

# Attachment Anxiety as a Barrier to the Benefits of Novel Couple Activities

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Novel and exciting couple activities have been found to increase satisfaction in couples (e.g., Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000), but only if both members enjoy the exciting activity (Girme, Overall, & Faingataa, 2014). We hypothesized that attachment anxiety might thwart the enjoyment and effectiveness of novel couple activities because of perceived threats to the security of the relationship. Undergraduate students ( $N = 154$ ) who were in a romantic relationship completed online questionnaires. Consistent with our hypothesis, higher attachment anxiety was associated with decreased couple enjoyment (as perceived by the participant). However, contrary to our hypotheses, higher attachment anxiety was not associated with greater willingness to engage in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity, or with decreased perceived benefits to the relationship. Furthermore, consistent with our guiding hypothesis, in exploratory analyses, we found that people who scored higher on attachment anxiety were more likely to be motivated to engage in the unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity because of threat-related concerns.

*Keywords:* relationships, attachment, anxiety, threat, leisure

Des activités de couple nouvelles et excitantes ont pour effet d'augmenter la satisfaction des couples (e.g., Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000), mais seulement si les deux membres apprécient ces activités (Girme, Overall, & Faingataa, 2014). Nous avons émis l'hypothèse que l'anxiété d'attachement pourrait contrecarrer l'appréciation et l'efficacité de nouvelles activités de couple dû à des menaces perçues par rapport à la sécurité de la relation. Des étudiants de premier cycle ( $N = 154$ ) étant en relation de couple ont complété des questionnaires en lignes. Conformément à notre hypothèse, des niveaux élevés d'anxiété d'attachement sont associés à moins de plaisir dans le couple (tel que perçu par le participant). Cependant, contrairement à nos hypothèses, un niveau élevé d'anxiété d'attachement n'était pas associé avec une plus grande volonté de s'engager dans une nouvelle activité de couple non intéressante qui a été proposée par le partenaire, ni à une diminution des bénéfices perçus de l'activité pour la relation. De plus, conformément à notre hypothèse, les analyses exploratoires nous ont permis de découvrir que les personnes qui ont des niveaux plus élevés d'anxiété d'attachement sont plus susceptibles d'être motivées à participer dans des activités qui ne les intéressent pas lorsqu'elle sont proposées par le partenaire dû à des préoccupations liées à la menace.

*Mots-clés :* relation, attachement, anxiété, menace, loisirs

At their beginnings, new romantic relationships are exciting, fun, and self-expanding (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001; Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000). But, after a while, the rate of fun and rewards dissipates, leading romantic partners to experience relational boredom (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996). Previous research seems to have found a solution to this: trying novel and exciting activities together as a couple (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). However, the limits of novel couple activities as a relational maintenance strategy have yet to be examined. The purpose of this study is to explore attachment anxiety as a factor that might negatively influence *successful* novel couple activity engagement. The guiding hypothesis of this study is that people who are more

anxiously attached view novel couple activities (with their potential risks and unpredictable nature) as security threats and, therefore, derive less benefits from this relational maintenance strategy (e.g., less enjoyment and satisfaction). Another hypothesis is that people who score high on attachment anxiety might be more willing to place themselves in contexts where there is little chance for enjoyment from novel couple activities, such as agreeing to engage in an unappealing partner-initiated novel activity. That is, when people with high attachment anxiety are confronted with a request from their partner to try a novel couple activity that they find unappealing, rather than finding a mutually desirable activity, they might agree out of fear of rejection for declining the request. The results of this study have implications for couples and couples therapists when navigating relational maintenance strategies related to leisure.

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### Novel Couple Activities

Relational boredom is a common part of the natural trajectory of a romantic relationship (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996) which can lead to a host of negative outcomes including decreased relationship satisfaction (Harasymchuk & Fehr, 2012; Tsapelas, Aron, & Orbuch, 2009). Fortunately, researchers have found an effective strategy to negate relational boredom: novel couple activities (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Reissman et al., 1993).

