Theory and research on adult attachment style emphasize the crucial role that the sense of attachment security plays in the formation and maintenance of couple relationships. In the present article, we review studies that have examined the contribution of adult attachment style to relational cognitions, emotions, and behaviors as well as to the formation, quality, and stability of dating and marital relationships. We discuss some of the measurement and design issues raised by this research. Based on the reviewed findings, we provide an integrative, systemic theoretical model delineating how the links between partners' attachment security and the quality of their couple relationship occurs. Finally, we discuss the implications of this model for the understanding of how attachment style and couple relationships combine to affect the family system in general, and parent-child relationships and children's developmental outcomes, in particular.

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nners, and extending it to other aspects of the family system.

THE SENSE OF ATTACHMENT SECURITY

According to Bowlby’s (1973) theory, interactions with significant others who are available and supportive in times of stress facilitate the formation of a sense of attachment security. Waters, Rodrigues, and Ridgeway (1998) viewed this sense as a set of expectations about others’ availability and responsiveness in times of stress, which are organized around a basic prototype or script. This script seems to include the following if-then propositions: “If I encounter an obstacle and/or become distressed, I can approach a significant other for help; I am a person worthy of receiving help; he or she is likely to be available and supportive; I will experience relief and comfort as a result of proximity to this person; I can then return to other activities.” In Bowlby’s (1973) terms, the sense of attachment security provides an individual with a framework for maintaining wellbeing, formulating effective emotion-regulation devices, developing positive models of self and others, and engaging in exploration, affiliation, and caregiving activities.

Although the sense of attachment security may be formed during early interactions with primary caregivers, Bowlby (1988) contended that every meaningful interaction with significant others throughout life may affect beliefs about others’ availability and supportiveness. Moreover, although the sense of attachment security may be quite general, it is also common for people to develop relationship-specific beliefs organized around actual experiences with a specific partner. These beliefs do not necessarily fit with the global sense of attachment security and may be influenced by the quality of the specific relationship (Collins & Read, 1994). In fact, like every mental representation, the sense of attachment security can be contextually activated by actual or imagined encounters with available figures, even in persons who have global doubts about others’ goodwill (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, et al., 1996).

In the last 15 years, numerous studies have examined the sense of attachment security in adulthood. The most frequently used strategy is to examine associations between the global sense of attachment security and theoretically relevant constructs. Specifically, these studies have focused on a person’s attachment style and compared persons whose reports suggest a secure style with those whose reports suggest more insecure styles. This line of research has been guided by two different conceptual and methodological approaches (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) that use different assessment techniques and tap different aspects of attachment style. Main et al.’s (1985) approach is based on a developmental perspective and assesses early attachment to parents through an intensive, reliable, and well-validated interview (the Adult Attachment Interview—AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985) that demands complex and skillful content and stylistic interpretation of narrative accounts of relationship qualities. Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) approach is based on a personality and social psychology perspective and assesses current attachment orientations to significant others (not only parents but also romantic partners) through self-report measures that have been found to be parsimonious and psychometrically sound.

Recent advances in the conceptualization and assessment of adult attachment style indicate that this relational construct seems to be organized around two underlying dimensions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The first dimension, typically called “avoidance,” reflects the extent to which people distrust others’ goodwill and strive to maintain emotional dis-
tance and remain independent from a relationship partner. The second dimension, typically called “anxiety,” reflects the degree to which people worry that a partner might not be available or supportive in times of need. Persons scoring low on these two dimensions exhibit the secure style and are characterized by a positive history of attachment interactions and a global sense of attachment security.

Studies using both the AAI and self-report measures of attachment style have generally supported Bowlby’s hypotheses about the psychological correlates of the sense of attachment security. First, persons having a sense of attachment security tend to react to stressful events with lower levels of distress than persons who score high on avoidance or anxiety dimensions (B.C. Feeney & Kirkpatrick, 1996; Mikulincer & Florian, 2001). Second, persons who hold a sense of attachment security are more likely to cope with stress by relying on support-seeking than do persons who score high on avoidance or anxiety dimensions (Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Third, securely attached persons hold more positive expectations about relationship partners than persons who score high on the avoidance dimension (Collins, 1996; Collins & Read, 1990). Fourth, securely attached persons hold more positive self-views than persons who score high on the anxiety dimension (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer, 1998). Fifth, persons who hold a sense of attachment security are more likely to engage in exploration and affiliation activities, and to be more sensitive and responsive to their partner’s needs than persons scoring high on avoidance or anxiety dimensions (Feeney, 1996; Mikulincer, 1997; Mikulincer & Selinger, 2001).

In his writings, Bowlby (1979) also emphasized the possible implications of attachment security for couple relationships. In his own words, “there is a strong causal relationship between an individual’s experiences with his parents and his later capacity to make affectional bonds” (p. 135). In particular, Bowlby (1979) highlighted marriage as the affectional bond in which the influence of attachment history is most likely to be manifested. Following this theoretical formulation, studies have attempted to test empirically whether relatively enduring differences in attachment style would be manifested in the quality of adult couple relationships and marriage.

In the next two sections, we (1) outline briefly some of the methodological issues involved in examining links between attachment style and couple relationship qualities, and (2) review the existing relevant studies. Based on the findings, we then present a systemic model to suggest how the links between attachment and marital quality occur. Moreover, we discuss the implications of our formulation for the understanding of how adult attachment and marital relationships combine to affect parent-child relationships and children’s developmental outcomes—an endeavor that places attachment in the context of the family system and gives a central role to couple relationships as a potential mechanism in the transmission of attachment relationships across the generations.

**METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

**The Assessment of Attachment**

As we noted above, two major methods of measuring attachment style in adulthood were developed in the 1980s. Main and her colleagues (Main & Goldwyn, 1994; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985) have relied on a narrative approach to elicit “working models of attachment.” The 60- to 90-minute AAI (see Hesse, 1999, for a description) asks interviewees to choose 5 adjectives to describe their relationships with mother and father, to
supply anecdotes illustrating why they characterized each relationship with those adjectives, to speculate about why their parents behaved as they did, and to describe change over time in the quality of their relationships with parents.

