being abandoned or rejected by one's partner (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned," "I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner"). The avoidance scale assesses discomfort with intimacy and emotional closeness (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down;" and "I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close"). The ECRS uses a 7-point Likert-type response format (1 = *disagree strongly*, 4 = *neutral/mixed*, and 7 = *agree strongly*). High subscale reliabilities were reported for anxiety and avoidance, .91 and .94, respectively (Brennan et al., 1998). The anxiety scale correlated highly with scales measuring anxiety and preoccupation with

attachment, jealousy, and fear of rejection; and the avoidance scale correlated highly with scales measuring avoidance and discomfort with closeness (Brennan et al., 1998). Evidence of validity has been widely established (see Brennan et al., 1998; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). In the current study, Cronbach's α s for the anxiety and the avoidance scales were .86 and .83, respectively. In addition to yielding the two dimensions of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance, the ECRS enables the classification into the four attachment groups: secure (low anxiety–low avoidance), preoccupied (high anxiety–low avoidance), dismissing (low anxiety–high avoidance), and fearful (high anxiety–high avoidance). In addition to the anxiety and avoidance scales, participants in the current study were also classified into attachment styles (according to Brennan et al., 1998), and these in turn formed the basis for classifying the couples into couple attachment classification combinations (both secure, female secure–male insecure, female insecure–male secure, and both insecure).

Procedure

The 60 couples were recruited through advertisements inviting couples to participate in a study on male–female interpersonal relationships. The candidates were told in an initial phone conversation that participation included a simple drawing task, though no previous knowledge of drawing was required; they were not told ahead of time that it would be a joint drawing task. They were also told that the session would involve completing questionnaires and a joint interview and that the session would be videotaped. Couples signed an informed consent form. The sessions took place at the couples' homes, and each couple was paid (about US \$20) for participating.

Joint drawing session. After receiving a short explanation of the procedure, first as a warm-up, each partner was given a paint box containing 24 oil pastels and a blank sheet of white paper, size A4, and was asked to draw a nondirected, freehand individual drawing. After working separately on these individual drawings, the two met and showed each other the drawings. Following this warm-up, they were given the following instructions for the joint drawing task: "*Here is one sheet of paper for both of you. Draw on it whatever you like, but do not talk to each other.*" The participants worked on a 100 × 70 cm blank sheet of white paper that was attached to the wall; they used the pastels they had been given earlier. This task was limited to 5 min. After drawing, each participant sat in a separate place and completed the questionnaires. They then took part in a joint interview (Snir, 2006).

Results

Intercorrelations Among the Study Variables

The intercorrelations between the SEQ scales and the ECRS scales are presented in Tables 1 and 2, separately for males (Table 1) and females (Table 2). The intercorrelations for the SEQ scales showed a significant positive correlation between

Table 1. Intercorrelations of the SEQ Scales and the Attachment Dimensions for Males

	ECRS		SEQ			
	Anxiety	Avoidance	Depth	Smoothness	Positivity	Arousal
Anxiety	—					
Avoidance	.39*					
Depth	-.09	-.16				
Smoothness	-.35*	-.39*	.09			
Positivity	-.37**	-.31*	.12	.68**		
Arousal	-.08	.04	.49**	.24	.17	—

Notes: ECRS = Experiences in Close Relationships Scale; SEQ = Session Evaluation Questionnaire.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Intercorrelations of the SEQ Scales and the Attachment Dimensions for Females

	ECRS		SEQ			
	Anxiety	Avoidance	Depth	Smoothness	Positivity	Arousal
Anxiety	—					
Avoidance	.32*					
Depth	.18	-.01				
Smoothness	-.33*	-.17	.15			
Positivity	-.50**	-.32*	.09	.71**		
Arousal	.13	.08	.20	.09	.26	—

Notes: ECRS = Experiences in Close Relationships Scale; SEQ = Session Evaluation Questionnaire.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

depth and arousal for males ($r = .49$; $p < .001$) but not for females ($r = .20$; ns). A high positive significant correlation was found between smoothness and positivity for both males ($r = .68$; $p < .001$) and females ($r = .71$; $p < .001$). This indicates that males who found the joint drawing experience to have depth and to be of value were also aroused and active during the session and that both males and females who experienced the joint drawing session as smooth also felt positive and pleased during the session.

