The Role of Attachment Avoidance in Social Comparisons Between Romantic Partners

by

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Abstract

Recent literature suggests that individuals respond more positively when outperformed by their partner (an upward comparison) than when they outperform the partner (a downward comparison). In some cases, however, individuals may respond negatively to a superior partner. In two studies, I examined attachment avoidance as a moderator of social comparison outcomes: I predicted that avoidant individuals would respond more negatively to upward than downward comparisons by distancing themselves from the partner (reducing closeness) and disengaging from the relationship (reducing commitment). In Study 1, attachment avoidance moderated comparison direction’s impact on closeness: Avoidant participants reported less closeness, especially after encountering a superior partner. Study 2 replicated Study 1’s findings and found that avoidant individuals reported less commitment after an upward comparison, but only in the organizational domain. Thus, not all individuals respond positively to upward comparisons with their partner; for avoidant individuals, upward comparisons may be harmful to their relationship.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Though winning an Oscar for Best Actress may be a blessing for the career of any actress, it may be a curse for her love life (Serjeant, 2010). Since the awards were first introduced in 1929, numerous Academy Award winning actresses have experienced the dissolution of their relationships soon after winning the coveted prize. During the past ten years alone, Sandra Bullock, Kate Winslet, Reese Witherspoon, Hilary Swank, Charlize Theron and Halle Berry were all in relationships that ended shortly after their Academy Award triumph. Why might the winning of this coveted award result in problems for a relationship? In many instances, the actress’ partner was also involved in the movie industry (i.e., actors, directors, set designer, costume designer, etc.) and was less successful. Could it be the case that the partner’s sense of inferiority contributed to the dissolution of these relationships?

1.1 Social Comparisons

A significant body of research suggests that after comparisons with more successful others (upward comparisons), individuals feel worse about themselves and view their own accomplishments as inferior (for reviews, see Collins, 1996; Wood, 1989), especially if the comparison is self-relevant and the superior other is “psychologically close” (Tesser, 1988). That is, it is more distressing for individuals to be outperformed by friends, colleagues, or family members than by acquaintances or strangers. In response to this threat to self-regard, individuals are motivated to lessen the threat and restore their positive self-evaluation. In one study, for example, participants took the sting out of a comparison to a superior close other by reducing the self-relevance of the comparison domain (Tesser & Paulhus, 1983). In other instances, individuals may seek to distance themselves from close others, especially if the other’s performance is unambiguously superior to the individual’s own performance (Pleban & Tesser, 1981). In one study, for example, participants outperformed by a similar other chose to sit further away from that individual than from an individual whom they had outperformed (Pleban & Tesser, 1981).
1.2 Social Comparisons and Romantic Relationships

A growing body of literature, however, suggests that individuals actually respond more positively when their romantic partner is superior even if the comparison domain is self-relevant (Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004; Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008; Pinkus, Lockwood, Marshall, & Yoon, 2011). When individuals are high in closeness to their partner, they may incorporate their partner into their own identity (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Inclusion of the partner in self allows individuals to take on their partner’s perspectives and characteristics, which may in turn increase empathetic responses and the likelihood that individuals will see a partner’s successes and failures as one’s own. This is consistent with the extended self-evaluation maintenance model (Beach & Tesser, 1993), which argues that the negative impact of upward social comparisons may be attenuated in romantic relationships because individuals empathize with their partner. Indeed, more recent research has shown that individuals do respond to upward and downward comparisons to their partner with empathy (Pinkus et al., 2008; Pinkus et al., 2011). That is, individuals feel pride and happiness when their partners succeed and feel sadness when their partners fail.

Furthermore, because romantic partners often share resources (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 1991, 2004, 2005) and outcomes, they may also have a sense of shared fate. That is, the outcomes of one partner will affect the other. If one partner succeeds, the other may reap the benefits as well; if one partner fails, the other may suffer the consequences as well. Therefore, individuals will be more likely to respond positively to a superior partner because they will reap more benefits (Pinkus et al., 2008; Pinkus et al., 2011).

