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Buffering the Responses of Avoidantly Attached Romantic Partners in Strain Test Situations

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Strain tests are unique contexts that have important implications for relationships, but they have rarely been studied in social interactions. We investigate how more avoidant individuals (responders) react when their romantic partners (askers) request cooperation with an important plan/goal that requires a major sacrifice from responders. As predicted, more avoidant responders were less accommodating when asked to sacrifice and showed drops in trust and commitment following the strain test discussion. However, certain asker behaviors—expressing confidence that the responding partner will facilitate the request, and acknowledging their sacrifices in doing so—led more avoidant responders to react more positively during and after the strain test discussions. Showing responsiveness, another positive asker behavior, promoted growth in trust and commitment, but it did not help more avoidant responders react more positively to the asker's goal. Blending key principles of interdependence and attachment theory, this is the first behavioral observation study to identify the specific partner behaviors that help highly avoidant people respond constructively in strain test situations and to suggest how avoidant partners can become more trusting and committed in their romantic relationships.

Keywords: attachment, partner buffering, strain tests, romantic relationships

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Achieving major personal goals sometimes comes at the expense of our families, especially our intimate partners. Relocating to a new city to pursue a dream job, investing time and money in a personal hobby, or going back to school to change careers often requires partners to alter their own social networks, occupational goals, or how they spend their time and money. These contexts are known as *strain tests* because one partner's willingness to sacrifice conveys whether he or she values the relationship enough to support the requesting partner's important personal plan or goal (Holmes, 1981; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Despite the importance of these situations, little research has investigated how relationship partners negotiate strain tests, and no prior work has examined effects of individual differences in strain tests. In the current research, we examine attachment avoidance in strain test discussions, specifically when individuals higher in avoidance are asked to make a major sacrifice for their partner. Adopting a dyadic perspective (Overall & Simpson, 2013; Simpson & Overall, 2014), we test how asking partners (those requesting the sacrifice) behave during strain test discussions to help their more avoidant

responding partners (those asked to sacrifice) respond more positively. In doing so, we identify specific behaviors that asking partners can enact to *buffer* the negative responses of people higher in avoidance in noncorrespondent situations.

Strain Tests and Attachment Avoidance

According to interdependence theorists (e.g., Holmes, 1981; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), *strain tests* are situations in which the achievement of one partner's (the *asker's*) important plan or goal depends in part on the other partner (the *responder*) making a major personal sacrifice. Strain tests are "diagnostic" situations because they can reveal the responding partner's underlying motives and degree of regard for the asking partner and/or the relationship (Holmes, 1981; Simpson, 2007a,b). This is because relationship partners' immediate best interests are *noncorrespondent* in strain tests; if the asker is going to achieve his or her desired plan or goal, the responding partner's outcomes will be very negative, at least initially. For example, if Emma wants to work long hours on the weekends, which will make her more productive professionally, her partner (Tim) will spend less time with her and will lack access to their only car on weekends, limiting what he can do. Strain tests, therefore, require *transformation of motivation* by the responding partner to do what is best for the asking partner, rather than what is best for him or her personally (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). By putting relational and self-centered motives at odds, strain tests reveal the responding partner's relationship motives and values. Thus, when responders are nonresponsive or act

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on their self-centered interests, this reduces relationship quality. When transformation of motivation occurs, however, trust and commitment should increase (Shallcross & Simpson, 2012; Simpson, 2007a, 2008b; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Thus, even though sacrificing may hurt the responder, accommodating the asking partner's request can lead to benefits over time because it improves relationship quality.

Transformation of motivation should be particularly difficult for responders higher in avoidance. Avoidantly attached individuals have been rejected by prior attachment figures, leading them to believe they cannot trust or depend on close others, especially in threatening, stressful, or challenging situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). As a result, people higher in avoidance suppress their needs for closeness and intimacy and protect themselves by defensively valuing independence, autonomy, and self-reliance (Mikulincer, 1998). Thus, when they are upset, more avoidant individuals emotionally withdraw from their romantic partners (e.g., Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997) and are less inclined to seek or provide support (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). This "distancing" coping strategy allows more avoidant people to circumvent the dependence that might expose them to hurt or exploitation by their current partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Being asked to make a major sacrifice—and potentially relinquishing independence and control—should be very troubling for responders higher in avoidance. Compared with more secure people, individuals higher in avoidance are less likely to feel happy when they make their partners happy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005), less willing to sacrifice for their relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), and dislike being depended on and supporting their partners (Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999). When they do make sacrifices, it often is in the service of not feeling guilty or not angering their partners rather than in the spirit of enhancing their relationship (Impett & Gordon, 2010). Thus, when confronted with a major request from their partner, the strong, chronic need to defend and maintain their independence should generally lead responders who are higher in avoidance to react negatively by being less accommodating and less supportive of their asking partner's request. These predictions are shown in Figure 1, Path A (see responders' strain-test behavior and postdiscussion evaluations).

These negative reactions should also be evident in the relationship evaluations of responders higher in avoidance. Avoidant individuals believe that close others cannot be trusted to be caring and responsive, especially in stressful or difficult situations (Bowlby, 1973), so they report lower levels of trust in their

