

## Airport Separations: A Naturalistic Study of Adult Attachment Dynamics in Separating Couples

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Couple members separating and not separating from each other in a public airport completed a questionnaire designed to assess relationship length, attachment style, and degree of subjective distress. After they completed these measures, their attachment behavior was observed unobtrusively. Analyses suggested that adult attachment behavior is organized in a manner similar to that observed in children. Relationship length and separation status were associated with the expression of attachment behavior in adults. Analyses also indicated that women with Anxious working models were more likely to experience distress prior to a separation. But the behavioral strategies exhibited by women varied as a function of Avoidant, not Anxious, working models. Results for men were less clear. Implications for adult attachment theory and research are discussed.

Throughout the history of attachment research, naturalistic studies have been regarded as an important source of information about the dynamics of attachment relationships (Colin, 1996). When John Bowlby (1969/1982) originally formulated his theory of infant-caregiver attachment, he relied heavily on naturalistic studies of infants who had been separated from their mothers (Bowlby, Robertson, & Rosenbluth, 1952; Heinicke & Westheimer, 1965; Robertson & Robertson, 1971). Similarly, his colleague Mary Ainsworth devoted considerable effort to studying child-caregiver interactions in their natural context. In her early research, she collected observational and ethnographic data on infant-mother dyads in Uganda (Ainsworth, 1967). Later, in Baltimore, she and her colleagues conducted one of the most extensive home observational studies to date on infant-mother interactions (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). These and other observational studies (Anderson, 1972; Carr, Dabbs, & Carr, 1975; Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, & Unzner, 1985; Marvin, VanDevender, Iwanaga, LeVine, & LeVine, 1977) are valuable because they provide important insights into the nature and function of attachment behavior and the dynamics of affectional relationships.

In the last decade, an increasing number of researchers have applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships (see Feeney & Noller, 1996, for a review). However, unlike research on infant-caregiver attachment, very little of the romantic attachment research has been based on observations of couples

in natural or nonexperimental situations. For the most part, adult attachment research has been conducted on undergraduates in laboratory settings and has consisted of correlating self-reported attachment styles (patterns of security and defensiveness) with self-reported predictors and outcomes. This restricted range of methods is understandable because it is difficult to identify natural situations that are likely to both activate attachment concerns and be amenable to unobtrusive observation. Nonetheless, overreliance on self-report and laboratory methods limits the broader validity of research on adult attachment. We believe that observational research in a nonlaboratory setting will help to reveal more clearly the natural dynamics of adult attachment behavior and provide a more direct test of the normative and individual-differences components of adult attachment theory.

In this article, we report the results of a naturalistic observational study of couple members temporarily separating from each other in a small metropolitan airport. Besides observing the couples unobtrusively, we also collected independent self-report measures of adult attachment style and relationship history from them. Partners were observed until they separated (i.e., one partner boarded the plane) or left together (i.e., both partners boarded the same plane). The observations allowed us to answer several questions stemming from an attachment perspective on adult relationships and interpersonal processes. First, how is attachment behavior manifested in adulthood? That is, do functional parallels exist between adult separation behaviors and infant separation behaviors? Second, how does the activation of attachment behavior vary as a function of partner accessibility (i.e., preceding a separation vs. preceding a flight together) and relationship length? Third, how are these strategies differentially regulated for individuals who differ in attachment style?

By addressing these questions in a natural setting with a diverse sample of adults, we have an opportunity to examine the ecological validity of adult attachment theory. The airport setting provides an appropriate context for studying adult attachment dynamics because the impending departure is likely to activate attachment-related concerns regarding the safety and

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availability of the partner. In this respect, it is a partial analogue to the well-known *strange situation* procedure used to study the attachment dynamics of infants separated from their mothers (Ainsworth et al., 1978).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, by relating self-report measures of attachment style to naturally occurring behaviors, we avoid the limitations of studies that correlate self-reported attachment style with self-reported outcomes.

Before describing the airport study in detail, we briefly review the major tenets of attachment theory as it has been applied to children and adults. Specifically, we review some of the factors responsible for the organization of attachment behavior in children and discuss the role these factors may play in organizing responses to airport separations in adults.

### The Nature, Function, and Dynamics of Attachment in Childhood

Bowlby (1969/1982) observed that infants of many mammalian species require the care and protection of adults in order to survive. As a result, Bowlby proposed that infants are born with various features (e.g., large eyes) and behavioral responses (e.g., cuddling) that attract the attention of potential caregivers. In addition to these relatively simple adaptations, however, infants are theorized to possess a more complex motivational system, the *attachment behavioral system*, for regulating proximity to caregivers. Adopting ideas from control theory and ethology, Bowlby argued that the attachment system has the set goal of maintaining proximity to one or a few individuals. When these individuals, or *attachment figures*, are perceived as available and responsive, the infant feels secure and explores the environment confidently but continues to maintain contact in subtle ways (e.g., with brief glances or intermittent vocalizations). In contrast, when an attachment figure's availability is judged to be uncertain, the child experiences anxiety and vigorously attempts to maintain or reestablish contact by engaging in various protest behaviors, such as crying, searching, following, and clinging. According to Bowlby, these *attachment behaviors* are adaptive because they help to reestablish proximity to an absent attachment figure or prevent an attachment figure from leaving.

One of the major objectives of research on attachment in infancy is to identify the factors that contribute to the regulation of attachment behavior. Many studies suggest that the way attachment behavior is organized at a particular time depends on a number of factors, including (a) the accessibility or availability of the attachment figure, (b) the duration of the attachment relationship, and (c) the security and defensiveness of the individual. (See Colin, 1996, for a review of infant attachment studies.) As noted above, the accessibility of the attachment figure helps to determine the kinds of attachment-behavioral strategies adopted by the infant. When the figure is nearby and accessible, relatively subdued attachment behaviors (such as smiling or showing a toy to the attachment figure) are likely to be exhibited. However, when the figure leaves or threatens to leave, intense attachment behaviors (such as crying, protesting, clinging, and following) are activated.

Another factor contributing to the organization of attachment behavior is the duration of the attachment relationship or—a related variable—the age of the child. Research indicates that

older children are less distressed by maternal separation than are younger children (Blehar, 1974; Maccoby & Feldman, 1972; Marvin, 1977). According to Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973), there are at least two reasons for this. First, children's representational capacities become more sophisticated over time. Thus, older children are better able to infer the reasons for and the likely duration of the separation. Second, as the attachment relationship evolves, children and their caregivers develop what Bowlby called a *goal-corrected partnership*. Through repeated experiences, children and caregivers explicitly or implicitly negotiate the parameters of their relationship and regulate their behavior on the basis of mutual goals and needs. Thus, older children learn that separations, when they occur, will be brief, and that the caregiver will eventually return.