Tracing their assumptions back to Ainsworth’s early formulations describing infants’ attachments (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), the creators of the AAI assumed that attachment patterns were best conceptualized as categories or types. Coding of the AAI is based on an analysis of 5 continuous scales intended to capture the quality of early experiences, separately with mother and with father (e.g., loving, rejecting), and on 12 scales that describe a person’s current state of mind regarding those experiences (e.g., derogation of attachment, coherence of the narrative). Based on a configurational analysis of these scales, which are thought to represent dominant discourse strategies (Main & Goldwyn, 1996), AAI narratives are coded as indicative of either secure, insecure-dismissing, or insecure-preoccupied working models of attachment.*

The second main method of measuring adult attachment differs in three important ways from the AAI. First, the data come primarily from questionnaires (but see Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995, for a comparison of questionnaire and interview methods). Second, the aim of these questionnaires is not to examine working models of early parent-child relationships, but rather to assess styles of attachment in adult close relationships. Third, items in these questionnaires focus explicitly on whether the self is worthy of love and whether the other will be available for support when the need arises. Initially, these questionnaires adopted a categorical approach (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), asking individuals to choose among three brief prototypical descriptions of Secure, Avoidant, and Preoccupied attachment in adult intimate relationships. However, subsequent versions deconstructed the paragraphs into sentences (Collins & Read, 1990) and computed continuous attachment scores (e.g., Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

An enduring concern, which has not been given the attention it deserves, is that there is not always correspondence between the narrative and questionnaire methods, or the categorical versus continuous scoring of questionnaires. Because the more intensive Adult Attachment Interview focuses on early parent-child relationships and the various questionnaire attachment style measures focus on adult-adult intimate relationships, it should not be surprising to find that the overlap is quite low at best (Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000; Cowan & Cowan, 2001). Comparing the self-classification of attachment categories using the paragraph method and the classification based on dimensional analysis of questionnaire responses, Brennan et al. (1998) found highly statistically significant results; yet, nearly half of the participants classified as secure on one measure were classified as insecure on the other. As we shall see, despite the fact that there is often low agreement between methods of measuring attachment, different studies using different methods tend to produce similar trends concerning the connections between partners’ attachment and marital quality.

A little-noted but important fact is that most of the items used to assess attachment are phrased in general terms (“I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others”), but some investigators re-write the items to focus on specific relationships (“I am somewhat uncomfortable being

* Two additional categories—Unresolved as a result of loss and Cannot Classify—are part of the system, but the three primary categories represent the major alternative strategies for dealing with threats to attachment relationships.
close to my partner”). The two versions tend to be significantly correlated in the .3 to .5 range (Cowan & Cowan, 2001). This modest correspondence leaves room for the suggestive findings described below revealing that self-reported attachment style with one’s partner shows higher correlations with marital satisfaction than self-reported general attachment style in relation to unspecified others.

Measurement of Marital Quality

Marital quality is measured in different ways in different studies. It is not problematic that different studies use different questionnaires assessing marital satisfaction, since they all tend to be very highly correlated (Gottman, 1993). What is more at issue is that most researchers rely on an individual’s self-report of the quality of his or her intimate relationship, while a few base their conclusions on observations of marital interaction, often in laboratory settings. Although significant correlations between self-reports and observations are consistently found, it is rare that one measure explains more than 25% of the variance in the other (cf. Levinson & Gottman, 1983).

Determining Sequence and Causal Connections

The question at the heart of this article is whether attachment patterns can be described as antecedent to marital quality, or, more strongly, as playing a causal role in partners’ ability to establish a positive couple relationship. As we shall see, this question is difficult to answer from the data that are presently available. One obstacle to making causal inferences is that most studies of attachment style and couple relationship not only assess both constructs at the same time, but, as we have indicated, both kinds of data are obtained from the same person. Conclusions about the linkage between the two are then confounded by the information source—a problem that Bank, Dishion, Skinner, and Patterson (1990) describe colorfully as “glop.” Our review will show that this does not pose an insurmountable problem, because studies with independent sources of attachment and couple relationship data support the hypothesis that the two are functionally related.

More difficult to deal with is the nature of the functional relationship. Many investigators assume that longitudinal designs will solve the problem, reasoning that if attachment measured at Time 1 predicts couple relationship quality assessed at Time 2, we can determine the direction of effects. But as two of us have noted elsewhere (Cowan & Cowan, 2002), it is possible that earlier couple relationship qualities produce the Time 1 attachment results. That is, causal hypotheses can be supported but not proven by longitudinal designs. What we need, then, are experimental and quasi-experimental longitudinal designs in which earlier intervention-induced changes in attachment style result in later changes in relationship quality, or vice versa. Having raised a number of methodological concerns, we now review findings on attachment and couple relationship.

A REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Relationship Expectations and Beliefs

Adult attachment studies have provided important information on the association between the sense of attachment security and positive beliefs about couple relationships. For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that participants who classified themselves as securely attached scored higher than insecure persons in beliefs about (a) the existence of romantic love and (b) the possibility that, although romantic feelings wax and wane, they may reach the intensity experienced at the start of the relationship, and in some cases, never fade. Subse-
quent studies have reported that, as compared to more insecure people, securely attached people held more optimistic beliefs about love relationships and marriage (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994; Whitaker, Beach, Etherton, et al., 1999), were more likely to use a positive frame in thinking about couple relationships (Boon & Griffin, 1996), and were less likely to evaluate negative relational outcomes (Feeney & Noller, 1992) and to endorse dysfunctional beliefs about couple relationships (Whisman & Allan, 1996).

The formation and maintenance of long-term romantic relationships: Attachment studies have consistently reported that persons differing in attachment style vary in (a) the likelihood of being involved in long-term couple relationships, and (b) the vulnerability of these relationships to disruption. For example, more securely attached persons have been found among seriously committed dating couples or married couples than in samples of single individuals (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Senchak & Leonard, 1992). Accordingly, Hill, Young, and Nord (1994) found that persons who reported a secure attachment style were more likely to attain marriage/cohabitation and less likely to experience divorce than insecure persons.

There is also extensive evidence that secure persons have more stable dating relationships than insecure persons (Feeney & Noller, 1990, 1992; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). This finding was replicated in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. For example, Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) found that secure persons’ relationships were more likely to be intact after 4 years than insecure persons’ relationships. In contrast, avoidant persons were more likely 4 years later to be “not seeing anyone and not looking,” whereas anxiously attached persons were most likely to indicate that they were not seeing anyone and looking for a partner.

Conceptually similar findings were found by Klohnen and Bera (1998) among women who participated in a 31-year longitudinal personality study. At ages 21, 27, 43, and 52, information was collected about their marital status. Participants also provided information about their commitment to marriage at age 21, marital tensions at age 27, relationship satisfaction at age 43 and 52, and attachment style at age 52. Women who endorsed a secure attachment style at age 52 showed a different relationship trajectory from women with an insecure attachment style beginning as early as age 21. First, securely attached women were more likely to be married at age 52 and reported higher relationship satisfaction than women who endorsed an insecure style at the same age. Second, securely attached mid-life women had reported higher commitment to getting married and starting a family at age 21 than insecurely attached women and this early difference seemed to have “come true” 6 years later at age 27, when secure women were more likely to be married and report fewer marital tensions than women who endorsed an insecure style. However, one should be aware of the retrospective nature of this study as well as of the possibility that variations in relationship trajectory might have affected women’s attachment style at age 52.

In one of the only studies of attachment and marital stability using the narrative approach, Crowell and Treboux (2001) assessed 146 premarital dating couples with the AAI and with another interview focused specifically on their relationship as a couple—the Couple Relationship Interview (CRI). Five years later, they found that the AAI did not predict marital breakup, but couples in which both part-
ners were categorized as insecurely attached on the CRI were more likely to have separated or divorced.