Thus, because they empathize and share outcomes with their romantic partners, individuals tend to respond positively to a successful partner. As a result, individuals use different coping strategies when outperformed by a partner than when outperformed by a friend or stranger. In one study, for example, high-closeness individuals responded to a superior partner by boosting their relationship-relevant self-appraisals, thus affirming their relationship rather than distancing themselves from it (Lockwood et al., 2004). In another study, individuals who reported that they shared outcomes with their partner were less likely to respond to a superior partner by distancing themselves from the partner (Pinkus et al., 2011). In sum, research indicates that because individuals empathize with and share outcomes with their partners, they will feel happy when
outperformed by a superior romantic partner, and will be unlikely to feel a need to distance themselves from that partner.

1.3 Attachment Avoidance and Social Comparisons

Although upward comparisons to romantic partners generally have positive outcomes, there may be notable exceptions. Individuals high on attachment avoidance are chronically uncomfortable with intimacy and closeness. Because of this discomfort, these individuals are less likely to see their partner as a valued part of their identity, thereby decreasing the likelihood that they will take on their partner’s perspective and see their partner’s successes and failures as their own. Indeed, past research has shown that empathy is inhibited by attachment avoidance (Mikulincer, Gillath, Halevy, Avihou, Avidan, & Eshkoli, 2001). Thus, individuals high in attachment avoidance may be less likely to respond positively to upward comparisons because they are less likely to respond empathetically.

Furthermore, the avoidance dimension of attachment is related to how individuals mentally represent others (working models; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007): Greater avoidance is related to more negative views of others, whereas less avoidance is related to more positive views of others. Thus, it is possible that even when their partner outperforms them, avoidant individuals still view them unfavourably.

Individuals high in attachment avoidance also have difficulties relying on others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990). Instead, they prefer to strive for self-reliance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Thus, it is unlikely that these individuals will see their fate as being tied to their partner; they may be unlikely to perceive themselves as sharing in their partners’ positive outcomes. This lack of “shared fate” responses may in turn result in greater distancing of the self from a superior partner (Pinkus et al., 2011). Indeed, this tendency to distance oneself behaviourally and cognitively from others is consistent with the coping strategies that avoidant individuals exhibit under threatening circumstances. These individuals tend to suppress distressing thoughts and memories (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005) and to put more physical distance between themselves and close others (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003) in order to protect themselves (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011). Thus, it is likely that after encountering a superior romantic partner, individuals high on avoidance will place greater distance between themselves and their partner.
Indeed, Scinta and Gable (2005) have shown that attachment avoidance does influence how individuals respond to comparisons to their romantic partner. They found that individuals high on attachment avoidance were less likely to report positive affective responses after being outperformed by their romantic partner in domains that were high in relevance for both the self and partner. Scinta and Gable did not, however, investigate the impact that these comparisons may have on relationship outcomes such as closeness and commitment. Furthermore, Scinta and Gable examined only imagined comparisons; thus, the responses obtained may reflect participants’ implicit theories regarding how they think they would respond rather than their actual responses to comparisons.

In two studies, I examined the role of attachment avoidance in determining dating individuals’ responses to intrarelationship comparisons. In Study 1, I examined their reactions after they recalled a comparison from their own daily lives. In Study 2, I attempted to replicate the findings of Study 1 using imagined comparisons. I predicted that individuals higher on attachment avoidance would respond negatively, especially after being outperformed by their partner. More specifically, I predicted that, following an upward comparison, participants high on attachment avoidance would distance themselves from their partner and disengage from the relationship, reporting less closeness to the partner, and less commitment to the relationship.
Chapter 2
Study 1

In Study 1, I examined reactions to comparisons between romantic partners drawn from participants’ own lives. Participants were asked to describe a time when their partner outperformed them (upward comparison) or when they outperformed their partner (downward comparison), and then rate their own perceived closeness. They also rated their commitment to their relationship. I predicted that more avoidant participants would report less commitment and closeness and this would be especially true after an upward comparison relative to a downward comparison.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Participants were 46 female and 20 male University of Toronto introductory psychology students ($M_{age} = 18.65, SD = 1.38$) who received course credit for taking part in the study. Participants were recruited by phone if they indicated on a pre-screening questionnaire that they had been in an exclusive romantic relationship for at least 1 month ($M = 15.83$ months, $SD = 15.26$; range = 1 to 82 months). There were no gender effects on any of the variables; therefore, gender is not discussed further.