The correlations between the avoidance and anxiety scales showed that although the two scales were not completely orthogonal (cf. $r = .11$ in Brennan et al., 1998, p. 59), the correlations were relatively low for both males and females (for males $r = .39$, $p < .005$; for females $r = .32$, $p < .02$).

Relationship Between the Joint Drawing Session Evaluations of the Partners

The correlations between the partners were computed on the SEQ subscales to test the degree of agreement between partners regarding the experience of drawing together. As can be seen from Table 3 (diagonal), a significant positive correlation indicating a moderate consensus between the partners was found in evaluating the session as having depth ($r = .40$, $p < .001$) and in experiencing arousal ($r = .36$, $p < .005$). However, the correlations between the partners' ratings of smoothness and positivity were not significant. Hence, the first hypothesis regarding the agreement between the partners' evaluation of the joint

drawing experience was confirmed for depth and arousal but not for smoothness and positivity.

In addition, a positive significant correlation was found between males' evaluation of the depth of the session and females' evaluation of positivity ($r = .28$, $p < .05$). That is, the more the male partner perceived the joint drawing session as valuable, the more the female partner reported feeling confident and pleased (positivity). However, such an association was not found between female depth and male positivity. Furthermore, significant positive correlations were found between the depth evaluations of males and the arousal evaluations of females ($r = .29$, $p < .024$) and between the depth evaluations of females and the arousal evaluations of males ($r = .30$, $p < .022$).

Gender Differences on the SEQ

The SEQ scales revealed significant gender differences on depth [$t(59) = -3.97$, $p < .001$] and on arousal [$t(59) = -3.04$, $p < .005$]. Females evaluated the session as having more depth ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.94$) than did males ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.78$), and they reported more arousal ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.65$) than did males ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.70$).

Couples' Attachment Characteristics

The attachment characteristics of the present sample refer to the scores on the attachment dimensions (anxiety and

Table 3. Correlations of the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) Scales Between Intimate Partners

Females	Males			
	Depth	Smoothness	Positivity	Arousal
Depth	.40**	-.09	-.22	.30*
Smoothness	.24	.24	.14	.23
Positivity	.28*	.24	.16	.25
Arousal	.29*	.07	.11	.36**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

avoidance) and the attachment style classification combinations among members of the couple. Females were found to score significantly higher on anxiety ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.97$) than males ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.78$); $t(58) = 4.85$, $p < .000$, whereas males scored significantly higher on avoidance ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .69$) than females ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .57$); $t(58) = 3.07$, $p < .003$. These gender differences were found previously (e.g., Feeney, 1999) and may be related to gender roles.

The most common attachment combination among the couples was secure–secure ($n = 23$; 38.3%). This was followed by the secure male–insecure female combination ($n = 19$, 31.7%; of these insecure females, 14 were preoccupied, 4 fearful, and 1 dismissing). The insecure male–secure female combination was the least characteristic ($n = 7$, 11.6%; of these insecure males, 5 were preoccupied, 1 fearful, and 1 dismissing). Due to this low cell size for the analysis on couple attachment combination, the secure–insecure were combined, regardless of gender ($n = 26$, 43.3%). The insecure–insecure combination was characteristic of 10 couples (16.6%), with 8 avoidant males (2 dismissing and 6 fearful)–preoccupied females, 1 fearful female–dismissing male, and 1 preoccupied male–preoccupied female.

Attachment Dimensions and the Joint Drawing Session Evaluations

Given the above gender differences on the SEQ ratings of the joint drawing session and the gender differences found on the anxiety and avoidance attachment scales, the hypotheses regarding the associations between the participants' attachment dimensions and their evaluations of the joint drawing session were tested separately for males and for females. The hypothesized negative correlations between attachment anxiety and the SEQ scales of smoothness and positivity were corroborated (*Hypothesis 3*). For males and for females, the higher their attachment anxiety the less they perceived the joint drawing session as smooth (males, $r = -.35$, $p < .007$; females $r = -.33$, $p < .01$) and the less they perceived it as positive (males, $r = -.37$, $p < .004$; females, $r = -.50$, $p < .001$). Contrary to the hypothesis, the correlations of the anxiety dimension with the depth scale were not significant either for males (see Table 1) or for females (see Table 2).