One of the most widely studied variables known to influence the organization of attachment behavior is *attachment style*, a set of knowledge structures or *working models* representing the responsiveness and availability of attachment figures.<sup>2</sup> According to Bowlby (1969/1982), these representations help to shape and constrain attachment behavior by providing expectations about how the attachment figure is likely to respond in particular situations. Research on children indicates that individual differences in these working models vary along two dimensions: *Avoidance* and *Anxiety* (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The first dimension, *Avoidance*, captures variability in the tendency to feel uncomfortable with closeness or dependence. The second dimension, *Anxiety*, reflects a fear of abandonment. Children classified as *secure* occupy the lower ends of these two theoretical dimensions. These children appear to be confident about the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver and actively seek contact with him or her when distressed. Children classified as *avoidant* are high in *Avoidance* and low in *Anxiety* (see Brennan et al., 1998). They are unlikely to seek the care and comfort of the attachment figure when they are distressed (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Fur-

<sup>1</sup> We refer to the airport context as a "partial" analogue to the strange situation because researchers using the strange situation focus largely on reunion behavior rather than pre-separation behavior. Nonetheless, we believe that both airport separations and the reunion episodes of the strange situation activate similar psychological issues. For example, both contexts have the potential to heighten concerns about the availability and responsiveness of the attachment figure, as well as concerns about self-efficacy and self-worth. That is, they both have the potential to strongly activate the attachment system. Additionally, the attachment figure is present in both contexts; therefore, defenses of an interpersonal nature (e.g., gaze aversion) can be activated and observed. We suspect that separation behavior is less diagnostic of infant attachment patterns in the separation episodes of the strange situation because the caregiver is not present to elicit these kinds of defenses. Furthermore, in the pre-separation episodes of the strange situation, the infant is not aware that a separation is about to take place. Clearly this is not the case for adults in the airport context.

<sup>2</sup> Technically, the term *attachment style* refers to the observable patterns of behavior exhibited by an individual, not the unobservable variables (such as working models) that shape these patterns. Nonetheless, as is customary in the literature on attachment, we use the terms *attachment style* and *working models* interchangeably throughout the present article to refer to the internal mechanisms theorized to shape attachment behavior.

thermore, they are likely to value their own autonomy and independence rather than relying on attachment figures as a secure base (Cassidy, 1988). *Anxious-ambivalent* children are high in Anxiety and low in Avoidance (see Brennan et al., 1998). They tend to exhibit heightened attachment-related concerns and vigilantly monitor the whereabouts of their caregivers. When separated from their attachment figures, they exhibit intense attachment behavior, often protesting vigorously for an extended period. When reunited with a missing attachment figure, they exhibit a mixture of angry resistance and desire for comfort. Research indicates that variability in the way working models are organized (i.e., whether a child feels uncomfortable with closeness or worries about being abandoned) depends at least in part on prior experiences with caregivers (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Thus, children who are secure or comfortable with closeness are more likely than avoidant children to have had responsive and sensitive caregiving (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Weston, 1982).

In summary, research on children indicates that the way attachment behavior is organized in a particular situation depends on several factors, including physical accessibility of the attachment figure, duration of the attachment relationship, and working models of attachment. Theoretically, each of these factors plays a role in determining whether the child judges the attachment figure to be accessible or inaccessible, and, hence, whether the set goal of proximity is exceeded or not. As explained below, if the dynamics of romantic relationships are driven by the same motivational systems present in childhood, then the same factors should contribute to the regulation of attachment behavior in the context of airport separations.

### Adult Attachment and the Regulation of Behavior

In the late 1980s, Hazan and Shaver published a series of articles in which they argued that attachment dynamics in adult romantic relationships are similar to infant-caregiver attachment dynamics (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). Shaver et al. noted that when a romantic partner is nearby and accessible, adults, like infants, feel secure and are more willing to explore their environments confidently. However, when a person is threatened with harm or a partner's availability or responsiveness is questionable, many adults experience considerable anxiety and, like infants, attempt to regain the attention and proximity of their partners. According to Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1994), these dynamics reflect, in part, the operation of the attachment-behavioral system and function to keep partners in close proximity.

Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1994) also argued that individual differences in adult attachment styles parallel those identified in children. Specifically, variation in adult working models falls along two major dimensions—Avoidance and Anxiety—which are functionally similar to the two dimensions discovered in studies of children (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998).<sup>3</sup> Highly Avoidant adults report a reluctance to rely on their partners for support and a discomfort with intimacy and closeness. Highly Anxious adults report worrying that their partners do not love them as much as they love their partners and fearing that their partners will abandon them. As in childhood, these working models are thought to

play an important role in regulating emotion and behavior because they allow the individual to anticipate (correctly or incorrectly) the motives and actions of the partner and react accordingly (Collins, 1996; Collins & Read, 1994; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994). A number of studies have highlighted the influence of working models on relationship variables, including relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990), stability (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Shaver & Brennan, 1992), and communication (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Kobak & Hazan, 1991).

As with research on childhood attachment processes, a major goal of adult attachment research is to uncover the factors that shape the organization of attachment behavior in adult relationships. Most of the research to date has focused exclusively on the influence of working models. As discussed above, however, research on infant-caregiver attachment processes indicates that a number of other variables, such as the accessibility of the attachment figure and the length of the relationship, shape the organization of attachment behavior in a given situation. Thus, it is likely that these variables affect adult attachment dynamics as well. Below, we discuss the influence of these factors on the regulation of attachment behavior in the context of airport separations.

For children, the actual accessibility of the caregiver is critical in determining the degree to which attachment-behavioral strategies are activated. In the airport setting, the accessibility of the romantic partner should similarly influence the activation of attachment behavior. When the partner is nearby and accessible (e.g., when partners travel together), attachment behaviors should be relatively subdued. Although partners may be mildly anxious about aspects of their impending journey, it is unlikely that they will take extreme measures to keep the partner nearby. However, when the partner's availability is uncertain (e.g., when couples are separating), more vigorous attempts to maintain

<sup>3</sup> Readers may be more familiar with the classic three-category typology of secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent individuals (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Over the last few years, Bartholomew's (1990, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a, 1994b) four-category typology has been adopted by many adult attachment researchers. According to Bartholomew's model, two latent dimensions, *Avoidance* (also called *Model of Other*) and *Anxiety* (also called *Model of Self*), define four theoretically distinct attachment patterns (secure, fearful-avoidant, preoccupied, and dismissing-avoidant). *Security* in Bartholomew's model is defined by low levels of Avoidance and Anxiety. *Anxious-ambivalence*, or *preoccupation* with attachment, is characterized by low Avoidance and high Anxiety. The avoidant pattern in the three-category model is represented by two patterns in Bartholomew's model: *fearful-avoidance* and *dismissing-avoidance*. Both of these patterns involve high scores on Avoidance but differ on Anxiety. *Fearful-avoidance* is a combination of high Avoidance and high Anxiety; *dismissing-avoidance* is a combination of high Avoidance and low Anxiety.

Here we focus primarily on the dimensions of Avoidance and Anxiety, rather than the attachment "types," for two reasons. First, recent taxometric analyses indicate that attachment patterns are dimensional, not categorical (Fraley & Waller, 1998). Second, the dimensions of Avoidance and Anxiety conceptually map onto the dimensions uncovered by Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978; see Brennan et al., 1998). However, in the General Discussion, we discuss our findings with reference to both the two dimensions and the four attachment patterns that result from their combination.

contact with the attachment figure should be exhibited. In such situations, adults should protest the impending separation (e.g., cry or cling to their partners).

Paralleling attachment theory and research on children (e.g., Marvin, 1977), the intensity of protest responses should diminish as the length of the relationship increases. As romantic relationships develop and evolve, partners should establish a kind of mutual understanding concerning each other's anxieties and the significance of brief separations. Therefore, brief separations such as those commonly taking place at an airport should elicit less attachment behavior from long-term couples.