Reissman et al. (1993) were the first to establish novelty as a key factor in acquiring a relational benefit from couple activities. They compared couple activities that were novel with couple activities that were pleasant but mundane and found that novel couple activities significantly increased relationship satisfaction, while pleasant but mundane couple activities actually decreased relationship satisfaction. These results were later replicated by numerous studies using a variety of methodologies (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008).

However, the aspect of novelty which is so important for creating relational benefits also gives rise to inherent risks. Partners often need to adapt to unexpected challenges (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006), interact in ways they never have, and see each other in new roles or behaviours (Aron et al., 2000). Novel couple activities may therefore introduce the opportunity for immediate and salient negative outcomes such as stress, tension (Girme, Overall, & Faingataa, 2014), self-consciousness, or embarrassment. Although these risks are usually small enough to not be particularly threatening, for some people they may cause enough worry or distress that the benefits of the novel couple activity cannot be achieved. Attachment theory, which has not previously been examined in the context of novel couple activities, provides a framework that may be valuable for identifying individuals who might experience difficulties in achieving the benefits of novel couple activities.

### Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (e.g., Ainsworth, 1964, 1967, 1969; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980), explains the connection between people's experiences in, beliefs about, and behaviours in relationships with others. People's early experiences in relationships shape their beliefs about the general trustworthiness, supportiveness, predictability, warmth, and availability of others. These beliefs then shape their behaviours. Securely attached individuals, who have

had mostly positive experiences in their past relationships, have positive beliefs about others and will be trusting and comfortable in present and future relationships. Insecurely attached individuals, who have had mostly negative experiences in their past relationships, have various kinds of negative beliefs about others that lead to various kinds of negative behaviours. In adults, these negative beliefs and behaviours fall under two dimensions of insecure attachment: anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Carver, 1997; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). This study will focus on attachment anxiety.

People higher in attachment anxiety are characterized by a fear of rejection and abandonment and an intense desire for closeness and intimacy (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Their behaviour often centers around maintaining closeness to their romantic partner, and when they are unsuccessful, they experience extreme negative emotions (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). They tend to be dependent (Feeney & Collins, 2001), obsessive, and jealous (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) within their romantic relationships. Overall, people higher in attachment anxiety are less satisfied with their romantic relationships (e.g., Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Meyer, Jones, Rorer, & Maxwell, 2015; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson, 1990).

People high in attachment avoidance, on the other hand, are characterized by a fear of closeness and intimacy and the belief that romantic love does not last (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). They have difficulty trusting and depending on others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mohr, Selterman, & Fassinger, 2013; Simpson, 1990). They withdraw and distance themselves from their romantic partner, preferring to remain independent and self-reliant (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). They tend to suppress their feelings and deny the importance of their romantic partner and relationship (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

Attachment is an important context to consider in research on novel couple activities because the effects of attachment on relationships are especially powerful in novel situations (Feeney, 2008). Novel couple activities are a form of exploration, which is defined by Feeney and Thrush (2010) as engaging in "activities that involve adventure, discovery, learning, novelty, challenge, goal striving, and/or self-enhancement" (Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010, p. 9). Having a secure base – a person who provides encouragement for one's exploration, will not interfere, and will be available for support if things go wrong – affects the ways in which individuals behave and feel during exploration (Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

People who perceive their partner to be a secure base show increased enthusiasm, enjoyment, self-esteem, and positive mood, as well as decreased anxiety, frustration, self-consciousness, and hostility toward their partner during exploration activities (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). Since people higher in attachment anxiety are less likely to perceive their partners as a secure base than securely attached people (Feeney & Thrush, 2010), attachment anxiety is an important consideration in the context of novel couple activities. This will be the first study to examine attachment anxiety in this context with an additional focus on unappealing partner-initiated activities.

### Hypotheses

The main goal of this study was to examine the limits of the benefits of novel couple activity engagement for people who have higher attachment anxiety. Three hypotheses as well as exploratory questions were generated. The reasoning behind each of these hypotheses will be explained in more details below.