The partner's attachment-related anxiety (the other's anxiety) and the individual's SEQ ratings (self-SEQ ratings) revealed a negative correlation ($r = -.26$, $p < .05$) between the female's

attachment-related anxiety and the male's positivity ratings. The higher the female's attachment-related anxiety the less positively the male experienced the joint drawing session. Interestingly, the male's attachment-related anxiety was not significantly related to the female's positivity rating ($r = -.13$, *ns*).

As posited in *Hypothesis 4*, attachment avoidance was negatively and significantly correlated with smoothness, though only for males ($r = -.32$, $p < .014$); the higher the male's avoidance, the less he perceived the session as smooth. With regard to positivity, as expected avoidance was negatively and significantly related to the positivity ratings of both males ($r = -.31$, $p < .019$) and females ($r = -.32$, $p < .015$); the higher the attachment-related avoidance, the less the joint drawing session was experienced as positive. As with the anxiety scale, no significant correlations were found regarding the associations between avoidance and the SEQ depth scale (see Tables 1 and 2). Partner attachment-related avoidance (the other's avoidance) and individual SEQ ratings (self-SEQ ratings) showed no significant associations.

Overall, the third and fourth hypotheses were partly supported by the correlations obtained between attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance on one hand and the joint drawing session evaluations on the other. Specifically, as hypothesized, the higher both the attachment-related anxiety and the attachment-related avoidance, the less favorably the joint drawing session was evaluated (less smoothness and less positivity of mood). However, the hypothesized relationship between the attachment dimensions and session depth were not confirmed.

Couple Attachment Style Combinations and Session Evaluations

To explore the fifth hypothesis on differences in session evaluations within couples by the various attachment combinations, we conducted a repeated-measure mixed one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The within-subject factor consisted of the male and female SEQ scores within couples, and the between-subject factor was the couple attachment combination. The dependent variables were the evaluation of the session on depth, smoothness, and positivity. This design enabled us to explore the possible two-way interaction between the within-subject factor (gender) and the between-subjects factor (couple attachment combination).

The results of the MANOVA revealed a multivariate significant within-subject effect [$F(3, 54) = 9.04$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .32$]. The univariate tests showed a significant difference between the partners in their evaluations of the session depth [$F(1, 56) = 25.78$, $p < .000$, $\eta = .32$], consistent with our findings on gender differences (see *Hypothesis 2*). The multivariate between-factor effect approached significance [$F(6, 108) = 2.07$, $p = .06$; $\eta = .10$]. The univariate tests showed a significant difference between the attachment combinations in their positivity session ratings [$F(1, 56) = 6.09$, $p < .005$, $\eta = .18$], consistent with our findings on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance and the positivity ratings (see *Hypotheses 3 and*

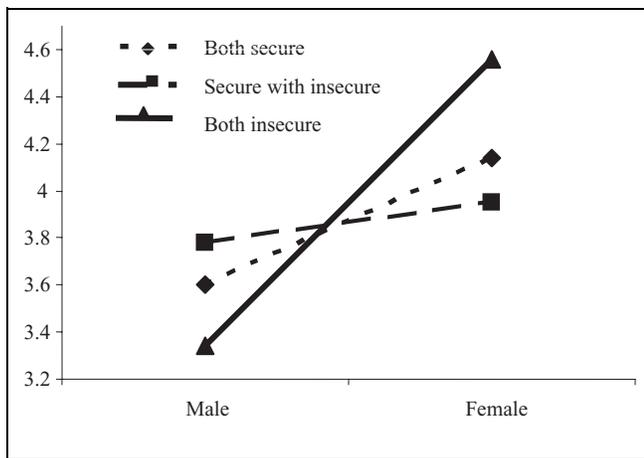


Figure 2. Depth Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) scores within couples by couple attachment combination.