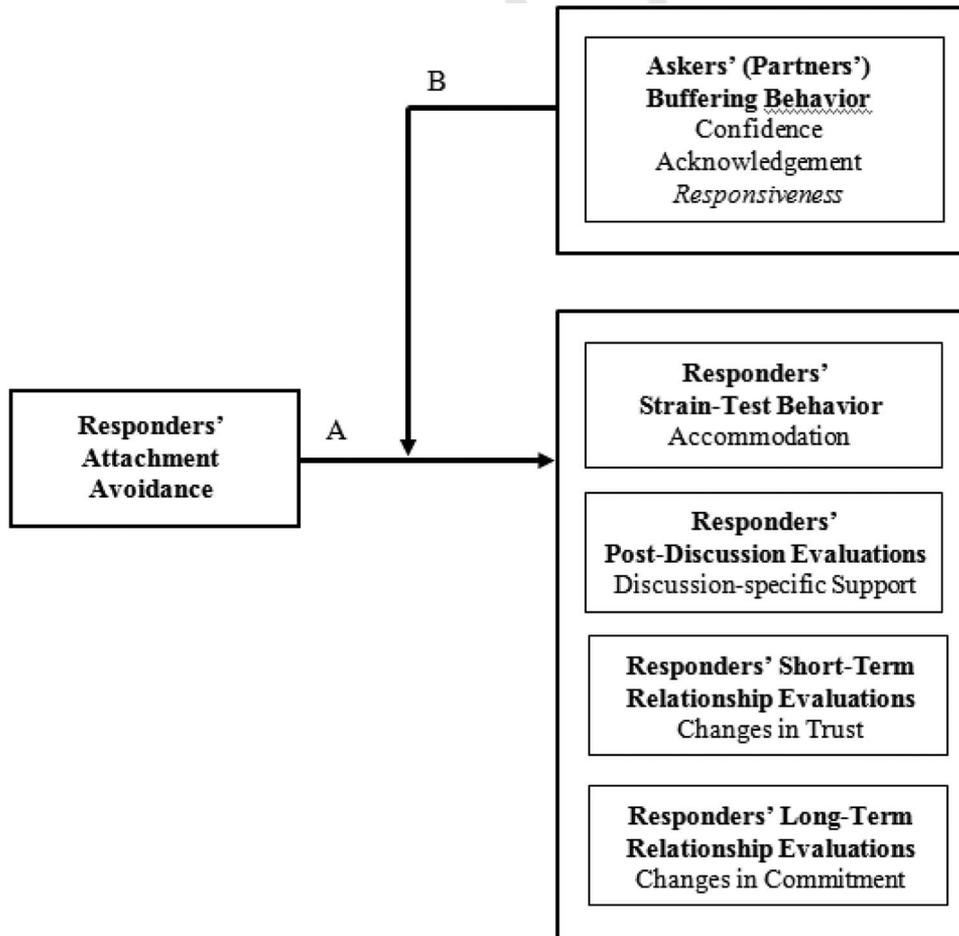


Figure 1. Model showing the partner buffering behaviors hypothesized to moderate links between responders' attachment avoidance and their responses in strain test situations.

romantic partners (Feeney, 2008; Simpson, 1990). Accordingly, when their partners ask them to sacrifice, more avoidant responders should report declines in trust, worrying that their partners might take advantage of them or ask more of them than is fair or appropriate (see Figure 1, Path A, responders' short-term relationship evaluations).

Individuals higher in avoidance also tend to be less committed to their partners and relationships (Simpson, 1990), and they make fewer efforts to invest in and maintain their relationships (Feeney, 2008). Low commitment may be one way for more avoidant individuals to both avert the hurt they anticipate in their relationships and sustain independence. Thus, when their partners ask them to make a major sacrifice, which should threaten their independence, more avoidant individuals should become even less committed to their relationship (see Figure 1, Path A, responders' long-term relationship evaluations). Anxiously attached people crave closeness, but also worry their partners may leave them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), leading to countervailing reactions in situations that involve both preventing rejection and restoring closeness and acceptance (see Simpson & Overall, 2014). Given their sensitivity to rejection and need to maintain closeness, the reactions of responders higher in anxiety are difficult to predict in strain tests; thus, we did not derive predictions for them.

Partner Buffering of Avoidance

Nearly all prior research has focused on how avoidance generates maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in relationships. Recent theoretical models (Overall & Simpson, 2013, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014), however, suggest that the relationship-damaging reactions caused by attachment avoidance can be overcome when their *partners* behave in ways that prevent triggering or assuage attachment-related concerns and defenses (Figure 1, Path B). Partner buffering involves individuals (partners) helping people higher in avoidance think, feel, and behave in ways that are less damaging to themselves, the partner, and the relationship. Buffering can occur once a dysfunctional reaction has started (to soothe avoidant defenses) or be enacted preemptively to prevent eliciting a dysfunctional response from individuals higher in avoidance.

Recent evidence suggests that behaviors that both contradict the distrusting expectations of more avoidant individuals and circumvent their defensive concerns about losing independence can have buffering effects. For example, Overall, Simpson, and Struthers (2013) found that more avoidant individuals react with greater anger and withdrawal when romantic partners want to change dissatisfying characteristics or behaviors. However, when partners soften their influence attempts by being sensitive to the more avoidant target's need to maintain autonomy and acknowledge his or her attempts to make changes, targets higher in avoidance display less anger and less withdrawal. In addition, Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, and Collins (2011) found that romantic partners can buffer the negative relationship outcomes of attachment avoidance by "easing the burden" of the relationship. Specifically, when partners behave more positively during postconflict discussion tasks—demonstrating they can "move on" and recover from the conflict—individuals who were insecure (mostly avoidant) in childhood felt better about the relationship, and these couples were more likely to still be dating 2 years later.

Partner buffering behaviors, however, must be tailored to the specific needs, concerns, and defenses of insecure people in relation to the specific demands and potential dangers inherent in a particular situation (Overall & Simpson, 2013, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014). The specific partner behaviors that buffer avoidance in strain tests, therefore, should be similar to those that buffer avoidance in other contexts, but they must also address the unique concerns of more avoidant people when they are asked to make a major personal sacrifice. Whereas more secure responders believe that their partners will respond to their needs and reciprocate sacrifices in the future, responders higher in avoidance lack trust in their partners' reliability, fear being taken advantage of, and subsequently sustain independence to prevent being hurt (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Thus, for more avoidant responders, strain tests should evoke concerns that they could be exploited, such as their partner not fully appreciating (or giving them credit for) their sacrifice or not reciprocating in the future. To dampen these concerns, asking partners must frame their requests in a way that responders higher in avoidance do not perceive as unreasonable or onerous (thereby circumventing their defensive reactions) while acknowledging that the request entails a major sacrifice (to contradict their distrusting expectations).

If askers can frame their strain test requests as a *transactional process*, such that more avoidant responders believe they are negotiating terms of an agreement rather than complying out of duty or accepting greater interdependence, the defenses of responders higher in avoidance should not be activated and they should think, feel, and behave more constructively. Consistent with this reasoning, more avoidant individuals tend to adopt exchange norms in their relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2001), view ambiguous interactions as being more instrumental than relational (Bartz & Lydon, 2006), and become increasingly adherent to exchange norms with their spouses during the first few years of marriage (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel 2010). These findings suggest that the behavioral strategies that ought to buffer individuals higher in avoidance most effectively in strain test situations should involve framing the discussion as a *transactive process* to make the sacrifice seem more *manageable, appreciated, and likely to be reciprocated*.

One effective partner buffering behavior that should mollify the negative responses of more avoidant responders is clear expressions of confidence that the request, although large, is reasonable and doable, and that responders can facilitate the asking partner's plan/goal. Expressing confidence should be effective because, when expressed positively and not coercively, it conveys that the scope of the sacrifice is reasonable and the plan/goal *can* be achieved without being too burdensome. Making the sacrifice seem more manageable and less threatening to their independence should circumvent the defenses of responders higher in avoidance, leading them to think, feel, and act more constructively.