**Hypothesis 1.** It is not uncommon for couples to engage in activities together that one partner is not interested in, normally out of a healthy sense of compromise (Aron et al., 2000; Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002). However, people higher in attachment anxiety are especially likely to make sacrifices of their self-interest in order to please their partner (Mattingly & Clark, 2012) and they consider their relationship to be more important than leisure activities (Carnelley & Ruscher, 2000). Furthermore, although people higher in attachment anxiety are less likely to engage in novel activities of their own accord (Carnelley & Ruscher, 2000), they will do them with their romantic partner when they think it may increase intimacy with their partner, increase approval from their partner, and/or regulate negative affect.

People higher in attachment anxiety, who intensely desire to keep their romantic partner close, may be especially concerned that if they decline a partner's novel activity request, it will lead their partner to think more negatively of them or of their relationship. Based on this reasoning, our first hypothesis is that people higher in attachment anxiety will be more likely to sacrifice self-interest by engaging in a partner-initiated novel couple activity they perceive as unappealing. In other words, attachment anxiety will predict agreeing to do the novel activity they do not find appealing.

**Hypothesis 2.** Securely attached individuals – those who are low in both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance – are usually comfortable with novelty within their relationship because they are confident that their partner will be supportive and still

love them even if things go wrong (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). People higher in attachment anxiety, on the other hand, are not certain about their partner's support and love (Feeney & Thrush, 2010), so they likely see novelty as a threat. This issue is likely exacerbated by the fact that people higher in attachment anxiety are more sensitive to threat (e.g., Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Meyer, Olivier, & Roth, 2005; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

Although securely attached people may find novel couple activities to be exciting and fun, those higher in attachment anxiety may be too focused on the risks to enjoy the activities, instead experiencing a host of negative affect states. Furthermore, when one romantic partner is not enjoying a couple activity, it often leads to less enjoyment for the other partner as well (Girme et al., 2014). Based on this reasoning, our second hypothesis is that people higher in attachment anxiety will experience poorer affect and less enjoyment during an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity, and will also perceive that their partner and the couple as a whole experienced less enjoyment of the activity. In other words, there will be negative correlations between attachment anxiety and perceived couple enjoyment as well as between attachment anxiety and positive affect during the activity, and there will be a positive correlation between attachment anxiety and negative affect during the activity.

**Hypothesis 3.** Although sacrifices of self-interest can be good for relationships (Mattingly & Clark, 2010; Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), they can be harmful when the sacrifice is perceived as difficult (Ruppel & Curran, 2012; Whitton & Stanley, 1999, 2000, as cited in Whitton et al., 2002; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). In the case of people higher in attachment anxiety, however, sacrifices of self-interest are negatively associated with benefits to the relationship even if the sacrifice is not perceived as difficult (Ruppel & Curran, 2012). Furthermore, there is some evidence that people higher in attachment anxiety make sacrifices of self-interest out of the motivation to avoid negative outcomes (Carnelley & Ruscher, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2003; Mattingly & Clark, 2012), which is associated with less benefits to the relationship and greater negative affect (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Neff & Harter, 2002). Therefore, if people higher in attachment anxiety are more likely to sacrifice self-interest by engaging in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity, as proposed in hypothesis 1, the activity may be less likely to benefit the relationship due to the sacrifice involved.

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Novel couple activities also do not benefit relationships unless the activity itself is enjoyed by both partners (e.g., Berg, Trost, Schneider, & Allison, 2001; Crawford et al., 2002; Girme et al., 2014; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson et al., 2006). Therefore, if individuals higher in attachment anxiety experience less enjoyment of an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity, as proposed in hypothesis 2, it is likely that the activity will benefit their relationship less due to the lack of enjoyment.

Based on this reasoning, our third hypothesis is that people higher in attachment anxiety will be less likely to perceive that their romantic relationship has benefitted from engaging in a partner-initiated novel couple activity they perceive as unappealing. In other words, attachment anxiety will be negatively correlated with perceived positive effects of activity on the relationship.