The sense of attachment security has also been found to be inversely associated with problems in relationship formation and maintenance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998; Doi & Thelen, 1993; McCarthy & Taylor, 1999; Thelen, Sherman, & Borst, 1998). For example, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) assessed maladaptive interpersonal behavior, as measured by the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems, and found that securely attached persons did not score extremely high in any of the problem scales. In contrast, whereas attachment anxiety was positively related to scores of “hard to be sociable,” “hard to be submissive,” “too responsible,” and “too controlling,” attachment avoidance was positively correlated with scores of “hard to be intimate.” These findings were replicated in self-reports and friend-reports. Overall, the findings consistently show that secure persons, as compared to insecure persons, (a) are more likely to be involved in long-term couple relationships, (b) have more stable couple relationships, and (c) suffer from fewer difficulties and/or disruptions in the relationship. The few longitudinal studies suggest that attachment security antedates indices of marital stability, but it is too early to claim that individuals’ attachment security plays a direct role in whether couples stay together or break up.

Attachment security as a mate selection standard: Another relevant line of research has focused on mating preference and claimed that a person seeking to form a long-term couple relationship would prefer to mate with securely attached partners, because they hold a positive orientation towards this type of relationship. In support of this view, Pietromonaco and Carnelley (1994) and Chappell and Davis (1998) found that participants, regardless of their own attachment style, reported more positive emotions and less negative emotions when imagining a relationship with a secure rather than an insecure partner. Accordingly, Baldwin et al. (1996, Study 3), Frazier, Byer, Fischer, et al. (1996), and Latty-Mann and Davis (1996) constructed vignettes of potential partners differing in their attachment orientations and found that secure partners were preferred over insecure partners.

The Quality of Dating Relationships

The bulk of relevant data has been reported by studies that have focused on the association between attachment security and quality of dating relationships. Specifically, these studies have tested the hypothesis that secure attachment would be linked to the formation of satisfactory dating relationships, which are characterized by emotional involvement, intimacy, commitment, trust, friendly communication patterns, and caring.

The hypothesized positive association between the sense of attachment security and satisfaction with dating relationships has been consistently documented in several cross-sectional studies using different measures of attachment style (e.g., forced-choice tripartite categorization, Adult Attachment Interview, Relationship Questionnaire) and different scales of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Relationship Rating Form, Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Marital Satisfaction Index). All these studies have found that attachment security is significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction, with securely attached persons reporting the highest level of satisfaction and anxiously attached persons reporting the lowest level (for details of these studies in Table 1, see Appendix). Generally, this association was found in both men and women and has been replicated in prospective longitudinal studies (see Table 1). Moreover, some studies have found that the associ-
ation between secure attachment and satisfaction with dating relationships cannot be explained by other personality factors, such as the “big five” factors, depression, dysfunctional beliefs, self-esteem, and sex-role orientation (e.g., Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994; Jones & Cunningham, 1996; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Whisman & Allan, 1996).

Using both global and relationship-specific measures of attachment orientation, Cozzarelli, Hoekstra, and Bylsma (2000) found a significant positive association between reports of secure attachment within a specific current dating relationship and reports of satisfaction with that relationship. Unexpectedly, reports of global attachment style in close relationships were not significantly related to reported satisfaction with a specific dating relationship. The same pattern has also been found in a study of married couples (Cowan & Cowan, 2001). It seems that relationship-specific secure attachment is more relevant to explain satisfaction with a couple relationship than is a global measure of attachment security.

The sense of attachment security has also been found to contribute to other basic characteristics of dating relationships. For example, significant positive associations have been found between reports of secure attachment and several measures of involvement and interdependence in dating relationships (e.g., Rubin’s Love scale, Dependency scale, Self-disclosure scale, Relationship Rating Form) in a number of cross-sectional (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1999b; Feeney & Noller, 1991; Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989; Levy & Davis, 1988; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991) and longitudinal studies (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Simpson, 1990). Accordingly, ratings of attachment security were significantly associated with greater commitment to a dating relationship, and ratings of attachment avoidance were significantly associated with lower levels of commitment (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Levy & Davis, 1988; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; Pistole, Clark, & Tubbs, 1995; Pistole & Vocaturo, 1999; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Simpson, 1990; Tucker & Anders, 1999).

In a study of the quality of dating relationships over a period of 4 months, Keelan, Dion, and Dion (1994) found that securely attached persons maintained high stable levels of commitment and trust in a dating relationship during the followup period. In contrast, insecure persons exhibited a decrease of commitment and trust over the same period. Moreover, secure persons reported a constant low level of perceived relationship costs (how much one invested in the relationship) over the 4-month period, whereas insecure persons showed increases in such perceived costs over time. The findings imply that the relationship commitment of insecure persons may deteriorate over time and that time may exacerbate initial differences in relationship commitment between attachment groups.

Persons differing in attachment style have been also found to differ in the quality of their communication pattern with a dating partner. For example, Fitzpatrick, Fey, Segrin, and Schiff (1993) found that self-reports of secure attachment style were related to higher reported levels of positive mutual patterns of communication and lower levels of demanding and withdrawal patterns. Accordingly, Guerreo (1996) videotaped dating couples while discussing important personal problems and found that securely attached persons scored higher than avoidant persons in measures of trust-receptivity, gaze, facial pleasantness, vocal pleasantness, general interest in the conversation, and attentiveness to partner’s speech while dis-
cussing problems with their partners. In addition, secure people scored lower in vocal and physical signs of distress than anxiously attached people.

In the same vein, Tucker and Anders (1998) videotaped dating couples while discussing positive aspects of their relationships and found that persons with a more secure attachment style tended to laugh more, touch their partner more, gaze more, and smile more during the interaction than insecure persons. Accordingly, secure persons were rated as significantly more nonverbally expressive and appeared to be experiencing more enjoyment than insecure persons. At a dyadic level, couples in which both partners were securely attached were rated as experiencing more enjoyment during the conversation than couples in which at least one partner was insecurely attached.

Importantly, similar patterns of findings have been found in dyadic studies that examined the effects of a person’s secure attachment on his or her dating partner’s reports of relationship satisfaction and quality (Collins & Read, 1990; Jones & Cunningham, 1996; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995; Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Simpson, 1990). In these studies, the two partners of dating couples completed adult attachment scales and reported on their satisfaction with, and appraisal of the dating relationship. Generally, a person’s secure attachment style was significantly associated with the partner’s reports of relationship satisfaction and quality (e.g., intimacy, commitment). However, this dyadic effect was stronger and more consistent for women’s than men’s secure attachment. In addition, both partners’ sense of attachment security made a significant contribution to their joint relationship satisfaction. In fact, both partners were dissatisfied when at least one of the partners scored high on attachment anxiety or avoidance. Only one study (Whisman & Allan, 1996) found that a person’s attachment style did not significantly predict the partner’s satisfaction.