A second effective partner buffering behavior should be direct, open acknowledgment of the sacrifice(s) that responders are being asked to make. Individuals higher in avoidance do not like to give support or be depended upon, mainly because they distrust their partners, feel vulnerable to exploitation, and believe they have not received full "credit" when they have given support in the past (cf. Bowlby, 1973). Directly acknowledging the time, effort, and sacrifice that facilitating the asking partner's major plan/goal will require should provide evidence that more avoidant responders'

efforts are valued, which should lead them to believe they *will* get recognition and credit if they support their partner's plan/goal. Direct acknowledgment may also reduce the burden that responders high in avoidance feel because the asking partner recognizes the magnitude of the sacrifice they are requesting, which should counteract perceptions that the asking partner is manipulating them or requesting too much.

These predicted effects are displayed in Path B of Figure 1: The links between responders' avoidance and their negative behavior and evaluations should be eliminated—or perhaps even reversed—when asking partners display *more* confidence or acknowledgment. Although displaying greater confidence in responders and acknowledging their sacrifices may result in better outcomes for all responders (regardless of their attachment orientations), these strategies should be *especially beneficial* for responders higher in avoidance because they are tailored to their specific needs and defensive tendencies in strain test situations. Moreover, by counteracting the negative, distrusting expectations of responders higher in avoidance, asking partners who display greater confidence or acknowledgment should also increase more avoidant responders' trust and commitment (Overall & Simpson, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014).

We also examined another potential partner buffering behavior that typically soothes most people in distressing situations—receiving understanding, validation, and caring from partners, known as *partner responsiveness* (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Validation does overlap to some extent with acknowledgment; however, acknowledgment is limited to acknowledging the sacrifices required by the plan/goal for the partner (e.g., listing what sacrifices from the partner are required, commenting on the size/scope of the sacrifice) specifically, whereas validation communicates the acceptance and reasonableness of the responder's thoughts and feelings generally. For many people, having partners who are responsive in noncorrespondent situations lowers distress (Reis & Clark, 2013). However, such emotionally focused behaviors also increase closeness and interdependence. As a result, partner responsiveness may not buffer more avoidant responders' reactions because it may undermine their independence. Consistent with this view, when discussing major conflicts with their romantic partners, individuals higher in avoidance are more calmed when they receive instrumental support (which focuses on how to resolve the problem) rather than emotional support (which involves comfort and reassurance; Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002). However, receiving *very high* levels of caring and support leads to positive outcomes in individuals higher in avoidance if it offers clear evidence that partners are reliable and trustworthy (Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015). Thus, the effectiveness of responsiveness in buffering more avoidant responders in strain test discussions remains unclear.

The Current Study

Romantic couples came to the lab to discuss two major strain test issues (one for each partner). Each asker identified something that he or she wanted to do that would require the *greatest sacrifice* by his or her responding partner. Immediately before and after each discussion, responders reported how much they trusted their partner. Immediately after each discussion, responders also reported how much they supported the partner's request. Trained

observers then coded the amount of confidence, acknowledgment, and responsiveness the asking partner displayed in each discussion and how accommodating the responding partner was toward the asking partner. Three months later, both partners reported their commitment to the relationship.

As shown in Path A of Figure 1, we predicted that greater attachment avoidance would be associated with less accommodation, less support for the partner's plan/goal, and larger declines in trust across the discussion and commitment over the following 3 months. However, as shown in Figure 1, Path B, we also predicted that when askers displayed greater confidence or acknowledgment, more avoidant responders should display greater accommodation, be more supportive, and report short-term increases in trust and long-term increases in commitment. We also explored whether a more interdependence-promoting asker behavior—partner responsiveness—buffered the negative reactions of more avoidant responders.

Method

Participants

Ninety-two heterosexual couples were recruited from the local community using fliers and ads on the research lab's website. Couples were reimbursed \$100 for participating. Each couple was married or cohabiting for at least three years ($M = 6.97$ years, $SD = 4.48$; 85% were married). Participants' mean age was 31.60 ($SD = 8.19$). Most participants earned over \$40,000 annually (62.2%) and were white/Caucasian (75.1%). A follow-up survey was completed by 86.5% ($n = 160$) of Participants 3 months later. There were no significant differences in control, independent, or dependent variables between those who did and did not complete the follow-up.

Procedures and Measures

Phase 1: Questionnaires. Both partners first privately completed an online survey, which contained the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), a 17-item measure that assesses *attachment avoidance* (e.g., "I don't like people getting too close to me") and *attachment anxiety* ("I often worry that my partner[s] don't really love me"; 1 = *I strongly disagree* and 7 = *I strongly agree*). Items were scored and averaged, with higher scores representing high avoidance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$) and high anxiety ($\alpha = .82$).

Participants also completed three commitment items (e.g., "How committed are you to your relationship?") from the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000), which were averaged ($\alpha = .83$).

Phase 2: Lab strain test discussion task. One week later, each couple came to the lab and completed two videotaped strain test discussions. Each partner first chose a goal that required his or her partner to make a *major* personal sacrifice. The experimenter then read:

Married and committed partners have to work together to decide how to spend their time, money, and energy, and every committed relationship involves a fair amount of give and take. We are interested in how couples discuss situations in which one partner wants to do something that involves a sacrifice for the other partner. For example,

you might like to spend your weekend golfing, which means that you have less time on the weekend for your partner or family. Other examples might be a job you really want, an activity you really like to do, a place you'd really like to visit, a place you'd like to live, something important that you want to achieve, or a major purchase that is appealing to one of you, but has little value for the other. Basically, we'd like you to choose something that you want to do that involves sacrifice or costs for your partner. It could be something current, or something you anticipate happening in the near future. It can be something you have already discussed or something you haven't discussed.

Participants were told they should choose a topic that required the *greatest sacrifice* from the partner. The most common topics involved relocating (e.g., moving for professional goals), pursuing further education, making a very expensive purchase, wanting to change occupations, and investing much more time/effort/money into a hobby. Each couple then discussed each partner's goal for 6–7 min in two discussions. During each discussion, the partner who had the goal was the “asker,” and the partner who was being asked to make the major sacrifice was the “responder.” Couples were randomly assigned so that either the female partner or the male partner was the “asker” in the first discussion. Participants also privately completed the prediscussion and postdiscussion measures, all of which were assessed on 7-point Likert-type scales, anchored 1 = “not at all” and 7 = “very much so”.

Discussion Measures

Discussion-specific support. Immediately after each discussion, the responding partner answered 10 items assessing the amount of support he or she gave to the asking partner during the discussion (e.g., “How much did you commit to doing something differently to help accomplish your partner's goal?”). These items were averaged ($\alpha = .83$).