4). The multivariate interaction effect of the within-subject by between-subject factors (gender by couple attachment combination) indicated an effect approaching significance [$F(6, 108) = 2.05, p = .065, \eta = .10$]. The univariate tests showed that the interaction was significant on the depth scale [$F(2, 56) = 5.03, p < .01, \eta = .15$], indicating that the gap between male and female depth reports varied as a function of attachment combinations of male and female security. Paired sample t tests showed significant differences between depth ratings of the session in the secure–secure couples [$t(22) = -3.19, p < .004$] and in the insecure–insecure couples [$t(9) = -4.78, p < .001$]. In both couple combinations, the female rated the session as having more depth than the male. The gap in the insecure–insecure combination in which the males were avoidant (fearful or dismissing) and the females preoccupied was particularly large (see Figure 2). No evidence of this gap was found in the couple combination in which one of the partners was secure and the other insecure. A separate test showed no difference between the secure female–insecure male combination and insecure female–secure male combination in the ratings of depth, though this should be interpreted with caution due to the small n in the insecure male–insecure female combination). No significant within-subject, between-subject, or interaction effects were found in this analysis for smoothness.

Discussion

This study is a preliminary empirical investigation of the joint drawing technique, commonly used in art therapy, with the aim of enhancing our understanding of the ways attachment styles relate to divergent experiences of the joint drawing session in couples. The SEQ was adopted in this study from verbal psychotherapy research to evaluate a couple's experience of drawing together on a shared space without talking. Given that the nonverbal processes in art therapy are not easily measured, the current study's findings regarding the use of the SEQ as a "window" for evaluation appear promising.

Some evidence that the members of the couple to some extent experience the joint drawing session as a shared experience is

provided by the findings of agreement in viewing the task as deep and valuable and in feeling active and aroused by it. At the same time, there is a lack of consensus between partners in evaluating the experience as smooth and positive. Our findings on the relationship between the attachment dimensions and the session evaluations in terms of their smoothness and positivity shed further light on this lack of consensus.

From an attachment perspective, it was our contention that because the joint drawing task elicits tensions between intimacy and individuality, a partner's attachment dimensions will affect the way he or she evaluates the joint drawing experience. Thus, in the current study, we tested the relationship of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance to participants' self-reported ratings of their perceptions and mood following their engagement in the joint drawing task.

It should be noted that the attachment characteristics of our sample were similar to those in previous studies (e.g., Feeney, 1999), which found that males tend to score higher on the avoidance scale and lower on the anxiety scale than females. Within the categorical method of attachment classification (Brennan et al. 1998), our sample was characterized by a higher than usual percentage of secure males and preoccupied females. This profile may reflect the reasons participants volunteered for our study. Participants were recruited for a study on close relationships, so insecure males (especially avoidant ones) who try to detach themselves from intimacy may have kept away, whereas females, especially those preoccupied with relationships, may have been interested in taking part in such a study.

The findings generally supported our hypotheses that attachment dimensions will affect how each member of a couple reports his or her experience in the joint drawing session. The correlations found between attachment-related anxiety and session smoothness indicated that for both males and females, the higher the attachment-related anxiety the more the individual perceived the session as less smooth (i.e., rough). Attachment-related avoidance was also associated with evaluations of the joint drawing session as less smooth, but only for males; for females, avoidance was not associated with evaluating the session as rough. However, as the direction of the correlation for females was similar to that for males, and as the sample was characterized by low female avoidance, in a larger sample the results might have been different. As for the reports on mood during the joint drawing task, the more insecure (anxious and/or avoidant) the individual, the less positively he or she reported feelings during the session. These findings are in line with previous studies that found attachment security to be related to more positive couple interactions and to better relationship outcomes (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The capacity of secure individuals to accept and support their partners, in contrast to the difficulties of insecure individuals to enjoy closeness and reliance on others, led to a more favorable couple interaction experience. Secure individuals appear to feel comfortable during the joint drawing interaction; they feel happy and confident, so they report their experience of the session as pleasant and positive.