**Exploratory questions.** Previous research have found that the motivation behind people’s decisions are strong predictors of the outcomes of those decisions (e.g., Impett et al., 2005; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Neff & Harter, 2002). In particular, avoidance-related motives are associated with negative outcomes (Impett et al., 2005). For this reason, we included as exploratory questions three possible avoidance motives that could have played a role in participants’ decisions of whether or not to do an unappealing activity with one’s partner: “avoiding an argument”, “worry about my partner’s feelings for me”, and “worry about negative effects on our relationship”. We are interested in learning which of these motives play a part in the decision-making process in this context.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were undergraduate students at Carleton University who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course. To be eligible, participants must have been in a romantic relationship and their romantic partner must have recently suggested engaging in a partner-initiated novel activity together that the participant perceived as unappealing. Participants were recruited through Carleton University’s psychology department with an

online sign-up system (SONA) and they received 0.25% credit towards the final grade of their introductory psychology course.

The original sample consisted of 328 participants; 167 were excluded due to not meeting the eligibility criteria described above, and seven were excluded due to not having completed the full questionnaire. The final sample consisted of 154 participants (81% female, 76% white). The age range was 18-47 years ( $M = 20.70$ ,  $SD = 4.91$ ). Most were in a monogamous relationship (90%), with the remaining 10% either engaged, married, or common-law. The duration of relationship ranged from one month to 28 years ( $M = 2.20$  years,  $SD = 3.59$  years). Relationship satisfaction scores were high ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ), attachment anxiety was moderate ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ), and attachment avoidance was low ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ). Refer to Table 1 for a full summary of descriptive statistics.

The full final sample ( $N = 154$ ) was used to examine hypothesis 1. For hypotheses 2 and 3, only those participants who agreed to engage in the unappealing partner-initiated activity were used ( $n = 84$ ; 54.50% of the final sample).

#### Materials

**Relationship satisfaction.** The *Relationship Assessment Scale* (Hendrick, 1988) was used to measure relationship satisfaction. Participants rated seven items on a five-point Likert-type scale (e.g., “How well does your partner meet your needs?”; “How often do you wish you hadn’t gotten into this relationship?”, reverse coded). The reliability of the scale was high ( $\alpha = .86$ ). The mean of the seven items was used as an index of relationship satisfaction.

**Attachment anxiety and avoidance.** The *Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form* (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) was used to measure adult attachment anxiety and avoidance. Participants rated 12 items on a five-point Likert-type scale (e.g., “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner” to assess anxiety; “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner” to assess avoidance). The reliability of the scale was good ( $\alpha = .78$  for anxiety and  $\alpha = .84$  for avoidance). The mean of the six items assessing anxiety was used as an index of

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Median	Min	Max
Age	20.70	4.91	19.00	18.00	47.00
Relationship duration	2.17	3.59	1.17	0.08	28.00
Relationship satisfaction	4.14	0.64	4.29	1.14	5.00
Attachment anxiety	2.73	0.51	2.67	1.67	4.00
Attachment avoidance	1.81	0.61	1.67	1.00	3.67

attachment anxiety and the mean of the six items assessing avoidance was used as an index of attachment avoidance.

**Decision motivations.** To measure decision motivations, participants who agreed to engage in the unappealing partner-initiated novel activity rated the degree to which each of the following concerns motivated their decision to engage in the activity on a Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (*no influence*) to 5 (*very strong influence*): “avoiding an argument”, “worry about my partner’s feelings for me”, and “worry about negative effects on our relationship”.

**Perceived relational benefit.** To measure perceived relational benefit, participants used a Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (*very negatively*) to 5 (*very positively*) to respond to the following single face-valid question: “How do you think doing the activity together affected your relationship overall?” (for those who decided to engage in the activity); or “How do you think declining to do the activity together affected your relationship overall?” (for those who decided not to engage in the activity).