2.1.2 Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in a study investigating perceptions of relationships. Upon arrival at the lab, participants received a pretest measure of attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationship – Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). This scale includes 18-items measuring attachment avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”; $a = .89$), which were rated on a 7-point scale with endpoints labelled 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree). Participants were then randomly assigned to recall either a time when their partner outperformed them (upward comparison condition) or a time when they outperformed their partner (downward comparison condition; Pinkus et al., 2011, Study 3; Appendix 1).
After recalling the comparison, participants were asked to describe the comparison in open-ended form, and to indicate the domain of comparison by selecting from a list of 12 domains (e.g., academic/career-related, physical appearance, wealth). In addition, participants rated the importance of the domain to themselves and the importance of the domain to their partner; ratings were made on a 7-point scale with endpoints ranging from -3 (not important at all) to 3 (very important). They also indicated how they performed relative to their partner on 7-point scale ranging from -3 (my partner was very superior/more successful) to 3 (I was very superior/more successful) with a midpoint of 0 (we performed the same/equal).

Participants then completed a questionnaire consisting of measures assessing the dependent variables. Participants completed a 10-item scale tapping how close they felt to their partner (e.g., “I am closer to my partner than any other person in my life.” and “I am very much in love with my partner”; Murray et al., 2005; $\alpha = .90$). Ratings were made using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 9 (completely true).

Participants also completed a 7-item measure of commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”; $\alpha = .90$); ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 (do not agree at all) to 8 (agree completely).

2.2 Results and Discussion

2.2.1 Comparison Manipulation

Thirty-seven participants reported a comparison in the academic domain. Seven participants reported a comparison in the social skills domain; five participants described a comparison regarding wealth; six participants described a comparison regarding personality, abilities/talent, or physical appearance; three participants described a comparison related to childcare/housework/family or other responsibilities. One participant described a health comparison, and four participants described a comparison in recreational activities. Three participants listed the domain of comparison as “other.”

Next, I tested whether the comparisons recalled by participants were important to them as well as their partner in both the upward and downward comparison conditions and whether attachment avoidance influenced the comparisons recalled. To account for the correlations between ratings
of participant and partner importance, a multivariate regression was conducted where importance ratings were regressed simultaneously on comparison condition, attachment avoidance, and the comparison by avoidance interaction. The results of the multivariate test revealed that, as a whole, importance ratings were not predicted by comparison condition, $F(2, 61) = 0.67, p = .51$, attachment avoidance, $F(2, 61) = 0.61, p = .54$, nor the comparison by avoidance interaction, $F(2, 61) = 0.64, p = .53$.

The comparisons participants recalled were in domains important to their partners in both the upward condition ($M_{upward} = 2.21, SD = 1.29$) and downward condition ($M_{downward} = 1.88, SD = 0.96$), $F(1, 62) = 0.93, p = .34$. The comparisons were also in domains that were important to the participants in both the upward condition ($M_{upward} = 1.91, SD = 1.33$) and downward condition ($M_{downward} = 1.88, SD = 1.47$), $F(1, 62) = .02, p = .89$.

Finally, I tested whether participants’ relative performance to their partners differed by comparison conditions using an analysis of variance (ANOVA). Participants reported performing worse than their partner in the upward condition ($M_{upward} = -1.67, SD = 0.96$) and performing better than their partner in the downward condition ($M_{downward} = 1.94, SD = 1.14$), $F(1, 64) = 192.83, p < .001$, indicating that the comparison manipulation was successful.

### 2.2.2 Closeness

To test whether attachment avoidance interacted with comparison condition in predicting closeness, I conducted a moderated multiple regression analysis with condition entered as an effects-coded categorical variable (-1 = downward comparison; 1 = upward comparison) and attachment avoidance as a centered continuous variable. As predicted, the comparison condition by attachment avoidance interaction was significant, $\beta = -.22, t(62) = -2.20, p = .03$. In addition, there was a main effect of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.69, t(62) = -6.78, p < .001$ and a marginally significant main effect of comparison condition, $\beta = -.18, t(62) = -1.82, p = .07$.

Next, I examined the difference in attachment avoidance for each comparison condition (Aiken & West, 1991; this strategy was used to examine all interactions across studies; see Figure 1). Simple effects revealed that for participants in the upward comparison condition, those with higher levels of attachment avoidance felt less close to their partners, $\beta = -.91, t(62) = -5.65, p < .001$, than participants in the downward comparison condition, $\beta = -.46, t(62) = -3.78, p < .001$. 