Despite the strong evidence of association between security of attachment and relationship quality in dating couples, our cautionary notes at the beginning of this article indicate that we cannot infer causality from correlational data. For example, the finding that secure persons have partners who report high levels of satisfaction may equally reflect the possibility that (a) the behavior and attitudes of secure persons reinforce their partner’s satisfaction, (b) their partners’ high levels of satisfaction lead participants to feel more securely attached in the relationship, and (c) secure persons choose partners who are able or willing to maintain long-lasting satisfactory relationships. Given the ambiguity here, there are two alternative courses of action with regard to the formation of theoretical models. One is to wait until intervention studies establish the direction of effects. A second alternative is to question the linear causal premise and wonder instead whether the linkage is bidirectional, with attachment and relationship quality involved in circular patterns of influence, as family system theories suggest (e.g., Wagner & Reiss, 1995).

The Quality of Marital Relationships

Studies of married couples have also provided strong supportive evidence on the link between attachment security and relationship satisfaction (see Table 2 in the Appendix). In a study of newlywed couples, Senchak and Leonard (1992) found that secure couples (both partners described themselves as securely attached) reported higher marital satisfaction and intimacy than mixed (one spouse chose the secure description and the other defined himself or herself as insecure).
and insecure couples (both partners described themselves as insecurely attached). No significant difference was found between mixed and insecure couples, implying that the attachment insecurity of one spouse may have an overriding influence on the quality of the marriage. However, because the couple was used as the unit of analysis in this study, the actual effects of each partner’s attachment style on relationship quality remained unassessed.

In dealing with this problem, Feeney (1994) and Feeney, Noller, and Callan (1994) analyzed the effects of a person’s attachment security on his or her own reports of marital satisfaction as well as on his or her partner’s reports after 12 and 21 months of marriage. Findings indicated that a person’s attachment security was significantly associated with both partners’ reports of high marital satisfaction. These findings have been replicated and extended in a number of subsequent studies (e.g., Davila, Bradbury, & Fincham, 1998; Feeney, 1999c; Lussier, Sabourin, & Turgeon, 1997; Mikulincer, Horesh, Levy-Shiff, et al., 1998). Importantly, Davila, Karney, and Bradbury (1999) replicated these findings at five points of measurements during 3 years (every 6 months) in a sample of newlywed couples. In addition, they reported that changes in husbands’ and wives’ reports of secure attachment predicted concurrent changes in the person’s own and partner’s reports of marital satisfaction.

Studies of marriage have also linked the sense of attachment security with more marital intimacy (Mayseless, Sharabany, & Sagi, 1997), less marital ambivalence (Volling, Notaro, & Larsen, 1998), and more positive climate within the marriage (Diehl, Elnick, Bourbeau, & Labouvie-Vief, 1998). Furthermore, Mikulincer and Florian (1999) found significant associations between spouses’ attachment style and their reports of marital cohesion and adaptability (FACES III). Whereas spouses who endorsed a secure style reported relatively high family cohesion and adaptability, spouses who endorsed an avoidant style reported relatively low levels in these two dimensions, and spouses who endorsed an anxious attachment style reported high family cohesion but low family adaptability. Attachment security has been also found to be associated with positive and constructive marital patterns of communication (Feeney, 1994; Feeney et al., 1994). Specifically, both wives’ and husbands’ reports of secure attachment were related to more satisfaction, disclosure, and involvement in videotaped marital interactions as well as to more mutual and less coercive patterns of communication during these interactions. In addition, secure spouses were more accurate than insecure spouses in the nonverbal communication of neutral and negative message. Importantly, these findings were also found when communication patterns and communication accuracy were measured nine months after the assessment of attachment style.

Two studies found positive associations between attachment security and quality of videotaped married couple interactions, one using the Adult Attachment Interview, the other using a self-report Q-sort method. With attachment coded from the AAI, Cohn, Silver, C.P. Cowan, et al. (1992) found that, although the attachment style classification was not significantly related to self-reports of marital satisfaction, it was significantly associated with observers’ ratings of couple interactions in a laboratory setting. Specifically, husbands classified as secure on the AAI showed more positive and harmonious interactions with their wives than husbands classified as insecure. Though wives’ attachment classification was not directly related to the quality of marital interaction, Cohn, Silver, et al. (1992) concluded that the potential detrimental
effect of wives' attachment insecurity was buffered by husband’s attachment security. Insecurely attached women married to securely attached men had more harmonious interactions than did insecure women married to insecure men. In another study, using an 84-item Q sort of attachment completed by each spouse, Kobak and Hazan (1991) examined the role that relationship-specific attachment representations play during problemsolving and confiding (sharing a marriage-related disappointment with the partner) interactions. Findings revealed that husbands who held a more secure representation of marriage were less rejecting and more supportive during a problem-solving interaction than insecure husbands. Secure wives were less likely than insecure wives to be rejected by their husbands in a confiding task.

**A SYSTEMIC THEORETICAL MODEL**

The reviewed data clearly indicate that the sense of attachment security is associated with (a) positive beliefs about couple relationships, (b) the formation of more stable couple relationships, (c) satisfaction with dating relationships and marriage, (d) high levels of intimacy, commitment, and emotional involvement within the relationship, and (e) positive patterns of communication and interactions in both dating and married couples. On this basis, one may wonder why and how this relational construct is so relevant to couple relationships. In the next paragraphs, we provide a systemic model that delineates the role of secure attachment in couple relationships (see the Figure).

Our analysis indicates that three main paths may underlie the association between a sense of attachment security and the formation and maintenance of stable and satisfying couple relationships. First, the affective consequences of secure attachment interactions with a significant other—distress alleviation due to the maintenance of proximity to attachment figures—would lead to a positive orientation toward togetherness and foster the organization of interaction goals around the pursuit of intimacy and closeness, which, in turn, would encourage involvement in long-lasting couple relationships. Second, the positive mental representations of self and others that characterize the sense of attachment security would foster the development of a cognitive-affective framework for the management of conflict and thus for maintaining satisfying couple relationships. Third, the sense of attachment security would facilitate the satisfaction of other basic psychological needs (e.g., exploration, affiliation, caregiving) within the couple relationship, which, in turn, would further increase relationship satisfaction.

As can be seen in the Figure, our proposed model is derived from a systemic theoretical framework and fulfills the four criteria delineated by family system theorists (Wagner & Reiss, 1995). First, interactions between people are seen by observers and also by family members as patterned, with regularities that permit rules to be inferred. In our model, marital interactions are patterned along intrapsychic and interpersonal regularities related to each partner’s sense of attachment security. The arrows that connect the different components of the model represent these regularities.

Second, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This means that the structure or organization of the intrapsychic and interpersonal elements in the whole system affects how any one element interacts with any other element. In our model, the association between attachment security in one individual and his or her marital cognitions and behaviors depends in part on the attachment security of both partners. Accordingly, we propose that the partners influence one another in
complex, reciprocal and even cross-construct ways. For example, sense of attachment security in one partner can facilitate the acceptance of autonomy needs in the other, which, in turn, can foster that partner’s sense of attachment security. The bi-directional arrows connecting the wife’s and the husband’s diagrams represent this reciprocal influence (see Figure).