Finally, according to adult attachment theory, working models of attachment should contribute to the regulation of attachment behavior. Specifically, individuals holding Avoidant working models should be less likely than less Avoidant individuals to exhibit attachment behavior during stressful situations. Situations that threaten the stability of the relationship (such as a separation) are theorized to activate defensive strategies among Avoidant individuals that promote interpersonal distance. When there is no threat to the relationship, however, Avoidant individuals should not be any less likely than others to maintain contact with their partners. Consistent with these theoretical propositions, Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan (1992) found, in a laboratory study, that highly Avoidant women were more likely to pull away from their partners if they were anticipating a painful, stressful task. This association was conditional upon their levels of stress, however. When they were relatively unstressed, highly Avoidant women maintained fairly high levels of contact with their partners. (See Cafferty, Davis, Medway, O'Hearn, & Chappell, 1994, and Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993, for additional evidence concerning the associations between working models and reactions to stressful events.) On the basis of attachment theory and research, we hypothesized that individuals in an airport setting who hold Avoidant working models would be less likely to seek contact with their partners when they were stressed (e.g., when their partner was leaving) than when they were relatively unstressed (e.g., when they were about to fly somewhere with their partner). In other words, the attachment-behavioral strategies adopted by highly Avoidant individuals were expected to be conditional upon the amount of stress elicited by the situation.

Theory and research on Anxious working models and the regulation of attachment behavior are less clear. Theoretically, highly Anxious individuals are hypervigilant to the whereabouts of their partners and should exhibit high levels of attachment behavior when their partners are leaving them. Consistent with this finding, Feeney and Noller (1992) and Fraley, Davis, and Shaver (1997) found an association between Anxiety and the amount of self-reported distress experienced after a relationship breakup. However, in their observational laboratory study, Simpson and his colleagues (Simpson et al., 1992) found little to no association between Anxiety and actual contact-seeking behavior. Thus, there appears to be a discrepancy between the experience and the behavior stemming from Anxious attachment. However, experience and behavior have not been compared within a single study. One goal of the present investigation was to help illuminate this discrepancy by comparing the differential associations between working models of Anxiety and attach-

ment-related distress as assessed through self-reports and behavioral indicators.

In summary, adult attachment theory posits that similar motivational systems underlie adult-adult attachment and infant-caregiver attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Shaver et al., 1988). Existing research on adult attachment dynamics has focused almost exclusively, however, on working models as regulators of attachment-related behavior despite the fact that attachment theory proposes a number of additional variables (such as the accessibility of the partner and the duration of the relationship) that are also responsible for the organization of attachment behavior. In the present article, we examine the influence of three kinds of variables in shaping attachment behavior: partner accessibility, relationship length, and working models. By doing so, we hope to advance the understanding of attachment dynamics in the domain of romantic relationships.

### Overview of the Present Study

In the study reported here, we sought to determine how attachment behavior is manifested during romantic separations and how the organization of attachment behavior is influenced by factors known to regulate attachment behavior in infancy (i.e., accessibility of the attachment figure, length of the relationship, and working models). To answer these questions, we conducted a two-phase observational study of couples who were separating from one another in a small metropolitan airport. In Phase 1, we observed and took detailed notes on the behavior and interactions of couple members who were about to separate from each other. On the basis of these observations, we were able to delineate the major behavioral patterns exhibited by separating adults.<sup>4</sup> This information was used to create a standardized coding form for behavioral observation in the second phase of the study. In Phase 2, we observed and coded the behaviors of both couples who were separating and couples who were flying together. Before coding these couples, however, a member of our research team asked each partner to complete a brief questionnaire designed to assess various demographic variables, relationship length, and attachment style. This procedure allowed us to examine relations between variables theoretically associated with the regulation of attachment behavior and the natural expression of attachment behavior.

#### Phase 1: Initial Observations and Coding Procedures

In Phase 1, we observed and took careful notes on the behaviors and interactions of separating couples in a small airport in California. This procedure allowed us to examine the kinds of behaviors activated by an impending separation and create a standardized coding form for the second phase of the study.

#### Method

Our research team, which consisted of four people, visited a small metropolitan airport on several occasions and took careful notes on

<sup>4</sup> In the ethological literature, such a record, or partial record, is called an *ethogram*. An *ethogram* is a relatively comprehensive description of the characteristic behavioral patterns of a particular species (Lehner, 1979).

Table 1  
*A Sampling of Behaviors Exhibited by Separating  
 Couples in Phase 1*

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Brief hug  
 Before boarding, he reads the newspaper and she leans her head on his shoulder  
 Massages her inner thigh  
 Kissed several times when she tries to leave  
 Both hold each other for approximately 5 min  
 When they separated, neither turned around to take "one last look" at the other  
 Eye-to-eye contact  
 Extended hug and stroking (lasts for about 5 min)  
 She stands on her tip-toes to give him a kiss  
 Tears in eyes; both members wipe the other's tears away  
 She goes back to the window and watches the plane leave  
 Holding hands  
 Petting other's head  
 She is still at the window 20 min after the plane leaves  
 Looks at wristwatch  
 Crying  
 At departure, she is the last to board the plane  
 She gives him money to buy coffee  
 Extended hand stretch  
 He leaves before she boards the plane but watches her from a distance without her knowledge  
 Intimate kiss  
 He waves "good bye" when boarding plane  
 He kisses her head several times  
 He leaves quickly  
 She walks away crying  
 Long hug; both are crying  
 Sitting close  
 She whispers "I love you" to him as she boards  
 Prolonged hug at the gate  
 She, in a comforting manner, strokes his face

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*Note.* These descriptions were taken from field notes taken in Phase 1 of the airport study and are provided to illustrate some of the major behavior patterns observed in separating couples. These descriptions are listed in no particular order, and, in some cases, more than one of these behaviors is from the same couple.

couple interactions. For each interaction, we kept a continuous written record of the behaviors and emotions exhibited by each member of the couple. Thirteen couples were observed.

## Results

*Behavioral observations.* A sampling of behavior patterns observed in various couples is presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the observed couples engaged in behaviors functionally similar to those exhibited by children separating from their attachment figures. Protest behaviors such as clinging, crying, and following were frequently observed. Before the departure, many separating couples maintained close contact, often holding hands or hugging. Caregiving behaviors were fairly common as well. For some couples, each member took turns comforting the other, by patting the other's head, for example, or by quietly reassuring the partner. Some of the younger couples mixed caring behaviors with sexual displays, sometimes intermingling a comforting embrace with subtle fondling.

During boarding, many partners continued to remain in close contact until the last possible minute, sometimes exhibiting what

we call an "extended hand stretch," in which the partners continued to hold hands even though they were walking away from each other. Once the departing person had boarded, the other partner often waited at the terminal window until the plane had departed safely. In one case, a man who had already boarded the plane came rushing out for one last kiss. Needless to say, the flight attendants, somewhat perturbed, asked him to return to his seat.

In general, these behavioral dynamics are functionally similar to those observed in children who are being separated from their primary caregivers. The majority of responses involved proximity-maintenance or protest behaviors, such as holding on to the partner and trying to prevent him or her from leaving. In addition to these responses, however, a number of behaviors were observed that are generally not observed in children. For example, mutual caregiving behaviors were present—behaviors that are typically exhibited by attachment figures who are separating from their children, but not exhibited by children themselves. This is consistent with Shaver et al.'s (1988) observation that adult attachment relationships differ from infant-caregiver relationships in that caregiving is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. In the airport context, caregiving behaviors appeared to serve a proximity-maintenance function and a comforting function. We also observed expressions of sexuality, which may serve both proximity-maintenance and reproductive functions.