I also examined the difference in condition at each level of attachment avoidance. For those low in attachment avoidance (1 SD below the mean), there was no effect of comparison condition, $\beta = .49$, $t(62) = -1.56$, $p = .12$. For those higher in attachment avoidance (1 SD above the mean), however, making an upward comparison was significantly associated with less closeness than making a downward comparison, $\beta = -.85$, $t(62) = -2.61$, $p = .01$.

### 2.2.3 Commitment

To test whether attachment avoidance interacted with comparison condition in predicting commitment, I conducted a moderated multiple regression analysis with condition entered as an effects-coded categorical variable (-1 = downward comparison; 1 = upward comparison) and attachment avoidance as a centered continuous variable. There was a main effect of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.72$, $t(62) = -7.52$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants with higher levels of attachment avoidance were more likely to report less commitment. There was no main effect of comparison condition, $\beta = -.07$, $t(62) = -0.72$, $p = .48$ and no significant comparison condition by attachment avoidance interaction, $\beta = -.11$, $t(62) = -1.14$, $p = .26$.

### 2.2.4 Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that individuals’ level of attachment avoidance determines how they respond to being outperformed by their partners. Individuals high in attachment avoidance are more likely to push their partner away as demonstrated by reports of less closeness after thinking about an instance when their partner performed better than them in comparison to after thinking about an instance when they outperformed their partner. However, there was no evidence that individuals feel less committed to their relationships after recalling an incident when their partner outperformed them. I also replicated past findings (Scinta & Gable, 2005) showing that upward comparisons do not negatively affect individuals with lower levels of attachment avoidance.

Although Study 1 provides support for the influence of attachment avoidance in responses to social comparisons between romantic partners, participants in this study recalled their own comparisons. This manipulation allowed us to assess the impact of comparisons that individuals encounter in their daily lives. Nevertheless, it is possible that attachment avoidance may influence the comparisons participants recalled. For example, it is possible that individuals high
in avoidance may recall particularly upsetting comparisons. Consequently, in a second study, instead of having participants recall their own comparisons, I provided hypothetical comparison scenarios to the participants.
Chapter 3
Study 2

In Study 2, I assessed the impact of imagined comparisons in three different domains (academic, social, and organizational) on closeness and commitment. As in Study 1, I predicted that, following an upward comparison, higher avoidance would be more strongly associated with less closeness and less commitment relative to a downward comparison. I did not expect any differences between the domains but included different domains to ensure that findings generalize across domains.

3.1 Method

3.1.1. Participants

Participants were 65 female and 25 male Introductory Psychology students ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.49$, $SD = 5.17$) who took part in exchange for course credit. Participants were recruited in the same manner as in Study 1 and had all been in a romantic relationship with one partner for at least 1 month ($M = 19.39$ months, $SD = 18.88$, range = 1 to 99 months).

3.1.2 Procedure

As in Study 1, participants first completed the ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000; $\alpha = .92$) as a pretest measure of attachment avoidance. Participants were then randomly assigned to imagine either an upward or downward comparison in one of three domains: academic, organizational, and social. In each condition, participants read about a hypothetical situation (see Appendix 2; adapted from Pinkus et al., 2011) in which they or their partner outperformed the other in the domain. Participants were then asked to describe what they imagined and how they would feel, in open-ended form.

Participants were next asked to complete the same closeness ($\alpha = .91$) and commitment ($\alpha = .91$) dependent measures used in Study 1. At the end of the questionnaire, participants completed a manipulation check. Participants were asked to rate how important the domain of comparison was to themselves and their partners on a 7-point scale with endpoints labelled 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important) as well as their performance relative to their partners on a 7-point
scale with endpoints labelled 1 (Partner Superior) to 7 (I was superior) with a midpoint of 4 (Equal).