**Affect.** A shortened version of the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess participants’ positive and negative affect during the activity (retrospectively). Of the original 20 items, 14 were selected and used, including *interested*, *enthusiastic*, *worried*, and *embarrassed*. Items that were conceptually irrelevant to the purpose of our study were eliminated in order to reduce the risk of attrition. Our shortened version remained highly reliable ( $\alpha = .88$  for positive affect and  $\alpha = .91$  for negative affect). Participants rated the degree to which they remembered feeling each emotion while engaging in the activity on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very strongly*). The mean of the seven items assessing positive affect states was used as an index of positive affect and the mean of the seven items assessing negative affect states was used as an index of negative affect.

**Enjoyment.** To measure participants’ enjoyment, perceived partner enjoyment, and perceived couple enjoyment, participants rated the following items using a Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (*disliked it a lot*) to 5 (*enjoyed it a lot*): “How much did you enjoy yourself during the activity?”; “How much do you think your partner enjoyed him- or herself during the activity?”; and “How much did you *both* enjoy yourselves during the activity?”.

## Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire at the location of their choice. The questionnaire began with self-report measures of demographics,

relationship satisfaction, and attachment anxiety and avoidance. Participants were then given the following instructions and question:

“Think of a time within the past month when your current romantic partner suggested you try a new activity together, but it was an activity you weren’t interested in or disliked (e.g., maybe he or she suggested you go to an NHL game together but you don’t care at all for sports; or maybe he or she suggested you see a musical together but you don’t like theatre.) Although these specific examples may not have happened to you, try to think of a similar situation that has happened to you. Can you think of a time in the past month when your partner asked you to engage in a new leisure activity together that you weren’t interested in or disliked?”

Participants who answered “yes” were asked the following open-ended questions: “What was the activity?”, “How did your partner suggest it?”, “What about the activity were you not interested in?” and “If you let your partner know you weren’t interested in the activity, how did you do it?”. These questions were intended to increase salience of the experience in order to gain more accurate retrospective responses throughout the remainder of the questionnaire (i.e., data were not examined).

Next, participants rated their decision motivations and perceived relational benefit. Then, only participants who decided to engage in the activity rated their affect and enjoyment, perceived partner enjoyment, and perceived couple enjoyment.

## Results

The descriptive statistics for the variables in the study are listed in Table 1. Just over half of the participants (54.50%;  $n = 84$ ) sacrificed self-interest by engaging in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity.

**Hypothesis 1.** We used a logistic regression analysis to assess whether people who score higher on anxious attachment would be more likely to agree to go along with the unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity. Contrary to our predictions, we found that people who scored higher on attachment anxiety were not more likely to agree to go along with the activity ( $\beta = -.05$ ,  $p = .879$ ).

**Hypothesis 2.** We used Pearson correlations to determine the relationships between attachment anxiety and subjective enjoyment and affect for those participants who engaged in the activity ( $n = 84$ ). Higher attachment anxiety was associated with lower enjoyment of the activity for both partners as a couple as perceived by the participant ( $r = -.28$ ,  $p = .001$ ), but was not associated with participant individual

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enjoyment of the activity ( $r = -.17, p = .12$ ), or partner individual enjoyment of the activity as perceived by the participant ( $r = -.16, p = .16$ ). The ratings of affect during the novel activity displayed a trend that was consistent with our hypotheses; however, the associations were not statistically significant (positive affect,  $r = -.15, p = .17$ ; negative affect,  $r = .15, p = .20$ ).

**Hypothesis 3.** We used a Pearson correlation to assess whether, for those who agreed to engage in the unappealing partner-initiated novel activity, people who scored higher on attachment anxiety would be more likely to perceive the activity as having less positive effects on the relationship, and found that the two variables were not related ( $r = -.05, p = .63$ ). We also assessed, using an independent-sample *t*-test, whether participants who decided to engage in the unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity perceived more positive effects of their decision on the relationship than those who decided not to. We found that people who went along with the unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity perceived more benefits to the relationship ( $M = 3.79, SD = 0.76$ ) than those who decided not to ( $M = 2.95, SD = 0.64; t(152) = 7.33, p < .01$ ).