Third, intrapsychic and interpersonal influences are circular rather than linear; it is difficult, if not impossible to tell where the “first cause” of any behavior lies. In the exposition of the model pre-
presented in the Figure, we mainly discuss the path from attachment to intervening mechanisms, to the quality of couple interaction. This line seems reasonable in the developmental lifespan sense that children develop secure or insecure attachments long before they become involved in intimate couple relationships. But as Bowlby (1973) implied early on, the formation and maintenance of attachment is a lifelong dynamic process in which real relationships (marriage, therapy) sometimes alter people's schemas and expectations. Thus, we have drawn two-headed arrows in the Figure to acknowledge that the connection between attachment and couple relationship quality has a "chicken and egg" quality because we do not always know which comes first.

Fourth, family systems are self-regulating. The domains of the family are dynamically interconnected in the sense that changes in any aspect of the system can lead to changes in other aspects. Attachment insecurity in one family member is likely to have ripple effects throughout the entire family system. Accordingly, changes that occur in some other aspects of the family system (e.g., parent-child relationship) can alter some aspect of the association between secure attachment and couple relationship quality. We view this property as an extension of our model to the family system and it is represented by the insertion of the partners’ diagrams within a larger family system framework.

Affect Regulation and Interaction Goals

Bowlby (1988) assumed that having a sense of attachment security reflects a history of interactions with supportive and loving others who bring comfort and relief in times of stress. One implication of this assumption is that during these positive interactions, securely attached persons might have learned that proximity maintenance is rewarding, that they can rely on attachment behaviors as an effective means of affect regulation, and that they could organize interpersonal behaviors around the basic goal of the attachment system—proximity maintenance. As a result, these persons would be prone to forming close relationships, and would be particularly ready to search for intimacy and interdependence in such relationships. Accordingly, they would put emphasis on the benefits of being together with a romantic partner, be more likely to dismiss potential relationship threats and wounds, and organize their interaction goals around the attainment and maintenance of intimacy and closeness. In this way, attachment security would enhance a person’s motivation to be involved in long-lasting stable couple relationships. This path is in line with Kirpatrick’s (1998) contention that attachment security reflects a positive orientation toward long-term mating strategies.

Insecure persons’ experiences with non-responsive others teach them that attachment behaviors are painful and that other interaction goals and behaviors should be developed as defenses against the distress caused by attachment experiences (Bowlby, 1988). In response to this distress, anxiously attached persons seem to construe their interaction goals around the hyperactivation of the attachment system and the unfulfilled need for security. Therefore, these persons would view couple relationships and partners as a means for achieving “felt security” via clinging and hypervigilant responses. Accordingly, although they would desire intimate relationships, their tendency to hyperactivate the attachment system may lead them to feel a chronic sense of frustration and dissatisfaction due to their unfulfilled needs for demonstrations of love and security. That is, this anxious form of insecurity would also motivate a move toward an attachment figure, but with a different approach than that of a person with a
secure working model of attachment. In contrast, avoidant persons seem to react to distress by organizing their interaction goals around the deactivation of the attachment system and a search for autonomy and control. As a result, when distressed, these persons would take distance from partners and be reluctant to form interdependent relationships (Bowlby, 1988).

These hypothesized attachment-style differences in interaction goals received strong empirical support in Mikulincer’s (1998, Studies 2 and 4) studies of the sense of trust in close relationships. In these studies, participants who classified themselves as securely attached tended to emphasize intimacy enhancement as the most important trust-related gain and to show relatively high accessibility of thoughts about intimacy in a trust-related context. For these persons, episodes that validate their sense of trust may contribute to the formation and maintenance of intimate close relationships, while betrayal of trust may raise concerns about closeness and intimacy.

Whereas anxiously attached persons tended to emphasize security enhancement as the most important trust-related gain and to show relatively high accessibility of thoughts about security in a trust-related context, avoidant persons tended to emphasize control goals and to show high accessibility of thoughts about control in trust-related contexts (Mikulincer, 1998). For anxiously attached persons, security seeking seems to be a central component of their sense of trust. Episodes in which partners behave in a responsive way may be appraised as contributing to security feelings, while betrayal of trust may be appraised as a threat to these feelings. Avoidant persons seem to organize their sense of trust around concerns about control. For these persons, this pursuit of control seems to be necessary to validate their sense of self-reliance and to insure the attainment of desired outcomes in the absence of confidence that the partner will voluntarily respond to their needs. Avoidant persons may perceive their partners’ responsiveness as a validation of the control they exert over partners’ behaviors, whereas betrayal of trust may raise doubts about the control they have in the relationship.

These findings highlight the fact that the sense of attachment security is more related to relational goals of closeness and intimacy than to intrapersonal, egoistic needs of security and control. It is possible that the internalization of the sense of attachment security satisfies these intrapersonal needs and frees cognitive and emotional resources for the regulation of relationship quality. On this basis, securely attached persons could develop a more open, selfless, and caring attitude toward their close relationship partners. They could become active agents responsible for their partners’ welfare and relationship quality rather than passive recipients of caring and comfort, and thus could move from egocentric to more reciprocal relationships. This is particularly important in the realm of dating relationships and marriage, in which the attachment and caregiving systems should maintain a balanced and dynamic equilibrium, and both partners are equally responsible for the maintenance of a satisfying, stable relationship.

Securely attached persons’ desire for intimate relationships is also manifested in their proneness to disclose and share personal information and feelings—one of the most basic means for the formation of intimate relationships. In a series of studies, Mikulincer and Nachshon (1991) found that participants who classified themselves as securely attached persons reported that they tended to disclose more personal information to relationship partners than avoidant persons, and showed more disclosure flexibility and reciprocity.
than insecure persons. Moreover, secure persons were found to disclose more personal information and to feel better interacting with a high than low discloser partner. In contrast, avoidant persons’ self-disclosure and emotional reactions were not affected by their partners’ disclosures. These findings have been replicated in subsequent studies (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998; Pistole, 1993; Tucker & Anders, 1999).

It seems that secure persons are not only able to disclose personal information but they are also highly responsive to others’ disclosure. In our view, self-disclosure is a necessary but not sufficient behavior for creating intimacy and closeness. A partner moving toward intimacy should be responsive to the partner’s communication, reinforce the partner’s confidence in their good intentions, and promote more intimate disclosure. On this basis, we can conclude that secure persons’ responsiveness to a partner’s disclosure seems to be a suitable strategy for developing stable and satisfactory relationships. Overall, there is consistent evidence that the sense of attachment security is related to a positive orientation toward togetherness and to the organization of interaction goals around the pursuit of intimacy and closeness. In our view, this relational orientation would motivate people to engage in intimate interactions and to invest efforts in relationships that would be characterized by intimacy, commitment, emotional involvement, trust, and supportiveness. On this basis, secure persons’ positive orientation toward togetherness would contribute to the stability and quality of couple relationships.