3.2 Results and Discussion

3.2.1 Comparison Manipulation

I tested whether the comparisons imagined by participants were important to them as well as their partner in both the upward and downward comparison and whether the domain of comparison and attachment avoidance influenced these ratings. To account for the correlations between ratings of participant and partner importance, a multivariate regression was conducted to test whether importance ratings were associated with comparison direction, attachment avoidance, and comparison domain. There were no significant interactions. Furthermore, importance ratings were not predicted by the comparison domain, Pillai’s Trace = .07, $F(4, 156) = 1.37, p = .25, \eta^2 = .03$, or attachment avoidance, Pillai’s Trace = .02, $F(2, 77) = 0.64, p = .53, \eta^2 = .02$, but there was a marginally significant main effect of comparison direction, Pillai’s Trace = .06, $F(2, 77) = 2.58, p = .08, \eta^2 = .06$. Participants’ importance ratings were not predicted by comparison direction, $F(1, 78) = .11, p = .74, \eta^2 = .001$; for participants, the comparisons were important in both the upward comparison condition ($M = 5.16, SD = 1.49$) and the downward comparison condition ($M = 5.24, SD= 1.26$). There was, however, a marginally significant relationship between partners’ importance ratings and comparison direction, $F(1, 78) = 3.03, p = .09, \eta^2 = .04$. Partner importance ratings were less important in the downward comparison condition ($M = 4.84, SD = 1.68$) than in the upward comparison condition ($M = 5.44, SD = 1.37$). In sum, participants rated comparison domains as more important to their partners when their partners outperformed them (upward comparison conditions), whereas participants’ importance ratings did not differ across comparison direction.

Next, I tested whether participants’ relative performance to their partners differed by comparison direction and comparison domain using an analysis of variance (ANOVA). There were no main effect of comparison domain, $F(2, 84) = .19, p = .83, \eta^2 = .01$, and no comparison direction by comparison domain interaction, $F(2, 84) = .99, p = .37, \eta^2 = .02$. There was, however, a main effect of comparison direction, $F(1, 84) = 43.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$. Participants reported performing worse than their partner in the upward condition ($M_{upward} = 3.38, SD = 1.25$) and
performing better than their partner in the downward condition \(M_{\text{downward}} = 5.04, SD = 1.13\), indicating that the comparison manipulation was successful.

### 3.2.2 Closeness

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) was conducted to test whether comparison direction and comparison domain were associated with avoidantly attached individuals’ reports of closeness to their partners. In Step 1 of the regression equation, avoidant attachment (centered) and direction of comparison were entered (effects coded as \(-1 = \text{downward}, 1 = \text{upward}\)). I then entered the domains of comparison (effects coded as \(-1, -1 = \text{academic}, 1, 0 = \text{social}, 0, 1 = \text{organizational}\)) in Step 2. Finally, I entered the interaction terms in separate steps. There was a main effect of direction, \(\beta = -.31, t(78) = -3.60, p = .001\), such that upward comparisons were associated with less closeness, and a main effect of attachment avoidance, \(\beta = -.38, t(78) = -4.31, p < .001\), such that greater levels of attachment avoidance were associated with less closeness. There was no main effect of comparison domain, \(R^2\) change = .002, \(p = .90\); however, the interaction between comparison direction, attachment avoidance, and comparison domain was significant, \(R^2\) change = .05, \(p = .03\).

I then tested the simple slopes of closeness on comparison direction within each domain and at varying levels of attachment avoidance. For the academic domain (Figure 3), direction of comparison had no impact at low (1 \(SD\) below the mean; \(\beta = -.16, t(78) = -.80, p = .43\)), moderate (mean value; \(\beta = -.16, t(78) = -1.11, p = .27\)), and high (1 \(SD\) above the mean; \(\beta = -.17, t(78) = -.80, p = .43\)) levels of attachment avoidance. This suggests that direction of comparison is not associated with closeness in the academic domain.

For the social domain (Figure 4), upward comparisons, relative to downward comparisons, were associated with less closeness for participants with lower levels of attachment avoidance, \(\beta = -.55, t(78) = -2.36, p = .02\), and participants with moderate levels of attachment avoidance, \(\beta = -.40, t(78) = -2.76, p = .007\), but not for participants with higher levels of attachment avoidance, \(\beta = -.25, t(78) = -1.20, p = .23\). These results suggest that being outperformed by one’s partner in the social domain is associated with reduced closeness for individuals with low to moderate levels of attachment avoidance, but not for those with higher levels of attachment avoidance.
Finally, for the organizational domain (Figure 5), direction of comparison did not matter for individuals low in attachment avoidance, $\beta = .08, t(78) = .42, p = .68$; however, individuals with moderate levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.36, t(78) = 2.35, p = .02$, and higher levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.80, t(78) = -3.36, p = .001$, reported feeling less closeness following an upward comparison relative to a downward comparison. These results indicate individuals with moderate to high levels of attachment avoidance feel less closeness to their partners after being outperformed by their partners on organizational skills.