*Standardized scale development.* On the basis of an examination of our field notes and the literature on attachment theory, we created a standardized form with which to code future observations. The coding form consisted of various behaviors falling into seven categories: Contact Maintenance, Contact Seeking, Avoidance, Resistance, Sadness, Caregiving, and Sexuality (see Appendix). The first four of these categories are based on the four major coder-rated behavioral scales used in Ainsworth's strange situation procedure with infants (Ainsworth et al., 1978, pp. 343–356) and correspond closely to the behaviors we observed in adult romantic couples (see Table 1). The Sexuality and Caregiving categories were based on a combination of what we observed in the initial phase of the study and Shaver et al.'s (1988) proposal that adult romantic attachment dynamics involve the interplay of the attachment, caregiving, and reproductive–sexual behavioral systems.

The scales were designed to allow independent coding of each couple member. In other words, we coded the behavior of each partner, not the couple as a unit. The coded behaviors contained a mixture of items that required some degree of inference on the part of the coder (e.g., "The person is trying to hurry the separation") and items referring to more concrete behavioral acts (e.g., "The person is watching from the window after the partner has boarded"). Each item was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). Items within each category were averaged to create composite scores for each of the seven behavioral categories.

During our initial observations, it was apparent that it would be difficult to have multiple observers code each person. We therefore worked to ensure that behavior patterns could be reliably coded by individual members of the research team. To achieve this objective, we conducted a second observational session in which the team collectively observed 10 separations and discussed how various behaviors should be coded on the

standardized form. Through group discussion, each member of the research team became more familiar with the general patterns of behavior typically observed and learned how to code these behaviors within a shared framework. In order to determine the success of this training procedure, we undertook a third observational session in which pairs of coders were responsible for observing and coding the same people ( $N = 21$ ). The average composite scores for each scale were roughly equivalent for coders. Therefore, we calculated interobserver reliability by correlating the pairs of coders' composite scores for each scale. These correlations were generally high, ranging from .80 on the Sexuality scale to .95 on the Resistance scale (average  $r = .90$ ). The magnitude of these correlations suggests that the training session was successful and that a single observer could capture most of the reliable variance in observable behavior. Accordingly, a single coder was responsible for observing each couple member in Phase 2 of the study.

## Phase 2: An Examination of Adult Attachment Dynamics

### Method

For the second phase of the study, we designed a one-page (double-sided) questionnaire containing questions about (a) demographics, (b) relationship history, (c) feelings about the impending separation, and (d) attachment style.<sup>5</sup> The demographic items inquired about participants' age, sex, and ethnicity. The relationship history items assessed the length of the relationship ("How long have you been involved, dating or married, with this person?") and the kind of relationship (i.e., dating, marital). Three items were designed to measure the level of distress the participant was experiencing with respect to separation ("How upset are you about being away from him or her?" "How angry are you about the separation?" "How sad are you about being away from him or her?"). These items were rated on a 1 (*not at all*) to 3 (*very much so*) scale and were averaged to create a composite self-report index of separation distress ( $\alpha = .78$  for men and  $\alpha = .77$  for women). To assess attachment style or working models, we asked participants to rate 18 items from Griffin and Bartholomew's (1994a) Relationship Styles Questionnaire (RSQ) on a 1 (*absolutely disagree*) to 7 (*absolutely agree*) scale. The RSQ includes items designed to measure the dimensions of Avoidance (e.g., "I find it difficult to depend on other people") and Anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being alone"). After we collected the data, these items were factor analyzed, using principal-axis factoring with varimax rotation, to yield factor scores on the two dimensions of Avoidance and Anxiety.

The general procedure was as follows: A female member of the research team approached couples waiting in airport gate lobbies and asked if they would be willing to fill out a brief questionnaire on "The Effects of Modern Travel on Close Relationships" for a class project.<sup>6</sup> If couples consented (only 5% dissented), each partner was given a questionnaire and a pencil and asked to complete the questionnaire independently. The researcher sat nearby and waited for each partner to finish the questionnaire. When the questionnaires were completed, the researcher politely thanked the couple for helping and proceeded to leave the vicinity.

While the couple members were completing their questionnaires, another member of the research team took a seat within viewing distance of the couple. He or she did not acknowledge the researcher who was distributing the questionnaires and pretended to wait for the next flight. As soon as the couple completed their questionnaires, the observer began to take notes on the couple's interactions. Notes were taken until both members of the couple left the gate area. For couples who were flying

together, notes were taken until both partners boarded the airplane. For couples who were separating, notes were taken until the nontraveling partner left the gate area. Once both partners were gone, the observer completed a standardized behavioral coding form for each partner. (Observers were, of course, blind to participants' questionnaire responses.) On average, each couple was observed for a total of 30 min, with times ranging from 15 to 90 min.<sup>7</sup>

We observed a total of 109 couples (218 people). Fifty-seven percent of these couples were separating from one another; 43% were flying together. Because of the nature of the setting and procedure, we were not always able to obtain self-report measures from couples we coded (e.g., 5 couples were not interested in participating). However, we were able to obtain questionnaire data from 99 of the 109 couples we observed. Unfortunately, complete questionnaire data were not available for each participant. Some participants neglected the second page (which contained the attachment-style items), and some omitted other items for unidentifiable, and apparently unsystematic, reasons. Therefore, to maximize our ability to estimate the associations of interest, we used all of the available data for each individual analysis (i.e., pairwise deletion of cases). Consequently, the sample size varied from analysis to analysis and is reported separately within each section below.

The sample was diverse, with ages ranging from 16 to 68 years ( $SD = 12$ ) and a mean of 34. Roughly half of the couples (47%) were married. Forty-three percent were dating, and 10% were engaged. The average relationship length was 6 years and ranged from 1 month to 43 years. The ethnic breakdown of the sample was as follows: 78% Caucasian, 5% African American, 11% Hispanic, 6% Asian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1% "Other." In general, separating couples were more

<sup>5</sup> For separating couples, we also assessed the frequency with which similar separations had occurred in the past (rated on a scale with the following metric: 1 = *never*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *twice a year*, 4 = *once a month*, 5 = *twice a month*). Sixty-nine percent of the sample endorsed one of the last two options, indicating that most members of this sample were accustomed to brief separations. There was a tendency for couples who were rarely separated to express more attachment behavior than couples who were more accustomed to separations. However, the low number of couples experiencing few separations made it difficult to estimate this association unambiguously. Analyses of the separation-frequency variable are available from R. Chris Fraley on request.

<sup>6</sup> Explicit criteria were not used to determine whether or not two people were a couple. In retrospect, however, it seems clear that we were identifying male-female pairs of roughly equivalent ages. Data for "couples" who were not romantically involved (i.e., brother-sister pairs) were not included in the analyses reported here.

<sup>7</sup> As noted above, part of the difficulty in doing observational research on adult attachment is identifying situations in which peoples' intimate behavior can be observed without infringing on their privacy or violating ethical principles. Given these issues, we chose to study attachment behavior in airports for three reasons. First, airports are public settings in which behavior is readily observable and easily documented. Second, as described in Phase 1, people express intimate behavior relatively freely in airports, despite the public environment. Third, given the public nature of the airport setting, people are aware that they are being watched to varying degrees by other people, including children, fellow passengers, employees, and security officials. Nonetheless, it is likely that some of our participants would have been uncomfortable knowing that their behavior was being systematically observed and recorded. Thus, to protect the privacy of participants, all questionnaire responses were anonymous and no identifying visual records (i.e., films or photographs) were made of the interactions. Please see the American Psychological Association's (1992) *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*, sections 6.10 and 6.13, for more information on naturalistic observation in public settings.