**Exploratory questions.** We used Pearson correlations to determine the relationships between attachment anxiety and motivations for sacrificing self-interest by engaging in a partner-initiated novel couple activity perceived as unappealing. Attachment anxiety was significantly associated with being motivated to do the activity by desire to avoid an argument ( $r = .33, p = .01$ ), and worry about the relationship ( $r = .28, p = .01$ ), but not by worry about partner's feelings towards self ( $r = .09, p = .43$ ).

Because attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance tend to have some similar effects on relational processes (e.g., Li & Chan, 2012), all statistical analyses were re-run using partial correlations to control for attachment avoidance; all significant effects remained significant. Refer to Table 2 for a full summary of correlations.

### Discussion

Although there is some evidence to suggest that novel couple activities are an effective solution to the problem of relational boredom, the limits of novel couple activities as a relational maintenance strategy have not been previously examined. This study explored attachment anxiety and unappealing activities as contexts in which novel couple activities may be unbeneficial or even harmful to couples.

Contrary to our first hypothesis, attachment anxiety did not predict likeliness to sacrifice self-interest by engaging in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity. However, consistent with our second hypothesis, higher attachment anxiety was associated with less enjoyment of said activity by the couple as a whole (as perceived by the participant). Our third hypothesis was not supported; there was no correlation between attachment anxiety and relational benefits derived from the decision to engage in the unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity.

Consistent with our guiding hypothesis, exploratory questions revealed that the decision to sacrifice self-interest by engaging in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity was motivated more by desire to avoid an argument and worry about the relationship for participants higher in attachment anxiety.

Table 2  
*Correlations Between Main Variables and Attachment Anxiety*

	Attachment anxiety
Enjoyment of novel activity	-.28**
Couple	-.17
Participant	-.16
Partner	
Affect during activity	-.15
Positive	.15
Negative	
Motivation to sacrifice self-interest	.33**
Desire to avoid an argument	.28**
Worry about relationship	.09
Worry about partner's feelings towards self	
Relationship	
Perceived benefit from engaging in activity	-.05

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

In this section, possible explanations for the lack of support for Hypotheses 1 and 3 will be explored. Then, limitations of the current study and directions for future research will be considered.

### **Attachment Anxiety and Willingness to Sacrifice**

Contrary to our prediction, attachment anxiety did not predict likeliness to sacrifice self-interest by engaging in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity. This also contradicts Mattingly and Clark's (2012) finding that attachment anxiety is associated with greater sacrifice of self-interest for the interests of a romantic partner. Mattingly and Clark examined romantic partners' willingness to sacrifice in general, not in novel couple activities specifically. However, Impett et al. (2005) found that recreation is the second most common area in which romantic partners make sacrifices, implying that Mattingly and Clark's (2012) finding is likely applicable to the current study's focus on novel couple activities.

There are many factors that might shape agreement to engage in an unappealing partner-initiated novel activity. Attachment anxiety likely influences this decision-making process alongside numerous other variables that were not examined in this study, such as partner responsiveness, power differences, and stage of relationship. Without consideration of these other variables, however, the effect of attachment anxiety may be more difficult to detect. As such, future research should continue to explore novel couple activity initiation and the role of attachment anxiety with these additional factors.

Other possible reasons why the predicted association was not found relate to methodological limitations of the current study, which will be discussed in detail in a later section.