Change in state trust. Immediately before and after each discussion, responders completed three revised items from the Trust subscale of the PRQC to assess *state* trust (“How much can you trust/count on/depend on your partner *right now*, at this moment?”). Items were averaged ($\alpha = .92$ and $.91$ for pre- and postdiscussion, respectively). Change in state trust was calculated using the unstandardized residual of postdiscussion state trust regressed on prediscussion state trust.

Phase 3: Behavioral coding. Each videotaped discussion was then rated by trained observers, all of whom were blind to the hypotheses and all other data. Coders rated the presence of each behavior on scales anchored 1 = “not at all”, 7 = “a great deal”.

Asker buffering behaviors. Five coders rated behaviors by the asking partner that should buffer highly avoidant responders. The coders, who were trained as a group, were first given detailed definitions of each behavior to be coded, after which they watched and discussed sample videos that provided good exemplars of the specific behaviors. All coders then made their ratings independently. Coders rated *asker confidence*, the degree to which the asking partner expressed confidence that his or her responding partner would be able and willing to support his or her goal: for example, stating they knew their partner would support them (intraclass correlation [ICC] = $.71$). Coders also rated *asker acknowledgment*, the degree to which the asker acknowledged the size and scope of the sacrifice(s) responders would need to make

to support his or her goal (ICC = $.82$); for example, recognizing the sacrifices the goal required or commenting on their size.

Asker responsiveness was assessed with three behavioral codes developed from theory (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988) and research (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998) on responsiveness. Coders rated the degree to which the responder displayed: (1) understanding, (2) validation, and (3) caring toward the asking partner and his or her views and opinions during the discussion. Interrater reliabilities for each item were high (ICCs were $.93$, $.93$, and $.88$, respectively), and they were highly correlated (r s ranged from $.75$ to $.85$), so the items were averaged ($\alpha = .92$).

Responder accommodation behaviors. Five different coders rated responder behaviors related to accommodation, which were developed from theory and research on accommodation in relationships (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Coders rated the degree to which each responder tried to: (1) mesh, blend, or fit his or her future plans and activities with the stated plan/goal of his or her partner; (2) approach the discussion as an opportunity for cooperation and joint planning; and (3) actively do or suggest things to help the partner make (or move forward with) plans that would facilitate the partner's plan/goal. Interrater reliabilities for each rated item were high (all ICCs > $.89$), and the three items (averaged across coders) were summed ($\alpha = .96$).

Level of sacrifice. Coders also rated the level of sacrifice required from the responder for the asker to achieve his or her goal, where 1 = “little sacrifice” and 7 = “extreme sacrifice” (ICC = $.82$).

Phase 4: Relationship follow-up. Three months after the lab visit, both partners were emailed a private link and asked to complete the same 3-item *Commitment* scale they had completed at phase 1 ($\alpha = .89$). Of the 159 individuals who completed the follow-up survey, only one reported that her relationship had ended since the lab session.

Results

Supporting Path A of our model, more avoidant responders were less accommodating when asked to make a major sacrifice for their partners and reported larger declines in state trust across the discussion (Table 1; Figure 1); there was no association between responder avoidance and discussion-specific support or change in commitment. However, as shown in Path B of Figure 1, we also anticipated that the negative reactions of more avoidant responders would be reduced (buffered) when asking partners: (1) conveyed greater confidence that responders would support their major plan/goal, or (2) directly acknowledged the sacrifice(s) that responders would need to make to support the request. To test these predictions, we ran dyadic models using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 20 to: (1) model the effects of each couple member's asker and responder measures simultaneously, and (2) calculate all effects accounting for the nonindependence of the data across partners and the two discussions. Each model regressed one of the responder outcomes on responders' avoidance, responders' anxiety, one asker behavior (i.e., confidence, acknowledgment, or responsiveness), and the interaction between responder avoidance and the asker behavior. All independent variables were grand-mean centered.

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Responder avoidance	—											
2. Responder anxiety	.28**	—										
3. Asker avoidance	.26**	.19**	—									
4. Asker anxiety	.19**	.31**	.28**	—								
5. Responder accommodation	-.15*	-.20**	-.15*	-.28**	—							
6. Responder discussion-specific support	.01	-.03	.00	-.14	.59**	—						
7. Responder change in state trust	-.22**	-.17*	-.09	-.20**	.35**	.21**	—					
8. Responder change in commitment	-.13	-.08	-.02	-.08	.09	.14	.07	—				
9. Asker confidence	-.23**	-.20**	-.29**	-.25**	.63**	.47**	.28**	.23**	—			
10. Asker acknowledgment	-.18*	-.17*	-.13	-.15*	.41**	.24**	.24**	.04	.49**	—		
11. Asker responsiveness	-.24**	-.23**	-.27**	-.12	.57**	.36**	.12	.27**	.70**	.72**	—	
12. Level of sacrifice	-.001	-.02	.03	-.06	.18*	.08	.03	-.09	.25**	.09	.10	—
<i>M</i>	3.23	2.81	3.23	2.81	3.98	5.17	.009	0	3.92	4.07	4.23	3.64
<i>SD</i>	.97	1.08	.97	1.08	1.00	.93	.41	.80	.61	.83	.68	1.03

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

Asker Confidence

The results of the analyses testing whether askers' confidence in their responding partners' support buffered the reactions of more avoidant responders are shown in Table 2. As predicted (Figure 1, Path B), significant interactions confirmed that observer-rated confidence moderated all four of the negative outcomes for highly avoidant responders. These interactions are shown in Figure 2. For brevity, simple slopes and significance tests for all of the significant interactions discussed below are reported in the supplemental materials available online.

Figure 2 (Panel A) shows the interaction predicting accommodation. More avoidant responders displayed significantly more observer-rated accommodation behavior when their partners expressed greater confidence in their (responders') support for the partner's plan/goal, and this positive effect was stronger than that of less avoidant responders. When askers showed less confidence, more avoidant responders displayed significantly less accommodation than did less avoidant responders. In contrast, when askers showed greater confidence, more avoidant responders were significantly more accommodating than less avoidant responders.