Table 2  
*Mean Behavioral Scores and Standard Deviations for Separating and Nonseparating Adults and Point Biserial Comparisons for Separation Status*

| Behavioral scale    | Women          |           |            |           |          | Men            |           |            |           |          |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|
|                     | Not separating |           | Separating |           | $r_{pb}$ | Not separating |           | Separating |           | $r_{pb}$ |
|                     | <i>M</i>       | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>   | <i>SD</i> |          | <i>M</i>       | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>   | <i>SD</i> |          |
| Contact Seeking     | 0.14           | 0.23      | 1.48       | 1.04      | .58*     | 0.22           | 0.35      | 1.38       | 0.92      | .55*     |
| Contact Maintenance | 0.46           | 0.51      | 2.09       | 1.16      | .59*     | 0.49           | 0.56      | 2.03       | 1.13      | .56*     |
| Caregiving          | 0.23           | 0.45      | 1.48       | 1.10      | .50*     | 0.30           | 0.55      | 1.53       | 1.19      | .45*     |
| Avoidance           | 0.23           | 0.67      | 0.31       | 0.83      | .05      | 0.14           | 0.66      | 0.41       | 0.74      | .30*     |
| Sexuality           | 0.07           | 0.20      | 1.12       | 1.08      | .42*     | 0.15           | 0.42      | 1.14       | 1.18      | .37*     |
| Sadness             | 0.02           | 0.10      | 0.96       | 1.18      | .40*     | 0.00           | 0.00      | 0.51       | 0.68      | NA       |
| Resistance          | 0.20           | 0.64      | 0.45       | 0.84      | .14      | 0.00           | 0.00      | 0.13       | 0.37      | NA       |
| <i>n</i>            | 45             |           | 64         |           |          | 45             |           | 64         |           |          |

*Note.* Means and standard deviations are presented separately for men and women. The point-biserial coefficient,  $r_{pb}$ , is reported to summarize the magnitude of the differences between separating and nonseparating couples within each gender while holding relationship length constant. NA (not applicable) is reported for Sadness and Resistance because there was no variability in these variables among nonseparating men. As can be seen, separating individuals exhibited substantially higher levels of attachment behavior than nonseparating individuals.

\*  $p < .05$ .

likely than nonseparating couples to be younger ( $r_{pb} = .22, p < .05$ ), unmarried ( $r_{phi} = .37, p < .05$ ), and involved for a shorter amount of time ( $r_{pb} = .28, p < .05$ ). There were no ethnic differences between separating and nonseparating individuals. The average age and relationship length for separating individuals was 31 years ( $SD = 10$ ) and 57 months ( $SD = 86$ ), respectively. Sixty-three percent of the separating couples were dating, 28% were married, and 9% were engaged. The average age and relationship length for nonseparating individuals was 37 years ( $SD = 12$ ) and 106 months ( $SD = 129$ ), respectively. Twenty percent of the nonseparating couples were dating, 70% were married, and 9% were engaged.

## Results

The analyses for Phase 2 are presented in three major sections. In each section, we examine variation in adult attachment dynamics as a function of one of the following factors: availability of the partner, length of the relationship, and attachment style (working models of attachment). Before we present the findings, three points should be noted. First, although we coded the behavior of each partner separately, individual scores are not statistically independent within a given couple. The average correlation between partners' scores across the seven behavioral scales was .80, indicating that the behaviors expressed by couple members were highly interdependent and coordinated.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in the analyses that follow we examine associations for men and women separately in order to maximize the statistical independence of observations within a specific analysis. Second, although the questionnaire contained items designed to assess the levels of separation distress participants were experiencing, these items were completed only by individuals who were separating from one another. Therefore, analyses of this variable are restricted to those individuals. Finally, an alpha level of .05 was adopted for all statistical tests, and unless otherwise noted, all probability values are nondirectional and calculated under the assumption that the true parameter is zero.

*Partner accessibility and attachment behavior.* To determine the influence of partner accessibility on the organization of attachment behavior, we compared the behavioral scores for two groups of individuals: those who were separating and those who were flying together. (We refer to this binary variable as *separation status*.) For this particular analysis, data were available for 64 separating couples and 45 couples who were flying together (a total of 109 couples). We hypothesized that individuals about to experience a separation would be more likely to engage in proximity-maintenance behaviors than individuals who were not about to separate. Table 2 reports the means and standard deviations of the behavioral scales for the two groups and point-biserial correlations (a standardized measure of effect size) comparing the differences between groups while controlling relationship length. As can be seen, proximity-maintenance behaviors such as Caregiving, Contact Seeking, and Contact Maintenance were much more likely to be expressed by individuals—whether male or female—who were separating from one another than by individuals who were not separating. Separation status accounted for approximately 30% of the variance in these proximity-maintenance strategies. Furthermore, sexual responses were observed more often in separating couples than in nonseparating couples; separation status accounted for almost 15% of the variance in sexual behavior. Interestingly, the differences between the two groups on the “defensive” behavioral scales of Avoidance and Resistance were relatively small. An examination of the mean levels of these scales indicates that defensive behaviors were fairly rare in this sample (the modal score was zero for separating and nonseparating individuals),

<sup>8</sup> Partner intercorrelations for the behavioral scales were .57 for Avoidance, .94 for Caregiving, .97 for Contact Maintenance, .46 for Resistance, .74 for Sadness, .86 for Contact Seeking, and .94 for Sexuality.

Table 3  
*Correlations Between Relationship Length (Log-Transformed) and Attachment Behavior as a Function of Gender and Separation Status (Separating or Not Separating)*

| Behavioral scale       | Women      |                | Men        |                |
|------------------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|
|                        | Separating | Not separating | Separating | Not separating |
| Contact Seeking        | -.26*      | -.21           | -.44*      | -.25           |
| Contact Maintenance    | -.44*      | -.36*          | -.49*      | -.37*          |
| Caregiving             | -.32*      | -.21           | -.39*      | -.28*          |
| Avoidance              | -.12       | .24            | .32*       | .30*           |
| Sexuality              | -.35*      | -.29*          | -.39*      | -.36*          |
| Sadness                | -.23*      | -.01           | -.45*      | NA             |
| Resistance             | .02        | -.04           | -.04       | NA             |
| Self-reported distress | -.34*      | NA             | -.26*      | NA             |
| <i>n</i>               | 58         | 41             | 58         | 41             |

Note. NA (not applicable) is reported for correlations for which no data were available (self-reported distress for nonseparating individuals) or variability did not exist (Sadness among nonseparating individuals and Resistance among nonseparating men).

\*  $p < .05$ .

perhaps contributing to the similarity between the separation-status groups.