The parts of the hypotheses (*Hypotheses 3 and 4*) concerning evaluations of the depth of the joint drawing experience were not supported by the correlations between the attachment dimensions characterizing each individual partner in the couple. Nevertheless, exploring the differences in the depth ratings of the session within couples as a function of the couple's attachment combination (*Hypothesis 5*) revealed an interesting pattern. In keeping with the literature on gender roles, which suggests that females are more concerned about relationships than males (Reis, 1998), females, overall, perceived the joint drawing interaction as deeper than males. However, the significant interaction that was found between within-couple depth ratings and the couple's attachment combination indicated that the gap between males and females in their evaluations of the experience as *deep* was widest in couples in which both partners were insecure. In our sample, this couple combination consisted mostly of females classified as preoccupied and males classified as avoidant. According to clinical reports and research on attachment in couples (Skowron, 2000), in this type of insecure couple, the anxious partner's intense need to be close and supported creates difficulties for the other partner, who is uncomfortable with closeness and dependency. Hence, the partner who avoids closeness deactivates the attachment system and becomes even more detached. This cycle continues: the anxiety of the preoccupied partner increases when she senses the detachment of her avoidant partner and she hyperactivates the attachment system even more. In the unfortunate dynamics of such a relationship, each partner expresses the need (closeness and separateness) that most threatens the other partner.

Our preliminary findings on partners' reported perception of the depth of a joint drawing session provide evidence for the escalation cycle characterizing the avoidant-anxious couple attachment combination. The highly avoidant behavior of one partner, in this case the male, contributes to his partner's efforts to be intensely involved in the interactions between them and in trying to feel her partner's presence. She attributes greater meaning to the joint drawing session than he does. In turn, her hyperactivation of the attachment system enhances the anxiety of her avoidant mate, who appears to be trying his best to keep himself out of any intimate interaction. His attempts are reflected in his perception of the situation as meaningless and shallow.

The gap between the partners in the experience of session depth can be demonstrated through the different accounts of a couple in which the female is preoccupied (anxious) and male avoidant. After both partners completed the questionnaires, the interviewer asked each of them to describe what he or she had drawn, to state how he or she perceived the partner's drawing, and to describe the experience of drawing in a shared space. In one example, the male drew an ocean on part of the page whereas at the same time the female drew a house on the other part. Then, the male added a quay between the ocean and the house (see Figure 3). In the postdrawing interview, each interpreted the joint drawing process very differently. Although the woman reported viewing her partner's drawing of the quay as his act of connecting the two of them in the shared space (i.e., connecting her pictorial image with his), the man reported

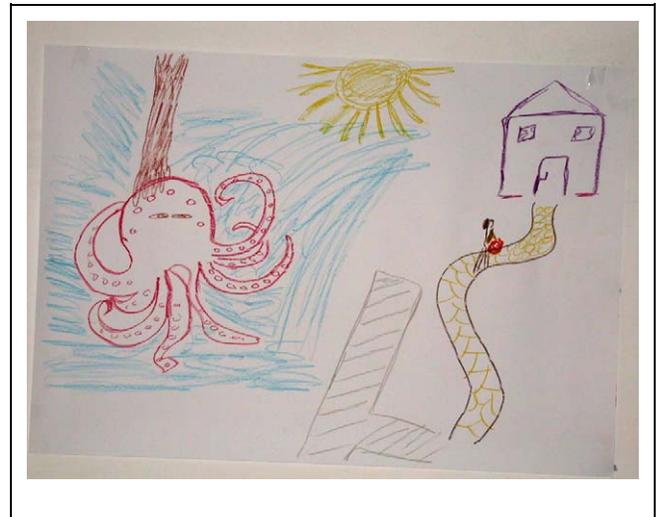


Figure 3. Gap between partners in the experience of session depth.

that for him “it’s simply a quay . . . it’s just a drawing with no special meaning.”

Such a gap between the depth of the experience for the man and woman did not appear in the secure-insecure group, where one partner was classified as secure and the other as insecure. Previous studies have shown that in couples where one partner is secure, he or she is sensitive to his or her partner's relational anxiety and behaves in a way intended to help the insecure mate to feel better. Feeney (2002b) found the best relationship outcome in secure females who dated anxious males (even compared with those who were both secure), explaining that individuals low in anxiety can recognize their partner's needs and try harder than others to adjust themselves and to be especially warm and supportive. An example from a postdrawing interview with a secure male who had drawn jointly with an insecure (anxious) female demonstrates his sensitivity and support for his partner. The woman told the interviewer she felt uncomfortable and had been worried she was spoiling his drawing. The man in turn reported he had tried to make her feel more comfortable. He wanted to engage her in the drawing by building on what she drew and by supporting her nonverbally and encouraging her to join in and add to his drawing.