AQ:2, T2
F2

Table 2
Models Testing Whether Askers' Confidence Moderates (Buffers) Associations Between Responders' Avoidance and Responders' Outcomes

APIM parameter	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>	CI Lower	CI Upper	<i>r</i>
Predicting responder accommodation					
Intercept	4.02**	68.39	3.90	4.14	.99
Responder avoidance	.01	.21	-.11	.14	.02
Responder anxiety	-.06	-.99	-.17	.06	.08
Asker confidence	1.02**	10.39	.82	1.21	.66
Asker Confidence * Responder Avoidance	.31**	2.96	.10	.52	.23
Predicting responder discussion-specific support					
Intercept	5.21**	80.61	5.08	5.33	.99
Responder avoidance	.10	1.53	-.03	.23	.11
Responder anxiety	.05	.90	-.06	.17	.07
Asker confidence	.76**	7.29	.56	.97	.49
Asker Confidence * Responder Avoidance	.24*	2.16	.02	.46	.16
Predicting responder change in state trust					
Intercept	.02	.58	-.05	.08	.07
Responder avoidance	-.24	-.73	-.10	.04	.06
Responder anxiety	.01	.40	-.05	.07	.03
Asker confidence	.12*	2.19	.01	.22	.18
Asker Confidence * Responder Avoidance	.14*	2.36	.02	.25	.18
Predicting responder change in commitment					
Intercept	-.01	-.07	-.14	.13	.01
Responder avoidance	-.07	-1.11	-.21	.06	.09
Responder anxiety	-.01	-.03	-.13	.13	.01
Asker confidence	.27**	3.38	.11	.43	.27
Asker Confidence * Responder Avoidance	.14†	1.77	-.02	.29	.15

Note. APIM = •••; CI = confidence interval.
† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

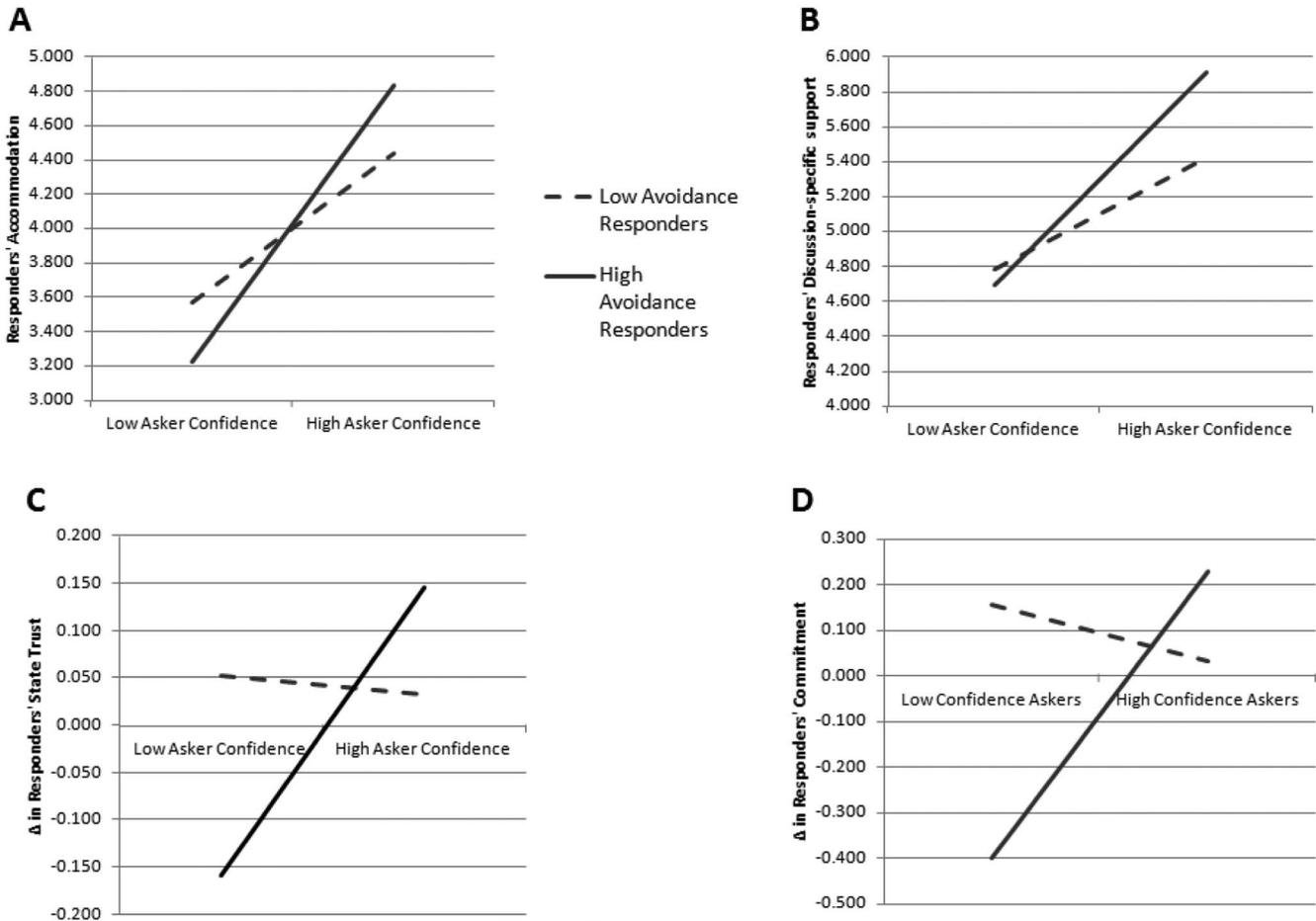


Figure 2. Interactions between askers' confidence and responders' avoidance predicting responders' outcomes. Note. Regression lines are drawn 1 *SD* above (to index high levels) and 1 *SD* below (to index low levels) the sample mean.

All responders reported greater support for the asker's plan/goal when asking partners displayed greater confidence, but this effect was significantly stronger for more avoidant responders (Figure 2, Panel C). This pattern differed to that for accommodation. Responders higher (vs. lower) in avoidance did not report less support than less avoidant responders when askers displayed less confidence, but they did report significantly more support when askers displayed greater confidence.

Asker confidence also generated changes in state trust in more avoidant responders (Figure 3, Panel C). Although confidence had little effect on the state trust of less avoidant responders, greater confidence predicted significantly larger increases in state trust in more avoidant responders. Indeed, more avoidant responders reported significant declines in trust when askers showed less confidence, but *increases* in trust that were roughly equivalent to their less avoidant counterparts' when asker confidence was higher.

Finally, more avoidant responders reported significantly larger increases in commitment when asking partners displayed greater confidence, but askers' confidence was not associated with commitment change for less avoidant responders (Figure 3, Panel D). More avoidant responders reported significant declines in commitment when askers' confidence was low, but increases in commit-

ment similar to less avoidant responders' when askers' confidence was high.

Asker Acknowledgment

All four interaction effects testing the effectiveness of askers' acknowledgment were significant or marginally significant. First, more avoidant responders displayed significantly more accommodation behavior when asking partners acknowledged their potential sacrifice, whereas askers' acknowledgment had little effect on the accommodation shown by less avoidant responders (Figure 3, Panel A). At low levels of askers' acknowledgment, more avoidant responders displayed significantly less accommodation than less avoidant responders. When askers acknowledged responders' sacrifices more, however, more avoidant responders displayed accommodation levels similar to less avoidant responders.