Mental Representations of Self and Others

Bowlby (1973) asserted that the attainment of a sense of attachment security would be manifested in the development of a positive self-image. In Bowlby’s terms, “...the model of the attachment figure and the model of the self are likely to develop so as to be complementary and mutually confirming” (Bowlby, 1973, p. 205). When a person interacts with non-responsive and unavailable others, he or she will likely experience himself or herself as incompetent and unlovable. By contrast, when a person anticipates others’ availability and responsiveness, he or she will consequently experience himself or herself as competent and valuable. Empirical research has consistently found that the sense of attachment security is related to high self-esteem (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and to the ability to manage stressors while maintaining a sense of optimism and self-efficacy (see Mikulincer & Florian, 2001, for a review).

Self-representations and Couple Relationships: In our view, these positive models of self would also contribute to the formation and maintenance of stable and satisfying couple relationships. Securely attached persons feel accepted and loved by their partners, which, in turn, would encourage them to reciprocate this love and further strengthen their willingness to care for the partner in times of need. In addition, these positive representations include a sense of self-efficacy in dealing with threats and life problems, which may lead to the adoption of a more confident attitude toward relationship obstacles as well as to the adoption of more constructive interpersonal problem solving strategies. On this basis, secure persons would be able to deal with interpersonal conflicts without appraising them in a catastrophic way and letting them lead to conflict escalation. This constructive conflict management strategy would directly contribute to the stability of couple relationships. There is extensive evidence of an association between secure attachment and the adoption of constructive
strategies as couples attempt to resolve problems (Gaines, Reis, Summers, et al., 1997; Gaines, Granrose, Rios, et al., 1999; Levy and Davis, 1988; Lussier et al., 1997; Pistole, 1989; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996).

We are not aware of research that relates attachment styles or working models directly to the emotion regulation strategies that centrally affect both the quality and stability of marital relationships (Gottman, 1993). Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, and Pearson’s (1996) finding that AAI-assessed attachment security in men and women was connected with low marital conflict suggests that such a link might exist. Secure attachment itself can be viewed as an emotion regulation strategy in which a person experiencing threat or loss seeks out another for soothing and support. Also, the ability to maintain a coherent narrative during the AAI when discussing personal and often highly emotional issues is indicative of an ability to regulate negative emotion in the service of problem solving. We speculate that in individuals or pairs with secure models of attachment, the ability to regulate negative emotion helps the partners avoid escalating negative interchanges in a way that leads to loss of control—a pattern that is one of the major risks for both decline in marital satisfaction and marital dissolution (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

**Representations of Others and Couple Relationships:** The sense of attachment security also includes positive models of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)—expectations that others will behave in a caring and benevolent manner. These positive representations may contribute directly to several positive aspects of close relationships that could maintain and enhance relationship satisfaction over time. First, these representations would be manifested in the sense of trust toward a partner. According to Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985), trust involves (a) the appraisal of a partner as reliable and predictable, (b) the belief that a partner is concerned with one’s needs and can be counted on in times of need, and (c) feelings of confidence in the strength of the relationship. Data from several studies support this view, in that secure persons have been found to report higher levels of trust toward their partner than insecure persons (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer, 1998; Simpson, 1990).

Second, the readiness to disclose oneself and share personal feelings with a partner may be fostered by the positive models of others that characterize securely attached persons. It demands a belief that the partner can be trusted and would not abuse the disclosed emotions, thoughts, and information. Therefore, secure persons who hold such positive beliefs about others’ intentions and goodwill would be those who would be particularly ready to disclose personal feelings and thoughts to their partner. As a result, these persons would tend to form relationships characterized by openness and emotional involvement, which, in turn, may contribute to relationship satisfaction.

Third, the belief of the supportiveness of the partner would promote good feelings toward the partner, such as gratitude, warmth, and love. Moreover, due to their positive representations of others, secure individuals would interpret unexpected behaviors by partners in less relationship-threatening terms. In this way, they would avoid unnecessary conflicts and prevent escalation of negative emotions toward partners.

These relationship-enhancing appraisals of partners’ behaviors were documented by Collins (1996), who asked participants to explain negative partner behaviors and to report on the causes of these behaviors. Secure participants gave
generally more positive and relationship-enhancing explanations of negative relational events. Compared to insecure persons, secure persons were less likely to view a partner’s behavior as intentional, negatively motivated, stable over time, and global across relationship areas. Importantly, Collins also found that secure persons’ relationship-enhancing explanations of negative partner behaviors buffered negative affect toward a partner as well as the arousal of relationship conflicts.

More direct support for the role of representations of others in the association between attachment security and relationship satisfaction is provided by Morison, Urquiza, and Goodlin-Jones (1997) and Whisman and Allan (1996) who found that positive attributions for partner behaviors appeared to mediate the association between the sense of attachment security and relationship satisfaction in dating couples.

Satisfaction of Other Basic Needs

Beyond emphasizing the psycho-evolutionary nature of the attachment system, Bowlby (1969) identified other needs that are also placed in an evolutionary context and maintain a dynamic interplay with attachment needs. In Bowlby’s (1969) terms, the experience of inner distress and the disruption of one’s sense of attachment security may activate proximity-related cognitions and behaviors, which, in turn, may inhibit the activation of cognitions and behaviors related to other basic needs (e.g., exploration, affiliation, caregiving). Moreover, because they are preoccupied with regulating their own distress, they may have fewer available resources for engaging in affiliation, exploration, and/or caregiving activities.

Persons who hold a sense of attachment security would have more available resources to engage in affiliation, exploration, and caregiving behaviors with their partners. Accordingly, these persons would hold a positive and accepting attitude toward these behaviors in their partner. Since they feel confident in a partner’s supportiveness, they would be sensitive to the partner’s exploration and affiliation needs and tolerate his or her explorative and affiliative behaviors even if these activities imply a momentary absence of the partner as an attachment figure. Moreover, since they rely on support-seeking as an affect regulation device, they would accept and even encourage a partner’s caregiving behaviors. Overall, secure persons would feel that a close relationship is an adequate interpersonal setting for satisfying not only attachment needs but also for accomplishing other important life tasks. As a result, the fulfillment of these basic needs would further contribute to both partners’ satisfaction with their couple relationship.

Exploration Needs: In human development, one of the basic evolutionary needs is to explore the environment and to learn new abilities and skills (Bowlby, 1969). In adulthood, this explorative activity is manifested in career development, work-related activities, and the learning of new adaptive skills, which, in turn, may further develop a personal sense of autonomy, mastery, achievement, and control. These activities demand energy and time that otherwise might be spent with a close relationship partner.

In couple relationships, the need for exploration can be encouraged or frustrated by the relational attitudes and behaviors of both partners. When one feels confident in the partner’s availability and responsiveness in times of need and/or the partner is attentive and supportive of one’s need for exploration, even when this comes at expense of time spent together, the satisfaction of this need may be facilitated. As a result, the individual would feel free to develop his or her own poten-
tialities and be more willing to reciprocate his or her partner’s need for exploration. Mutual respect, understanding, and marital satisfaction would thus be enhanced. Accordingly, partners would appraise their couple relationship as promoting rather than inhibiting their own sense of autonomy and their personal development. In the long run, the satisfaction of exploration needs could contribute to relationship stability and diminish unnecessary conflicts related to possible differences in the partners’ trajectory of personal development.