In secure female-insecure male couples, a secure female drawing jointly with an insecure (avoidant) male partner might have reacted to his need for individuality by becoming less involved in the joint drawing (i.e., similar in low-depth ratings). In general, however, we found that the less anxious the female, the more positively did the male experience the joint drawing task. In other words, anxious females diminished their male partners' feeling of a positive experience. Previous studies found that gender interacted with attachment patterns in predicting couples' perceptions of various situations (e.g., Feeney, 1999). Although the findings of such studies differ on whose attachment pattern had the greater effect on the couples' reports, some of the results are partly in line with ours. For example, Collins and Read (1990) found men to be more

vulnerable to their partner's anxiety and women to be more vulnerable to men's avoidance in reporting the quality of their relationship.

Recent findings from psychotherapy research suggest that secure attachment to the therapist facilitates a sense of safety for in-session exploration, thus enabling deep and meaningful sessions that facilitate positive outcomes (Mallinckrodt, Porter & Kivlighan, 2005). Deep and smooth sessions have been named "smooth sailing" and deep and rough sessions "heavy going" (Stiles et al., 1994). Our findings on the joint drawing experience suggest that although the smoothness and positivity of an interaction is mainly affected by the individual's attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance, the gap in the participants' experience of depth varies as a function of the couple's attachment style combination. This finding emphasizes the need to consider the impact of both partners' attachment patterns on the relationship, as it has been found that insecure spouses are more "reactive" to their spouse's behavior (Feeney, 2002a).

The first limitation of this study concerns the size of the couple sample. Because this study is a part of a larger project involving a qualitative investigation of drawings and processes (Snir, 2006), the sample size was a compromise that facilitated both quantitative and qualitative research. The limited sample size did not permit to deal with the range in duration of the romantic relationships in this sample to test the possible ways attachment styles relate to the experiences of the joint drawing session in couples of different relationship duration. It is reasonable to assume that the couple's responses to the shared space differ in different stages of the couple relationship, as the tension between individuality and togetherness may take different forms. Similarly, not all the attachment patterns in both genders were well represented. The group in which both partners were insecure was relatively small, also due to the motivation to participate in the study discussed earlier. A larger sample is also needed to investigate all possible attachment-style combinations in couples.

Second, the intimate partners that participated in the study were volunteers that underwent a joint drawing session outside of a psychotherapy context. Thus, this is an analogue study of art therapy rather than a study of troubled couples seeking psychotherapy within a clinical setting (Kazdin, 1994). Conducting the study within a clinical setting would contribute to the growing literature on the implications of attachment theory to psychotherapy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

The third limitation is the reliance on self-reports to assess the variables of the study, namely attachment and the postsession evaluations of impact and mood. Although the validity of both self-report measures (the attachment measure and the SEQ) is well documented, interview-based measures may well be used in future research to further study these intrapersonal and interpersonal processes.

Implications for Practitioners

Despite the above limitations, the current study demonstrates the value of the joint drawing technique in couple

psychotherapy as a way to shed light on the interpersonal interaction between the partners. These interpersonal processes reveal the way the attachment styles play out in the joint drawing task as the partner's attachment working models evoke different strategies of deactivation and hyperactivation of the attachment system that affect the meaning the partners attribute to the experience and their affect. The ability to explore aspects of the relationship and of the self-in-relation, and to experience meaningful experiences while interacting together in the joint drawing, is essential for the therapeutic process (Clulow, 2001).

The tension created between couples with opposed defense mechanisms was demonstrated in the current study in couple's perceptual and emotional reactions to engaging in the joint drawing task. It might be important for couple's therapists to use the post-joint drawing discussion, as an opportunity to enhance couples awareness to the mutual effect of their reactions, as a way to increase the secure base that each partner can provide for the other.

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