More avoidant responders also reported providing significantly more support to their asking partners when askers engaged in more acknowledgment, whereas the support reported by less avoidant responders was not affected by askers' acknowledgment (Figure 3, Panel B). Though similar to the pattern for askers' confidence, the differences between higher and lower avoidance responders were

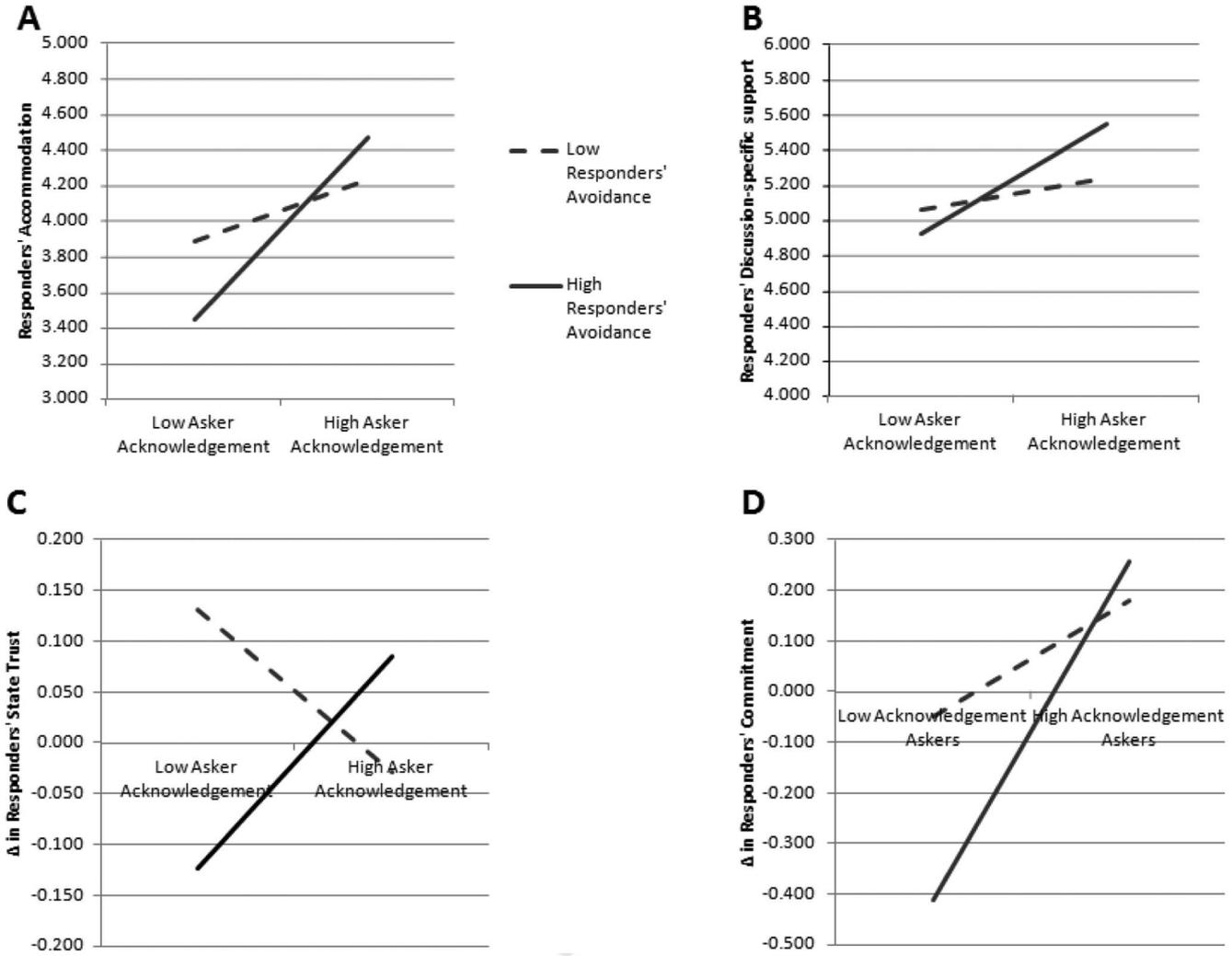


Figure 3. Interactions between askers' acknowledgment and responders' avoidance predicting responders' outcomes. Note. Regression lines are drawn 1 SD above (to index high levels) and 1 SD below (to index low levels) the sample mean.

not significant when askers' acknowledgment was low versus high.

Third, more avoidant responders reported significantly larger positive changes in state trust when askers displayed more Acknowledgement, whereas less avoidant responders showed a marginally reverse pattern (Figure 3, Panel C). In particular, when askers displayed less acknowledgment, more avoidant responders reported declines in state trust, which differed significantly from lower avoidance responders. In contrast, when askers acknowledged their partners' sacrifice(s) more, more avoidant responders reported increases in state trust, which were roughly equivalent to less avoidant responders' increases.

Finally, the effect of askers' acknowledgment predicting changes in responders' commitment three months later was significant for responders higher, but not lower, in avoidance (Figure 3, Panel D). When asker acknowledgment was low, more avoidant responders reported declines in commitment, but they experienced the same positive changes in commitment as less avoidant responders when their partner's acknowledgment was high.

Asker Responsiveness

The pattern of effects for asker responsiveness indicated that responsiveness did not alleviate the defensive reactions of more avoidant responders during the discussion, but it did affect short-term and long-term relationship evaluations (Table 4). First, more avoidant responders reported significantly larger increases in state trust when askers displayed greater responsiveness, whereas less avoidant responders were unaffected by their partners' responsiveness (Figure 4, Panel A). When askers were less responsive, more avoidant responders reported declines in state trust, which differed significantly from less avoidant responders. But when askers were more responsive, more avoidant responders reported *increases* in state trust, which were equivalent to those of less avoidant responders.