In contrast, the satisfaction of exploration needs would be frustrated when one partner restrains the other’s attempts to spend energy and time outside the relationship and/or threatens with separation and divorce if his or her wishes and demands are not being fulfilled. Accordingly, when a person is afraid of the partner’s reactions and is not secure about his or her availability and responsiveness, he or she may inhibit exploration in advance and give up any attempt to develop an autonomous personality in order to please the partner. In most of these cases, one may expect that many nuclei of frustration, tension, conflict, and dispute may arise within the couple. Furthermore, the individual may develop negative feeling toward the partner and the relationship, such as a sense of suffocation and coercion, a sense of limitation of personal choices and activities, or a sense of self-degradation in order to satisfy a partner’s egoistic needs. As a result, marital satisfaction would decrease and the likelihood of separation may increase.

Indeed, adult attachment studies have found that securely attached persons were more likely than insecure persons to engage in exploration activities and to open their cognitive structures to new evidence (e.g., Green-Henessy & Reis, 1998; Mikulincer, 1997; Mikulincer & Arad, 1999). Second, a person’s sense of attachment security would also encourage a partner’s exploration attempts. On this basis, the sense of attachment security would contribute to the satisfaction of both partners’ exploration needs.

Affiliation Needs: Affiliation needs refer to the phylogenetically evolved tendency to be sociable with others (Bowlby, 1969). They drive people to spend time in the company of others, to be involved in friendships, and to engage in a wide variety of social activities, such as play, alliance against outsiders, and squabbles (Weiss, 1998). In his taxonomy of social interactions, Weiss suggested that attachment and affiliation behaviors differ in the level of perceived exclusiveness, permanence, and emotionality. First, attachment behaviors demand exclusivity from the provider of a secure base, because relationships between this provider and a third person may reduce his or her availability when needed. In contrast, affiliation behaviors may not necessarily demand exclusiveness. Rather, the incorporation of other persons in an affiliation relationship may be perceived as a positive outcome because these persons can advance common interests, facilitate learning, and strengthen potential alliances (Weiss, 1998). Second, whereas attachment relationships may persist over time, affiliation relationships may be ended with relative ease (Weiss, 1998). Third, attachment behaviors may involve stronger emotions than affiliation behaviors. In attachment behaviors, people experience a cycle of tension and relief, accompanied by feelings of anxiety, fear, and gratitude (Bowlby, 1988). These emotions may be weaker or even irrelevant when people seek others for companionship or play (Weiss, 1998).

In couple relationships, affiliation needs could be manifested in two different ways: (1) a person’s motivation to develop a friendship relationship with his or her partner by attempting to engage in com-
mon activities and recreations and to spend time together with the same friends; (2) a person’s motivation to maintain his or her own separate network of friends, which sometimes may come at expense of the energy and time devoted to the partner. In this way, the satisfaction of affiliation needs may contribute to both the sense of couple’s “togetherness” and the sense of “individuation” and personal freedom within the couple. The issue of balancing these two issues is at the heart of most theories of what makes for satisfying couple relationships (Gottman, 1993).

We believe that the sense of attachment security would directly contribute to the satisfaction of both partners’ affiliation needs. First, the sense of attachment security would encourage affiliative activities within the couple relationship because secure persons put strong emphasis on togetherness. Moreover, the sense of attachment security would facilitate affiliative activities outside the couple relationship because the person is confident that the partner would continue to love him or her even if energy and time is spent with other friends. Indeed, Mikulincer and Selinger (2001) found that secure persons were more likely than insecure persons to engage in affiliative activities and to hold a flexible balance between attachment and affiliation goals in close relationships.

Caregiving Needs: Caregiving needs are designed to provide protection and support to others who are either chronically dependent or temporarily in need, and they are guided by an altruistic orientation—the alleviation of others’ distress (Bowlby, 1969). These needs drive us to help, assist, and comfort significant others, and motivate us to protect these persons from any threat or danger. These caregiving activities often entail personal sacrifice in terms of time, resources, and mental efforts. Although caregiving needs in one individual are very responsive to the arousal of attachment needs in his or her partner, Bowlby (1969) viewed them as two separate motivational systems. Whereas attachment needs imply that the person seeks support and protection, caregiving needs imply that the person seeks to be an active provider of support and protection.

The satisfaction of caregiving needs seems to play an important role in couple relationships. We hypothesize that in long-lasting, satisfying relationships, people will be attentive to partners’ needs and to learning when, how, and in which areas the partner wishes or expects support and protection. In addition, persons would be expected to learn to accept the partner’s offer of support and comfort and to appraise it as a sign of love and caring, not as a sign of a patronizing or unequal relationship. In other words, persons would be expected to learn to accept their partners’ caregiving efforts without feeling a loss of personal control or tension due to a power struggle.

In contrast, caregiving needs would be frustrated when the partner is not able or willing to accept the other’s assistance and support or when he or she reacts with hostility, suspicions, or even rejection to the partner’s caring efforts. These needs can be also frustrated when the person, due to his or her personality or relational history, is not attentive to the partner’s needs and is not able to relieve successfully the partner’s suffering and pain. These reactions can elicit interpersonal conflicts around issues of trust, cooperation, reciprocity, and the provision and receipt of support. Furthermore, they may lead to feelings of personal alienation, low self-esteem, neglect, and inferiority. Specifically, the person may develop a sense of being stuck in the unequal position of the “weak,” “needy,” and/or “eternal infant.” The most probable outcome of this kind of interaction is dissatisfaction.
and a desire to leave the frustrating relationship.

In our view, the sense of attachment security would contribute to the satisfaction of both partners’ caregiving needs. First, a person’s sense of attachment security would encourage his or her own caregiving attempts, because he or she would have available resources to attend to a partner’s needs and provide adequate care for alleviating distress. Moreover, secure persons’ positive models of others would be likely to foster the perception of others as deserving help, and motivate people to provide the necessary support to restore or maintain a partner’s welfare. Indeed, adult attachment studies have found that self-reports of attachment security are associated with relatively high levels of reported responsiveness to a romantic partner’s needs (e.g., Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1996; Feeney, 1996; Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Accordingly, secure persons have been found to offer spontaneously more comfort and reassurance to a romantic partner in times of need than insecure persons (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson et al., 1992). Second, because of their reliance on support seeking as an affect regulation device and their high sense of self-esteem, secure persons would hold a positive and accepting attitude toward their partners’ supportive and caring behaviors, thereby leading to the satisfaction of the partner’s caregiving needs.