It is noteworthy that the variation in attachment behavior was considerably higher for separating than for nonseparating individuals. For some scales, such as Contact Seeking, the standard deviation for separating couples was three to four times that of nonseparating couples. Also of interest, there was practically no variation in Sadness for nonseparating couples. Everyone we observed, except for one woman, obtained the lowest possible score for Sadness, indicating that people who were not separating exhibited no obvious signs of sadness or despair. The variability in Avoidance and Resistance was also fairly restricted. In fact, the combination of low mean levels and restricted variability in the Resistance scale indicates that behaviors indicative of Resistance, such as anger and pouting, were very rare in this sample. Therefore, in the following analyses we focus primarily on data relevant to proximity-maintenance behaviors (i.e., Contact Seeking, Contact Maintenance, and Caregiving) because they seem to be better indicators of the activation of the attachment system in the airport setting.<sup>9</sup>

*Relationship length and attachment behavior.* According to our inference from attachment theory, attachment behavior should be less pronounced among couples who have been involved for a longer period of time. Thus, we predicted that the intensity of attachment behavior would vary as a negative function of relationship length. Our preliminary analyses of this association indicated that attachment behavior varied roughly as a negative loglinear function of relationship length. Consequently, in the analyses that follow, relationship length was log-transformed to help meet the assumptions of the linear models employed.

Correlations between attachment behavior and relationship length were computed separately for separating and nonseparating groups within each gender. Data from 99 couples (58 separating and 41 flying together) were available for these analyses. There are two noteworthy features of these results (see Table 3). First, the expression of attachment behavior tended to decrease as a function of relationship length, indicating that couples who had been together longer were less distressed by the

impending separation. Second, although couple members who were flying together exhibited substantially fewer attachment behaviors than couple members who were separating (see Table 2), the expression of attachment behavior also decreased as a function of relationship length among nonseparating individuals. This suggests that the negative association between attachment behavior and relationship length is not dependent on the threat of separation per se.<sup>10</sup> The findings for the nonseparating couples are compatible with the possibility that additional sources of anxiety and threat (e.g., fear of flying, late departures) were active among nonseparating individuals. Longer term couples may express less proximity-maintenance behavior in such circumstances because they are more certain of each other's willingness to provide comfort if needed, without signals of availability having to be provided in advance.

<sup>9</sup> As the reader will notice, the behavioral subscales of Contact Seeking and Contact Maintenance tended to have the same pattern of covariates with the various predictor variables. In fact, these two scales were highly correlated ( $r = .87$  for men and  $r = .89$  for women), suggesting that they are indicators of the same latent variable. Nonetheless, we have chosen to present the results for these two scales separately because they were designed, in part, to mirror the behavioral dimensions assessed by Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1978) in the strange situation. The same rationale applies to Caregiving, Sexuality, and so on, which are more clearly separate conceptual dimensions.

<sup>10</sup> As one reviewer noted, the association between relationship length and attachment behavior might have been due to age rather than relationship duration per se. In fact, relationship length and age were correlated .57 in the present sample. In a supplementary set of analyses, we examined the association between relationship length and attachment behavior while holding age constant. The overall result of holding this variable constant was equivalent to subtracting .10 from each of the correlations in Table 3. Relationship length still accounted for approximately 4% to 10% of the variance in Contact Seeking, Contact Maintenance, Caregiving, Sexuality, and self-reported distress for separating and nonseparating men and women. Thus, the negative association between relationship length and attachment behavior is observed even when age is held constant.

*Working models and the organization of attachment behavior.* To examine the association between the working-model dimensions (Avoidance and Anxiety) and attachment behaviors, correlations were computed between Avoidance, Anxiety, and the behavioral scales, while partialing out the contribution of relationship length. These analyses were conducted separately for men and women within separating and nonseparating couples. For couples who were separating, we also examined the correlates of self-reported distress concerning the separation. Data from a total of 92 couples (54 separating, 38 nonseparating) were available for these analyses.<sup>11</sup>

On the basis of attachment theory, we predicted that highly Avoidant individuals would express fewer attachment behaviors than less Avoidant individuals when separating from their partners. Furthermore, we hypothesized that this association would be conditional upon separation status. Specifically, we expected the association between Avoidance and attachment behavior to be negative among separating individuals and zero or positive for nonseparating couples. The results for women are summarized in Table 4. For separating women, the dimension of Avoidance captured roughly 8% of the variation in proximity-maintenance behaviors such as Contact Seeking, Contact Maintenance, and Caregiving. Highly Avoidant women were less likely to seek and maintain proximity to their partners and were less likely to provide or seek care and support (see the left-hand side of Table 4). Furthermore, Avoidant working models were associated with withdrawal strategies, such as pulling away and not making eye contact with the partner. A different pattern of results emerged for women who were not separating from their partners. When there was no threat of abandonment, relatively Avoidant women were somewhat more likely to seek care from their partners and less likely to avoid their partners (see the right-hand panel of Table 4). These associations were significantly different (one-tailed tests) from those observed among separating couples (Contact Seeking:  $z = 1.77, p < .05$ ; Contact Maintenance:  $z = 1.38, p = .08$ ; Caregiving:  $z = 3.30, p < .05$ ; Avoidance:  $z = 2.72, p < .05$ ).

Table 4  
*Correlations Between Working-Model Dimensions and Airport Behavior for Women, Separated by Separation Status (Separating or Not Separating)*

| Behavioral scale       | Separating<br>( <i>n</i> = 54) |         | Not separating<br>( <i>n</i> = 38) |         |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|---------|
|                        | Avoidance                      | Anxiety | Avoidance                          | Anxiety |
| Contact Seeking        | -.28*                          | .03     | .10                                | .06     |
| Contact Maintenance    | -.16                           | -.00    | .14                                | .04     |
| Caregiving             | -.28*                          | -.04    | .41*                               | .08     |
| Avoidance              | .28*                           | .02     | -.30*                              | .25     |
| Sexuality              | .03                            | -.04    | .00                                | .20     |
| Sadness                | .10                            | .10     | .06                                | .06     |
| Resistance             | -.03                           | .06     | -.20                               | .03     |
| Self-reported distress | -.03                           | .29*    | NA                                 | NA      |

*Note.* Reported correlations are partial correlations, controlling for relationship length. NA (not applicable) is reported for pairwise comparisons for which data were not available (self-reported distress for nonseparating individuals).

\*  $p < .05$ .

Table 5  
*Correlations Between Working-Model Dimensions and Airport Behavior for Men, Separated by Separation Status (Separating or Not Separating)*

| Behavioral scale       | Separating<br>( <i>n</i> = 54) |         | Not separating<br>( <i>n</i> = 38) |         |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|---------|
|                        | Avoidance                      | Anxiety | Avoidance                          | Anxiety |
| Contact Seeking        | -.01                           | -.08    | .03                                | -.13    |
| Contact Maintenance    | -.13                           | -.28*   | .10                                | -.15    |
| Caregiving             | -.21                           | -.19    | .13                                | -.01    |
| Avoidance              | .02                            | .42*    | -.03                               | .27*    |
| Sexuality              | .06                            | -.12    | .16                                | -.18    |
| Sadness                | -.28*                          | -.15    | NA                                 | NA      |
| Resistance             | .00                            | -.24    | NA                                 | NA      |
| Self-reported distress | -.09                           | .02     | NA                                 | NA      |

*Note.* Reported correlations are partial correlations, controlling for relationship length. NA (not applicable) is reported for pairwise comparisons for which data were not available (self-reported distress for nonseparating individuals) or for which there was no variability (Sadness and Resistance for nonseparating individuals).

\*  $p < .05$ .