### 3.2.3 Commitment

To test whether comparison direction and comparison domain were associated with avoidantly attached individuals’ reports of commitment, I conducted the same linear regressions as above with commitment as the dependent variable. There was no main effect of comparison direction, $\beta = -.09, t(78) = 1.01, p = .31$. There was, however, a significant main effect of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.40, t(78) = -.42, p < .001$, suggesting that as attachment avoidance increases, commitment decreases. There was also no main effect of comparison domains, $R^2$ change = .007, $p = .65$; however, the interaction between comparison direction, attachment avoidance, and comparison domain was marginally significant, $R^2$ change = .05, $p = .07$.

I then examined the simple slopes of commitment on comparison direction within each domain at varying levels of attachment avoidance to investigate whether results trended in a manner similar to those for closeness. For the academic domain (Figure 6), direction of comparison was not associated with commitment for participants with lower levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = .17, t(78) = 0.82, p = .41$, moderate levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = .07, t(78) = 0.47, p = .64$, or higher levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.03, t(78) = -0.12, p = .90$. This suggests that regardless of their levels of attachment avoidance, individuals’ commitment is unaffected by direction of an academic comparison.

For the social domain (Figure 7), direction of comparison was not associated with commitment for participants with lower levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.16, t(78) = - .65, p = .52$, moderate levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.02, t(78) = -.12, p = .90$, or higher levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = .12, t(78) = .55, p = .58$. This suggests that regardless of their levels of attachment avoidance, individuals do not feel less committed to their partners after being socially outperformed by their partners.
Finally, for the organizational domain (Figure 8), direction of comparison did not matter for those low in attachment avoidance, $\beta = .10$, $t(78) = .47$, $p = .64$; however, those with moderate levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.34$, $t(78) = -2.02$, $p = .05$, and higher levels of attachment avoidance, $\beta = -.54$, $t(78) = -2.83$, $p = .006$, reported less commitment following an upward comparison relative to a downward comparison. These results indicate individuals with moderate to high levels of attachment avoidance feel less committed to their partners after being outperformed by their partners on organizational skills.

3.2.4 Discussion

Study 2 provides further evidence that attachment avoidance affects how individuals respond to being outperformed by their partners. In addition, Study 2 suggests that the domain of comparison may also play an important role in determining how attachment avoidance influences reactions to a superior romantic partner. In the social domain, individuals with low to moderate levels of attachment avoidance reported less closeness, but not less commitment, to a superior partner than to an inferior partner; however, there was no difference in reports of closeness for individuals with higher levels of avoidance. It is possible that because more avoidant individuals value self-reliance and view others negatively, they are less likely to value success in the social domain, whereas individuals with moderate to low levels of avoidance value these skills more. In addition, the scenario we asked participants to imagine may not be indicative of all comparisons made in the social domain. That is, individuals with low to moderate levels of avoidance may normally respond positively to a more socially skilled partner; however, they felt more threatened by the situation we asked them to imagine in which they and their partner were at a party and did not know the other guests.

In contrast, individuals with moderate to high levels of attachment avoidance reported less closeness and less commitment to a more organized partner than a more disorganized partner, whereas comparison direction did not influence how close or committed individuals with low levels of attachment avoidance felt to their partner in the organizational domain. This suggests that individuals with moderate to high levels of avoidance respond negatively to more organized romantic partners than more disorganized romantic partners, whereas individuals with low levels of avoidance respond similarly to more organized and more disorganized partners.
Surprisingly, academic comparisons did not affect closeness or commitment at any level of attachment avoidance. These null findings may be due to the irrelevance of the comparison; one third of the participants in this condition reported that their partners were not students.\(^1\) Thus, it may be that academic intrarelationship comparisons are more threatening to individuals with higher levels of avoidance, but only when the comparison is relevant. Therefore, I may have been unable to detect an effect in this comparison domain because of the limited sample size. In addition, I had not anticipated that such a large proportion of participants would have nonstudent partners. Thus, I did not run a sample size large enough to test this possibility directly. Consequently, future research should only use comparison domains that are relevant to both partners. Domains that are important to the self and the partner have the greatest impact on the relationship because responses to success and failure will be the strongest (Tesser, 1988).