### **Attachment Anxiety and Outcomes of Engaging in Activity**

Contrary to our hypothesis, attachment anxiety was not correlated with perceived benefits to the relationship from the decision to engage in the activity. This finding is inconsistent with previous research that suggests relational sacrifice is negatively associated with relational benefits for people higher in attachment anxiety (Ruppel & Curran, 2012). In fact, this finding should have been exacerbated rather than reduced in the current study because engaging in a novel couple activity perceived as unappealing may be perceived as an especially difficult or harmful sacrifice by people higher in attachment anxiety due to their sensitivity to the threat of novelty (Ruppel & Curran, 2012, as cited in Whitton et al., 2002; Whitton et al., 2002, 2007). However, upon examining the open-ended responses about the actual activities that participants engaged in, a possible explanation became

evident. Many participants reported on couple activities that were not novel, despite it being a requirement. The lack of novelty likely dramatically reduced the level of personal sacrifice experienced by the participants, which may have led to the lack of correlation between attachment anxiety and benefit from engaging in the couple activity. Suggestions for how to ameliorate this issue in future research are in the next section.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The current study contains several limitations worth noting. First, the study used a convenience sample consisting of psychology undergraduate students from a single university in Ottawa, Canada, the majority of whom were Caucasian women. This limits the ability to generalize these findings to people of other demographics. Future research should attempt to replicate these findings using samples with more men and more cultural diversity. Furthermore, the mean length of participants' romantic relationships was just over 2 years and, therefore, it would be beneficial to examine the hypotheses in more established relationships that are past the "honeymoon" phase in the relationship. This concern is further validated by the high mean relationship satisfaction reported by this sample (4.10 on a scale of 1 to 5).

Future samples should also be larger; Hypotheses 2 and 3 were tested on only the portion of the total sample who sacrificed self-interest by engaging in an unappealing partner-initiated novel couple activity ( $n = 84$ ). The lack of correlation between attachment anxiety and relational benefits may have simply been due to a lack of power to find significance rather than a true lack of association. This lack of power may have also prevented other correlations from acquiring statistical significance.

Another limitation of the current study is its correlational design. Because of this, the direction of causality between the variables examined cannot be determined. The design also allowed for potential retrospective bias, given that participants reported on an event that occurred in the past. It is possible that participants' memories of the activities that they engaged in were inaccurate due to the time passed between its occurrence and their reporting on it. It is also possible that participants' reports on the activities may have been affected by other events that occurred between them and their romantic partners since engaging in the activity. Future research should examine these hypotheses using an experimental design in order to more accurately understand the nature of the relationship between attachment anxiety and novel couple activities. An experimental design would also reduce the possibility that romantic

partners' presence affected the reports of the participants, since they would be completing the questionnaires in the lab rather than in the location of their choice.

Additionally, some variables in this study were measured using the participants' perceptions rather than with more direct measures. For example, participants rated their perception of their partners' enjoyment of the activity (rather than have the partner make the rating). Also, participants rated their perception of the effect of the decision of whether or not to do the activity on their relationship. Future research should recruit both partners of a couple to assess the before and after effects of novel activity engagement for a more accurate report of each partner's enjoyment of the activity.

Furthermore, multiple variables that may influence the relationship between attachment anxiety and novel couple activities were not controlled for in this study. For example, there is evidence that commitment plays an important factor in willingness to sacrifice (Powell & Van Vugt, 2003; Van Lange et al., 1997; Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). It is also likely that power balance in the relationship and personality traits such as openness to experience and agreeableness would also affect willingness to sacrifice and enjoyment of novel couple activities. Future research should attempt to replicate the findings about attachment anxiety and novel couple activities while controlling for these additional variables.

Finally, as mentioned in an earlier section, the lack of novelty in the actual activities on which many participants reported is a serious limitation because the aspect of novelty was a main focus of this study. Future research should ensure that participants report on activities that are, in fact, novel, either by using an experimental design in which the allowable activities are provided by the researchers, or by asking participants about the activity in an interview setting where they can be prompted accordingly by a researcher.

### Concluding Remarks

The research on novel couple activities may provide an exciting solution to a seldom considered problem: relational boredom. However, there is still much to be done before novel couple activities as a relational maintenance strategy are fully understood. This study served as a preliminary examination of one context in which novel couple activities may not be as effective as previously presumed. We hope that this study will encourage further research on the benefits and limits of novel couple activities as a relational maintenance strategy, using improved methodology in order to produce more decisive conclusions.

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