The dimension of Anxiety captured very little of the variance (less than 1%) in attachment behaviors for separating women. This coincides with the work of Simpson et al. (1992), who found little or no association between Anxiety and contact seeking in a stressful laboratory situation. Consistent with self-report studies of attachment (Feeney & Noller, 1992; Fraley et al., 1997), however, the dimension of Anxiety correlated with self-reported measures of separation distress for women ( $pr = .29$ ).

Next we examined the associations between working models and attachment behavior for men. As can be seen in Table 5, the patterns are not as clear for men as they are for women. For separating men, Avoidance was negatively but only weakly associated with behaviors serving proximity-maintenance functions. Male Avoidance accounted for about 4% of the variance in Caregiving, 2% of the variance in Contact Maintenance, and practically none of the variance in Contact Seeking. Interestingly, however, the dimension of Anxiety was able to account for some of the variation in these behaviors. Men with more Anxious working models were less likely to maintain contact with their partners. Anxiety accounted for about 4% of the variance in Caregiving and 8% of the variance in Contact Maintenance. Self-reported separation distress was not correlated with working models. For men who were not separating from their partners, there was no notable relationship between working models and attachment behavior. Furthermore, there were

<sup>11</sup> We also examined the contribution of Anxiety  $\times$  Avoidance interactions to explaining attachment behaviors. In general, the nonadditive combination of Avoidance and Anxiety explained only 2% of the variance in attachment behaviors beyond that explained by the additive combination of the dimensions. We also examined the associations between the attachment dimensions and behavior while holding constant relationship length, separation frequency (see Footnote 5), age, partner's attachment style, and all the relevant interactions. These variables and their interactions did not alter the results in any systematic way.

no appreciable differences between the associations estimated among separating and nonseparating individuals.

*Summary of findings.* In summary, these data indicate that some of the factors shaping the organization of attachment behavior in childhood also contribute to the organization of attachment behavior in the context of adult romantic relationships. In an airport setting, attachment behaviors were most pronounced in couples who were separating. Specifically, separating couples exhibited higher levels of attachment behavior and more behavioral variability than nonseparating couples. We also found that separating individuals who had been involved for a shorter period of time exhibited the strongest levels of attachment behavior.

As predicted, working models of attachment contributed to the organization of attachment behavior among women in a way that was dependent on partner accessibility. For women who were relatively high on Avoidance, proximity-maintenance behaviors were mildly present when there was no impending threat of separation (i.e., when they were flying with their partners). When they were about to be separated from their partners, however, women with Avoidant working models were more likely to pull away from their partners and avoid close contact. Analyses also indicated that, although Anxiety was associated with self-reports of separation distress for women, it was not associated with differential behavioral strategies. These dynamics were not evident among men.

### General Discussion

A major objective of adult attachment research has been to identify factors that contribute to the organization of attachment behavior and relationship dynamics (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). To achieve this goal, researchers have focused on the role of working models of attachment in the regulation of relationship behavior (Simpson et al., 1992), emotion (Kobak & Sceery, 1988), and communication (Feeney et al., 1994). Although this research has made a substantial contribution to the understanding of attachment processes in adulthood, the field has been lacking a careful and systematic examination of the natural behavioral dynamics of adult attachment relationships. One reason for this omission is that it is difficult to identify situations that both are stressful enough to activate attachment-related concerns and are amenable to unobtrusive observation. To overcome this problem, we examined the attachment dynamics of couples about to be separated at an airport. By doing so, we were able to exploit a situation that is likely to activate attachment-related concerns about the availability and safety of one's partner and is well-suited to unobtrusive observation.

We used the airport context to examine several issues relevant to attachment in adulthood. We examined the occurrence and organization of attachment behavior by taking detailed notes on the actual interactions of separating couples. Furthermore, we examined the contribution of several factors known to influence attachment dynamics in childhood (such as availability of the attachment figure, duration of the relationship, and working models of attachment) to the organization of attachment behavior in adulthood. We discuss findings relevant to each of these factors in more detail below.

### *The Nature and Function of Adult Attachment Behavior*

Bowlby (1969/1982) argued that an important function of attachment behavior in young children is proximity maintenance. When children feel insecure or uncertain about the availability of their caregivers, attachment behaviors such as crying, clinging, calling, and following are activated to keep a caregiver nearby or reestablish contact with a missing caregiver. According to Bowlby, these behaviors, and the motivational systems giving rise to them, are adaptive because young children who are separated from their caregivers are less likely to survive. Thus, the *ultimate function* of attachment is to promote the survival of children to reproductive age.

According to our observations, proximity maintenance also appears to be a function of separation behavior in adults. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, many of the behaviors exhibited by separating adults served to maintain close contact with romantic partners. For example, adults who were about to experience a separation were likely to hold onto, follow, and search for their partners. When couples were not separating (i.e., when they were about to fly somewhere together), attachment behaviors were fairly subdued. Thus, it appears that the functional dynamics of attachment are similar in childhood and adulthood. When individuals are concerned about the availability and accessibility of their partners, they are more likely to exhibit behaviors that reduce the uncertainty of the partner's whereabouts or ensure the partner's proximity.

It is noteworthy that attachment behaviors were exhibited even though a separation was, for all practical purposes, inevitable. That is, although these behaviors may be "designed" for proximity maintenance, it is unlikely that any of our participants actually believed consciously that their partner would stay if they protested enough. This observation highlights an important feature of the way the attachment system is theorized to operate: Attachment behavior is activated under conditions that threaten the stability of the relationship, independently of what can actually be done to maintain that stability. Similar observations have been made with respect to conjugal bereavement. Bereaved individuals continue to long for and seek their departed spouse even though they know consciously that their efforts will not be successful (Bowlby, 1980; Fraley & Shaver, in press; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). Perhaps more striking is the observation that abused children continue to seek comfort from their parents even when their parents are the source of distress (Browne & Saqi, 1988; Rajecki, Lamb, & Obmascher, 1978).

Taken together, these observations suggest that the attachment system is "designed" to activate proximity-maintenance behaviors when the availability of the partner is questionable, but the system is not necessarily designed to discriminate between situations in which attachment behavior will or will not bring the partner back. From an evolutionary perspective, such a pattern is understandable. In an environment where almost all separations can be prevented through active protest, it is hard to imagine how a system would be selected to make discriminations between retrievable and irretrievable separations. Furthermore, if the system could make these distinctions, it would fail to activate attachment behavior in critical "false alarm" situations (i.e., when restoring proximity is possible, although the loss may seem irretrievable).

Although it is relatively clear how proximity-seeking behaviors promote survival and, ultimately, reproductive fitness in young children, it is less clear how they do so for adults. One hypothesis is that the attachment system contributes to the formation and maintenance of adult pair-bonds, and infants reared within a stable pair-bond are more likely to survive than infants reared by a single parent (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Draper & Harpending, 1988; Rasmussen, 1981; Zeifman & Hazan, 1997). Thus, it is possible that the attachment behavioral system was "co-opted" by natural selection to promote the pair-bond and, consequently, the reproductive fitness of the individuals involved. This theoretical issue deserves future attention and research.