More generally, a larger sample size is needed to test these hypotheses more accurately. I initially did not expect differences to arise across various domains and had expected the results to generalize across domains. These findings, however, indicate that comparison domains may have different consequences for individuals depending on their levels of attachment avoidance. Thus, the unexpected differences resulted less power to appropriately test this design, and future research should address this by using a larger sample.

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\(^1\) For both closeness and commitment, the comparison direction by avoidance interaction was less significant for participants whose partner was not a student than for participants whose partner was a student; however, the interactions for closeness and commitment failed to reach significance in both subsamples.
Chapter 4  
General Discussion

Across these two studies, I examined whether upward comparisons between romantic partners are most problematic for individuals who are higher in attachment avoidance. Specifically, I found that individuals who are more avoidant push superior partners away by distancing themselves from their partner, by reporting less closeness (Study 1 and 2), and disengaging from the relationship, by reporting less commitment (Study 2). Moreover, I found that individuals with different levels of attachment avoidance may respond more or less negatively to superior romantic partners depending on the comparison domain. Individuals with low to moderate levels of avoidance reported less closeness after being socially outperformed by their partner. In contrast, individuals with moderate to high levels of avoidance reported less closeness and less commitment after being outperformed by a more organized partner. Levels of attachment avoidance did not predict individuals’ responses to comparisons regarding academic performance.

These studies add to the growing body of research examining the effects of comparisons between romantic partners. Whereas past studies have shown that individuals respond positively to a superior partner, the present studies show that this positive effect may be limited to individuals low in attachment avoidance and when comparisons are made in certain domains. Furthermore, whereas past research regarding intrarelationship comparisons has mainly focused on the affective consequences (Scinta & Gable, 2005; Pinkus et al., 2011), this research indicates how key relationship variables, such as closeness and commitment, are affected by these comparisons. Changes in these variables indicate that these comparisons have a direct impact on how individuals think and feel about their relationship.

4.1 Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present studies suggest that upward comparisons to romantic partners are most threatening to more avoidant individuals, it is important to note that these studies did not include a control condition. Without knowing how avoidant individuals respond to neutral comparisons or no comparisons, it is difficult to determine whether the differences observed between the two
conditions are distinct from responses in more neutral circumstances. Thus, in future research, it will be important to examine responses to neutral comparisons and no comparisons.

Furthermore, the findings of these two studies may not generalize beyond dating relationships. It is possible that married individuals may respond to these comparisons differently than dating individuals do because of qualitative differences between the two types of relationships. For instance, because married individuals are in more highly committed relationships than dating individuals (Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999), even avoidant married individuals may not respond as negatively as dating individuals. Higher levels of commitment among married individuals may result in greater likelihood of gaining benefits associated with a superior partner and greater likelihood of incurring costs associated with an inferior partner, leading to a greater sense of shared fate. Indeed, past research has shown that married individuals report more shared fate responses than do dating individuals (Pinkus et al., 2011). This potential difference between dating and married relationships should be explored further in future research.

In the present studies, participants were only asked to recall and imagine comparisons and the dependent variables were self-reported. I note that it may be the case that the impact of actual comparisons differs from that of imagined and recalled comparisons. For instance, participants may recall or have been asked to make less self-relevant comparisons, making them less painful. Furthermore, what participants report on the dependent measures may differ from their actual behavioural responses. In general, behavioural intentions predict behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Sheeran, 2002); nevertheless, in future research, it will be useful to examine actual behavioural responses.

Finally, future research should explore the underlying mechanism of the predicted responses. There are numerous attributes related to attachment avoidance that may be driving these responses. Three potential factors that could be investigated are shared fate, empathy and partner perceptions. Because individuals high in avoidance have difficulties relying on others (Collins & Read, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), they may have a lower sense of shared fate, which is associated with greater endorsement of distancing self from superior other (Pinkus et al., 2011). In addition, because greater attachment avoidance is associated with inhibited empathetic responses (Mikulincer et al., 2001), future studies could measure empathic responses...
to test whether deactivation of this process contributes to less positive responses. Finally, because higher levels of avoidance are associated with more negative views of partners (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), these comparison responses may be due to unfavourable views of the partner.