EXTENSION OF MODEL TO THE FAMILY SYSTEM

We have focused on couple relationships and only indirectly on the intergenerational transmission of attachment. Given the space limitations here, we can offer only a sketch of possible intergenerational linkages in the model we have presented and how the dynamics might play out in the life of a family. A growing body of research finds relatively high concordance between mothers’ working models of attachment, based on their responses to the Adult Attachment Interview, their infants’ security of attachment after a brief separation (Ainsworth et al., 1978; van IJzendoorn, 1995), and measures of children’s adaptation with peers in later years (Sroufe, Carlson, & Shulman, 1993). These findings have been used to support hypotheses about the continuity of relationship quality across the generations. The high degree of concordance between adults’ attachment styles and their children’s attachment styles and peer relationship quality is especially impressive because it occurs across methods (adult narratives, observations of parent-child interaction, peer reports), across measurement contexts, and across time. And yet, we know surprisingly little about the mechanisms that underlie this continuity or how to explain what appears to be a strong tendency to repeat relationship patterns from one generation to another.

It has been widely assumed that the quality of parent-child relationships is the linking mechanism—that adults who are themselves securely attached tend to provide a secure base for their children—and there is substantial evidence for this kind of association in studies of infants (Haft & Slade, 1989), toddlers (Crowell & Feldman, 1988), and preschoolers (Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992). For example, Cohn and colleagues found that fathers who gave coherent narratives of their early family relationships provided more warmth and structure to their preschoolers during challenging tasks than fathers whose narratives were not coherent.

We offer here the idea that the quality of the relationship between the parents plays a central role in the generational transmission of working models of attachment. Two studies of different samples of
fathers and mothers with preschoolers and kindergartners (Cohn et al., 1992; Cowan, Bradburn, & Cowan, in press) support this hypothesis. Based on the AAI continuous ratings of (a) whether the parents in the study described their own parents as loving, and (b) whether the parents were still angry with their parents (the children’s grandparents) in ways that disrupted their AAI narratives, less securely-attached men and women were in marriages that tended to be more conflictful (observational data) and in parent-child relationships with their own children that were less effective (observational data). In turn, when parents were assessed as less securely attached when their children were preschoolers, the children were significantly more likely to be seen by their kindergarten teachers as having internalizing or externalizing problems in school one and two years later. Over and above measures of parenting style, both attachment and marital data from the parents contributed significantly to predicting the children’s adaptation to school. Other analyses of data from the second Cowan et al. study (Cowan, Cowan, & Heming, in press) revealed that preventive interventions in the form of couples groups designed to foster more effective marital and parent-child relationships resulted in positive outcomes for the parents and for their children.

These findings lead us to conclude tentatively that marital quality may play a causal role in affecting parenting style and children’s adaptation. The question remains: how does this occur? One possibility is that conflicted parent-child relationships “spill over” to interfere with the relationship between one or both parents and the child. The second possibility, suggested by Davies and Cummings (1998), is that marital conflict has a direct effect on the child, disrupting attachment relationships and creating emotional insecurity that plays out in the child’s outside-the-family relationships.

Extrapolating from these findings, and subject to replication and extension of the results, we conclude that the transmission of attachment relationships from grandparents to parents to children is not simply a matter of parenting. When a person learns early on that he or she is worthy of love, and that adults will be responsive and available in times of need, he or she is more likely to establish satisfying relationships with other partners, and to have the inclination and ability to work toward solving relationship problems and regulating emotions so that they do not escalate out of control. The family environment established by couples who can regulate emotions and solve problems effectively facilitates both mother-child and father-child relationships that, in turn, foster a child’s ability to explore new ideas and relationships (Byng-Hall, 1999). All of these processes appear to foster the children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The field of family psychology still struggles with the eternal question of why some couples succeed in maintaining a long-lasting, satisfactory relationship while others fail in this relational task. From our point of view, attachment theory is one of the main promising conceptual frameworks for raising and testing useful hypotheses concerning the psychological and ecological factors that contribute to positive relational outcomes. This theoretical framework allows the examination of the role that inner resources, such as the sense of attachment security, may play in the dynamic relational processes that characterize the different stages of marriage and family development. New research is beginning to show that the links between attachment and couple relationships have consequences.
for children’s development. Because of the universality of attachment processes, this theoretical framework could be used in examining marital and family processes across different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. Despite important differences in methods of measuring attachment, and issues in the conceptualization of attachment as a categorical or continuous phenomenon, the accumulation of knowledge that has been achieved in the last two decades provides a clear, coherent picture of the consistent connections between a sense of attachment security and the formation and maintenance of stable and satisfactory couple relationships. Furthermore, research has provided relevant empirical data on the psychological processes that help explain the positive relational outcomes associated with a sense of security of attachment.

The model presented in this article suggests some of the mechanisms that may underlie these processes. Nevertheless, some important issues that have not been addressed here could be examined in future studies. First, future studies should be designed to expand and deepen our understanding of (a) the interplay between attachment processes and the satisfaction of other basic needs within couple relationships, and (b) how this dynamic interplay may contribute to relationship satisfaction and quality. Second, there is a need for additional empirical efforts that attempt to integrate attachment theory and research with data on family dynamic processes and mechanisms. Third, most of the existing research has focused on the early stages of couple relationships and marriage. For a fuller understanding of the links between security of attachment and couple relationship quality, it will be important to examine the role that attachment processes play in later stages of marriage and family development (e.g., in midlife and aging couples). Fourth, the emphasis in this article has been on consistency and coherence across domains, as if attachment operates as a “template” for the development of other intimate relationships. The correlations we reported are far from perfect. More research is needed on the possible effects that specific couple and family relationships may have on each partner’s sense of attachment security.

More theoretical and empirical efforts should be invested in applying the cumulative knowledge gleaned from adult attachment research to enhancing and improving interventions in marital and family therapy—to find modifiable aspects of attachment that can facilitate family relationships and modifiable aspects of family relationships that can enhance the security of each individual’s attachment. This endeavor is necessary not only to improve the life of men, women, and children living in families. It is essential in that it can provide crucial theoretical information about the nature of the links between attachment and marriage, and about the causal connections between the two domains. We hope that our article will act as a stimulus and serve as a guideline for further theoretical and clinical debate, as well as for empirical studies in attachment and couple relationships across the lifespan.

REFERENCES


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### Table 1

**Studies Demonstrating a Significant Attachment-Satisfaction Link in Dating Couples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sample</th>
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<th>Satisfaction Measure</th>
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<td>Individuals</td>
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<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Tripartite categorization</td>
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<td>Collins &amp; Read</td>
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<td>Couples</td>
<td>Adult Attachment Scale</td>
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*Notes:* * longitudinal design; APFA = Adult Personal Functioning Assessment; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; QMI = Quality Marriage Index; MRQ = Multidimensional Relationship Questionnaire; MSI = Marital Satisfaction Inventory; RRF = Relationship Rating Form.
TABLE 2

Studies Demonstrating a Significant Attachment-Satisfaction Link in Married Couples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Attachment Measure</th>
<th>Satisfaction Measure</th>
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Notes: * longitudinal design. DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; FAM = Family Assessment Measure; QMI = Quality Marriage Index; MAT = Marital Adjustment Test; RISS = Relational Interaction Satisfaction Scale.