The effect of askers' responsiveness on change in commitment was also significant for responders who were higher, but not lower, in avoidance (Figure 4, Panel B). When asker responsiveness was low, more avoidant responders reported significant declines in

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F4

Table 3
Models Testing Whether Askers' Acknowledge Moderates (Buffers) Associations Between Responders' Avoidance and Responders' Outcomes

APIM parameter	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	CI Lower	CI Upper	<i>r</i>
Predicting responder accommodation					
Intercept	4.01***	57.85	3.87	4.15	.99
Responder Avoidance	-.05	-.74	-.20	.09	.06
Responder anxiety	-.09	-1.39	-.22	.04	.11
Asker acknowledge	.42***	4.98	.25	.58	.35
Asker Acknowledge * Responder Avoidance	.21**	2.62	.05	.37	.19
Predicting responder discussion-specific support					
Intercept	5.19***	69.65	5.05	5.34	.99
Responder avoidance	.04	.56	-.10	.18	.04
Responder anxiety	.03	.45	-.10	.16	.03
Asker acknowledge	.24**	2.88	.08	.41	.21
Asker Acknowledge * Responder Avoidance	.14†	1.73	-.02	.30	.13
Predicting responder change in state trust					
Intercept	.02	.53	-.05	.80	.06
Responder avoidance	-.04	-1.07	-.10	.03	.08
Responder anxiety	.01	.21	-.05	.07	.02
Asker confidence	.01	.38	-.06	.09	.03
Asker Confidence * Responder Avoidance	.11**	2.99	.04	.19	.22
Predicting responder change in commitment					
Intercept	.004	.06	-.14	.15	.01
Responder avoidance	-.09	-1.35	-.23	.04	.11
Responder anxiety	-.02	-.38	-.15	.10	.03
Asker confidence	.02†	1.79	-.02	.44	.15
Asker Confidence * Responder Avoidance	.32*	2.57	.07	.56	.21

Note. APIM = •••; CI = confidence interval.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

commitment, whereas less avoidant responders did not. But when askers were more responsive, more avoidant responders experienced the same increases in commitment as less avoidant responders.

Discriminant Analyses and Alternative Explanations

We also tested whether responder avoidance was associated with the level of sacrifice requested by askers (coded by observers) to ensure that more avoidant responders were not given less demanding or less difficult goals than less avoidant responders. Responders' level of avoidance and the amount of sacrifice requested was not associated ($b = -.001$, $p = .99$), and controlling for level of sacrifice did not change any results reported previously. In addition, gender (coded 1 = *female*, -1 = *male*), discussion order (i.e., whether a partner was in the asking role first or second), asker attachment avoidance and anxiety, relationship duration, and relationship closeness were also included as control variables in all analyses. Inclusion of these variables did not change the pattern of results, and gender did not interact with any of the predictors. Additional analyses assessing whether responder anxiety interacted with askers' level of confidence or acknowledgment indicated that the interactions in Figures 2–4 were specific to avoidance and did not occur for anxiety (all b s < .12, all p s > .09).

Discussion

This study assessed behavioral dynamics in couples' strain test discussions to test how partners can buffer the defensive reactions of more avoidant individuals when requesting major sacrifices of

them. As predicted, more avoidant responders displayed less accommodation to their partner's strain test request and experienced declines in state trust (Figure 1, Path A). However, two behaviors enacted by askers—acknowledging the responder's sacrifice, and expressing confidence in their support—improved the reactions of more avoidant responders (Figure 1, Path B). When asking partners expressed greater confidence or acknowledgment, more avoidant responders exhibited equal or greater levels of accommodation and support for their partner's plan/goal than less avoidant responders. More avoidant responders also reported increases in commitment and state trust when asking partners expressed greater confidence or acknowledgment. We also explored whether responsiveness had the same buffering effects: Asker responsiveness improved trust and commitment in more avoidant responders, but it did not affect their level of accommodation behavior or support for their partner's plan/goal.

The negative responses of highly avoidant responders in strain test situations can put their relationships at risk unless their partners can avert or dampen their defensive reactions. This study provides clear evidence that asking partners *can* buffer the negative reactions of more avoidant individuals, thereby producing more constructive interactions and better relationship outcomes. As discussed later, the current results extend prior research on buffering avoidant defenses by: (a) revealing how partners can build trust and commitment in people higher on avoidance, (b) showing that effective buffering can produce responses in more avoidant people that are *more positive* than even those in less avoidant people, and (c) discriminating the most effective buffering behaviors from general positivity (e.g., responsiveness).

Table 4
Models Testing Whether Askers' Responsiveness Moderates (Buffers) Associations Between Responders' Avoidance and Responders' Outcomes

APIM parameter	<i>b</i>	<i>T</i>	CI Lower	CI Upper	<i>r</i>
Predicting responder accommodation					
Intercept	4.00***	62.99	3.87	4.13	.99
Responder avoidance	-.07	-.12	-.14	.13	.01
Responder anxiety	-.06	-.91	-.18	.07	.08
Asker responsiveness	.80***	8.34	.61	.99	.66
Asker Responsiveness * Responder Avoidance	.14	1.39	-.06	.33	.11
Predicting responder discussion-specific support					
Intercept	5.19***	74.50	5.05	5.33	.99
Responder Avoidance	.07	1.03	-.07	.21	.08
Responder anxiety	.05	.76	-.08	.18	.06
Asker responsiveness	.51***	4.90	.30	.71	.38
Asker Responsiveness * Responder avoidance	.10	.95	-.11	.30	.07
Predicting responder change in state trust					
Intercept	.02	.71	-.04	.09	.08
Responder avoidance	-.04	-1.14	-.11	.03	.09
Responder anxiety	.01	.46	-.05	.08	.04
Asker responsiveness	.05	1.09	-.04	.15	.10
Asker Responsiveness * Responder Avoidance	.14**	2.90	.05	.24	.22
Predicting responder change in commitment					
Intercept	-.007	-.09	-.15	.13	.01
Responder avoidance	-.09	-1.34	-.22	.04	.11
Responder anxiety	.003	.05	-.13	.13	.00
Asker responsiveness	.31**	2.97	.11	.52	.26
Asker Responsiveness * Responder Avoidance	.20*	2.05	.008	.40	.17

Note. APIM = ***; CI = confidence interval.
 * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

First, this study is the first to show that partner buffering behaviors are not only associated with reduced defensive reactions, but also increased state trust and commitment in more avoidant people. Low trust and commitment are defining features of avoidance, but buffering behaviors that counteract the expectations of highly avoidant people can confirm that partners can be trusted and

it is safe to commit to the relationship (Overall & Simpson, 2015). Indeed, when asking partners displayed less confidence or acknowledgment during strain test discussions, more avoidant responders reported significant declines in pre-to-post discussion state trust and commitment across 3 months. However, when partners showed more of these buffering behaviors, more avoidant