Comparisons to one’s partner are a prevalent part of daily life (Pinkus et al., 2008). For most individuals, these comparisons do not pose a problem; however, for avoidant individuals, these comparisons may be detrimental to their relationships. They respond to superior and inferior partners by distancing themselves, which can carry costs to the relationship. By identifying those who respond poorly to these comparisons, it is possible then to understand why they have these negative reactions and how to change these reactions to achieve more relationship-enhancing responses.
References


Figure 1. Closeness regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance (Study 1).
Figure 2. Closeness regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance in the academic domain (Study 2).
Figure 3. Closeness regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance in the social domain (Study 2).
Figure 4. Closeness regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance in the organizational domain (Study 2).
Figure 5. Commitment regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance in the academic domain (Study 2).
Figure 6. Commitment regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance in the social domain (Study 2).
Figure 7. Commitment regressed on comparison direction and attachment avoidance in the organizational domain (Study 2).
Appendices

Appendix 1 – Study 1 Comparison Manipulation Instructions

Upward Comparison Condition

Please recall an incident in the past 2 – 6 months when you were outperformed by your partner in a domain that you both care about (e.g., financial, social). That is, think about a time when your partner was more successful than you in a domain that is important to both of you. In the space below, please write a brief paragraph describing this comparison.

Downward Comparison Condition

Please recall an incident in the past 2 – 6 months when you outperformed your partner in any domain that you both care about (e.g., financial, social). That is, think about a time when you were more successful than your partner in a domain that is important to both of you. In the space below, please write a brief paragraph describing this comparison.
Appendix 2 – Study 2 Comparison Scenarios

Academic Skills Scenario

Upward Comparison

Imagine that you and your romantic partner are in the same psychology course at U of T. You have recently written the midterm exam, which you both studied hard for. During your next lecture, the professor mentions that she will post the grades after class outside of her office. At the end of the class, both you and your romantic partner walk over to the professor’s office together to see how you did on the midterm. You scan the list together looking for your grades. Your grade comes up first and you both see that you got a B on the exam. You keep scanning until you find your partner’s grade and you both see that he/she got an A on the exam. Picture this scenario in your mind and then please vividly describe the situation on the lines below.

Downward Comparison

Imagine that you and your romantic partner are in the same psychology course at U of T. You have recently written the midterm exam, which you both studied hard for. During your next lecture, the professor mentions that she will post the grades after class outside of her office. At the end of the class, both you and your romantic partner walk over to the professor’s office together to see how you did on the midterm. You scan the list together looking for your grades. Your grade comes up first and you both see that you got a B on the exam. You keep scanning until you find your partner’s grade and you both see that he/she got a C on the exam. Picture this scenario in your mind and then please vividly describe the situation on the lines below.

Social Skills Scenario

Upward Comparison

Imagine that you and your romantic partner are at a party. Neither of you know many of the guests. You both begin making conversation with new people. Throughout the evening, you notice that your partner has been more successful at striking up conversations than you. It seems like your partner makes friends more easily than you and that people find him or her more
interesting to talk to. Take a moment to imagine this scenario, and please describe the scenario in
the space below.

**Downward Comparison**

Imagine that you and your romantic partners are at a party. Neither of you know many of the
guests. You both begin making conversation with new people. Throughout the evening, you
notice that you have been more successful at striking up conversations than you. It seems like
you make friends more easily than your partner and that people find you more interesting to talk
to. Take a moment to imagine this scenario, and please describe the scenario in the space below.

**Organizational Skills Scenario**

**Upward Comparison**

Imagine that you and your romantic partner are both facing busy times at school with many
assignments approaching. During this time, you notice that your partner is well prepared for all
of them and does not have to rush to complete any of his/her work, whereas you are left
scrambling to finish. Take a moment to imagine this scenario, and please describe the scenario in
the space below.

**Downward Comparison**

Imagine that you and your romantic partner are both facing busy times at school with many
assignments approaching. During this time, you notice that you are well prepared for all of them
and do not have to rush to complete any of your work, whereas your partner is left scrambling to
finish. Take a moment to imagine this scenario, and please describe the scenario in the space
below.