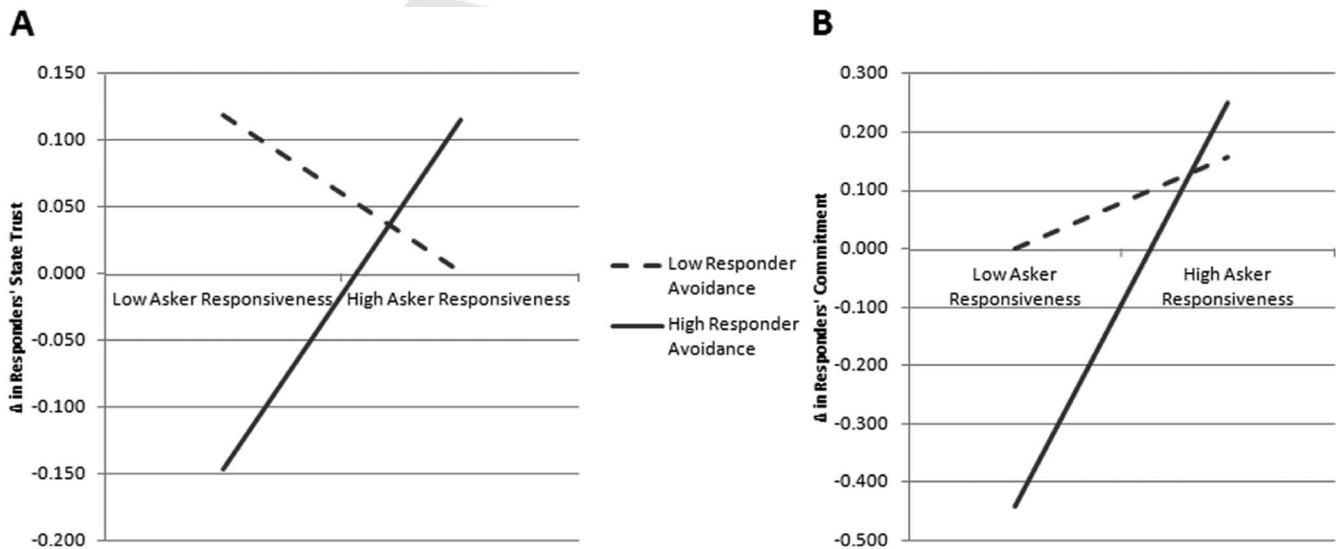


Figure 4. Interactions between askers' responsiveness and responders' avoidance predicting change in responders' state trust and commitment. Note. Regression lines are drawn 1 SD above (to index high levels) and 1 SD below (to index low levels) the sample mean.

responders experienced *increases* in trust and commitment at a level comparable to the positive changes reported by less avoidant responders. The fact that changes in state trust and commitment occurred in fairly long-term relationships makes these findings all-the-more impressive. These increases suggest that avoidant tendencies might begin to change in response to carefully tailored, sensitive buffering behaviors enacted by partners in “diagnostic” situations, which could promote better couple and family functioning over time.

Second, greater asker confidence not only had positive outcomes for more avoidant responders; they reported *even more* support and exhibited *even more* accommodation than their less avoidant counterparts. There are several possible reasons for these cross-over effects. The self-reported support ratings by more avoidant responders, for example, might be higher than those of less avoidant responders because of contrast effects. If more avoidant people are typically less inclined to provide support, they may report giving more support partially in response to the “unexpected” behavior by their partner. We suspect, however, that the positive perceptions stemming from the contrast between what more avoidant responders expected versus what happened may have led them to behave in an unusually constructive and positive manner, as supported by the accommodation effects. When askers violate more avoidant responders’ negative expectations, more avoidant responders may rise to the occasion, becoming better partners, at least temporarily (see *Girme et al., 2015*). Training partners in these techniques could promote improvements in their relationship evaluations as well as relationship functioning.

Displaying confidence, acknowledgment, and responsiveness also increased state trust across the strain test discussions, most likely because these behaviors violated more avoidant responders’ negative expectations. The critical role of expectation-violation is supported by the fact that less avoidant (more secure) individuals did not experience the same benefits from these buffering behaviors. Less avoidant (more secure) individuals generally trust their partner’s love and goodwill, and are unencumbered by chronic attachment concerns (*Bowlby, 1973*). As a result, less avoidant individuals rarely worry about being taken advantage of or being “under-appreciated” by their partners, and they commonly assume that their partner’s major requests are (or will be) reasonable. The expression of higher levels of confidence and acknowledgment by their partners, therefore, is less meaningful to them as it is for more avoidant individuals. Ironically, the myopic focus on whether the partner is trustworthy and interdependence is safe allows these specific behaviors to benefit highly avoidant responders in strain test situations.

Third, although asker responsiveness improved more avoidant individuals’ relationship evaluations (i.e., trust and commitment), it did not help them respond more positively to their partner’s plan/goal during the discussion (i.e., accommodation and discussion-specific support). This may be because responsiveness contains only one of the two ingredients for successful buffering in strain tests: It can counteract highly avoidant individuals’ negative expectations, but it does not reframe the sacrifice as less onerous and interdependence-promoting, which may lead to highly avoidant people becoming defensive during the discussion. This suggests that both of these features are critical for successful buffering, and there may be an important distinction between buffering avoidant individuals’ defensive reactions during

strain tests and building better relationship outcomes more generally. This distinction may be particularly important for clinicians: Are therapies successfully targeting *both* types of outcomes in distressed couples?

Caveat and Conclusions

The current study has some limitations. Our sample was heterosexual, married or cohabiting, and mostly White, well-educated, and middle-class, making generalizations to other populations unknown. Very highly avoidant individuals may not be in or remain in long-term relationships, and they might be less inclined to volunteer for a relationships study, meaning that individuals with clinical levels of avoidance may have been underrepresented in our sample. Our couples generally had high-quality relationships, so the extent to which these findings generalize to clinically distressed couples is unclear. The study is also correlational, so causal inferences cannot be made. Nevertheless, we did find buffering effects for both observer-rated responses and self-reported evaluations, and we ruled out several plausible alternative explanations (e.g., relationship closeness, level of sacrifice). We also did not directly test the psychological mechanisms underlying our effects. Although we hypothesize that acknowledgment and confidence are effective buffering behaviors because they frame the sacrifice as manageable, appreciated, and likely to be reciprocated, we did not assess these perceptions directly. Isolating these mechanisms is an important direction for future research.

Attachment and interdependence theory are two of the most comprehensive and generative theories in the field of close relationships, but they are rarely linked (for an exception, see *Tran & Simpson, 2009*). Attachment orientations operate as perceptual filters through which interdependence with a partner is viewed. Because attachment theory focuses on how people manage their desire for and comfort with interdependence issues, examining behavior in interdependence-relevant contexts can be most informative. Our results demonstrate that when asking partners enact buffering behaviors tailored to the specific needs, motives, and defenses of more avoidant responders within these important strain test situations, more avoidant responders react quite well, sometimes even *better than* less avoidant (more secure) responders, and these positive changes remain evident in their relationships months later. By reframing the situation, individuals help their at-risk partners respond more constructively and enhance their relationship evaluations. Training the partners of highly avoidant individuals to enact these techniques may help these couples work through tenuous situations successfully. And by buffering their partners well, people may also help their families successfully navigate these potential risky situations and translate them into opportunities for growth.

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