#### *Relationship Length and the Organization of Attachment Behavior*

Although attachment behavior in the airport was heightened during an impending separation, several factors contributed to the degree to which attachment behavior was expressed. Attachment behavior was expressed less strongly for couples who had been involved for a longer time. This finding is consistent with the idea that couples who have been together for a long time view brief separations as fairly inconsequential to the long-term stability of the relationship. A negative association between relationship length and attachment behavior was also observed among nonseparating couples. Although nonseparating individuals exhibited low levels of attachment behavior (their modal score was zero), those who did exhibit such behavior were more likely to have been involved for relatively short periods of time. This may indicate that there were (unmeasured) sources of mild anxiety and threat sufficient to activate attachment concerns and that these concerns were more likely to be expressed among shorter term couples.

#### *Working Models of Attachment and the Organization of Attachment Behavior*

According to attachment theory, working models play a role in shaping the organization of attachment behavior in certain situations. In fact, a large literature has developed on the influence of working models on relationship initiation (Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994), satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), and dissolution (Feeney & Noller, 1992; Simpson, 1990), as well as other intrapsychic and interpersonal processes (Mikulincer, 1995; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). In the present study, we examined the association between working models of attachment (assessed using self-report instruments) and observations of natural attachment behavior in the airport setting. The results suggest that working models contribute to the organization of attachment behavior in ways generally consistent with attachment theory and research. Under conditions in which the partner's whereabouts were certain (i.e., when a separation was not taking place), the attachment system was relatively quiescent (see Table 2), and Avoidant women were relatively comfortable seeking care from their partners (although the mean level of such behaviors was low). However, as the attachment system became more active (i.e., when there was an impending separation), Avoidant women pulled away

from their partners (see Simpson et al., 1992, for a similar finding in a laboratory context).

Attachment theory suggests that these dynamics reflect a behavioral strategy adopted in conditions in which protest behaviors are typically punished or ignored by an attachment figure (Main & Weston, 1982). According to Main (1990; Main & Weston, 1982), highly Avoidant children have attachment figures who generally eschew physical contact and ignore or discourage their children's bids for comfort or closeness. In fact, when their children express distress or a need for help, these parents often pull away from or unenthusiastically offer support for their children (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Grossmann et al., 1985), even though they can be very responsive when the child is not upset (Escher-Graub & Grossmann, 1983, as cited in Colin, 1996). Main has suggested that avoidant children learn to suppress attachment behaviors in order to maintain proximity to the attachment figure. When a separation is about to occur, or when the child feels upset, the best way for him or her to maintain the attention of the attachment figure is to suppress attachment-related behaviors. Apparently, avoidant children learn to suppress attachment behavior in stressful situations but engage with their caregivers more freely when there is a smaller threat of being rejected or ignored. In other words, the behavioral strategies enacted by the child become conditional upon the amount of distress elicited by the situation. We suspect that similar experiences are responsible for the dynamics observed in the present study. When separation is imminent, highly Avoidant women pull away from their partners in order to reduce attachment-related anxiety. However, in a less threatening situation (e.g., flying together), they may feel somewhat more comfortable being close to their partners. Future research is needed to determine whether such dynamics reflect current relationship interaction patterns or patterns learned earlier in life.

According to attachment theory, highly Anxious individuals should be more likely to seek and maintain proximity to their partners during a separation because their thresholds for separation distress are lower as indicated by self-report studies of emotion (see Feeney & Noller, 1992; Fraley et al., 1997). This raises a question about why Anxiety was unrelated to the activation of attachment behavior in our study and in the study by Simpson et al. (1992). Simpson and his colleagues speculated that Anxiety is unrelated to proximity-seeking because Anxious individuals, when distressed, experience conflicting motives. On the one hand, they are motivated to alleviate their distress by obtaining comfort from an attachment figure. On the other hand, they also experience anger and resentment toward their partner for not being completely available to them. These contradictory behavioral tendencies may cancel each other.

There are two reasons why this hypothesis seems unsatisfactory. First, we measured behavioral indicators of conflicting motives by coding overt expressions of anger, resentment, and pouting (Resistance). As Table 2 indicates, however, expressions of resistance were extremely rare in this sample. Furthermore, Anxiety did not correlate positively with our measures of Resistance. Second, this hypothesis fails to account for the fact that Anxiety was correlated with self-report measures of distress for women—in both the present study and in other research using self-report instruments (Fraley et al., 1997; Mikulincer et al., 1993). It is therefore unlikely that conflicting motives were

responsible for the weakness of the association between Anxiety and proximity-maintenance behaviors.

This issue might best be addressed by considering a model of the functional organization of the attachment system (see Shaver & Hazan, 1988). According to the model, there are two major components to the attachment system: an appraisal component that influences the amount of attachment-related anxiety that an individual experiences and a behavioral component that organizes the kinds of interpersonal strategies that an individual characteristically uses. Variability in the first component, Anxiety, is reflected in individual differences in the tendency to feel insecure or anxious about abandonment. Variability in the second component, Avoidance, is reflected in individual differences in readiness to seek contact and closeness with others. According to this model, a person high in Anxiety will not necessarily engage in attachment behaviors in a stressful context. Because variability in Anxiety and Avoidance are independent (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998), a highly Anxious person could either pull away from or seek comfort from a partner in a stressful situation. Nonetheless, a highly Anxious person should feel more anxiety in a stressful situation, independently of how he or she behaves.

When these functional dynamics are considered in light of Bartholomew's (1990) model of individual differences (see Footnote 3), an interesting psychological picture emerges with respect to our data. Recall that Anxiety but not Avoidance was correlated with women's experienced separation distress, whereas Avoidance but not Anxiety was correlated with the degree of attachment behavior women expressed. Thus, secure women, who are low on both Anxiety and Avoidance, experienced less separation anxiety but freely expressed attachment and caregiving behaviors. Fearful women, who are high on both Anxiety and Avoidance, experienced relatively high levels of separation anxiety even though they tended to pull away from, rather than seek contact with, their partners. Preoccupied women, who are high on Anxiety and low on Avoidance, experienced relatively high degrees of anxiety and expressed relatively high levels of attachment behavior. Dismissing women, who are low on Anxiety and high on Avoidance, experienced low levels of separation distress and tended to avoid contact with their partners.

Unfortunately, the data for men were not as clear as the data for women. Avoidant men who were experiencing a separation were less likely to engage in proximity maintenance behaviors with their partners, but this trend was relatively weak. There was some indication that highly Anxious men were less likely to maintain contact with their partners, but this finding was not predicted and is difficult to explain. At this point, we believe it would be premature to draw conclusions about sex differences because the differences were not expected theoretically and are not common in the literature on adult attachment (see Feeney & Noller, 1996). If these differences reflect something that truly differentiates the attachment dynamics of men and women, future studies will be needed that examine additional variables (such as sex role orientation; see Shaver et al., 1996, for an example) that might play a role in such dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, these data suggest that the two dimensions underlying adult working models play different roles in the regulation of emotion and behavior, at least for women. Anxiety appears

to underlie the subjective experience of separation distress—the degree to which a situation is viewed as threatening the stability of the relationship. The dimension of Avoidance appears to regulate the behavioral strategies used to maintain proximity, with some individuals pulling away from their partners under stressful conditions and others seeking closer contact.

### *Limitations of the Present Study*

Although there are virtues to the methodology employed here, there are also some limitations worth discussing. First, it is possible that working models are associated with whether individuals come to the airport alone or with their partners. For example, highly dismissing adults (i.e., adults low on Anxiety and high on Avoidance) may be less interested in having to wait with their partners, and they may drive to the airport alone or have their partners drop them off at curbside. To examine this possibility, we correlated separation status (i.e., whether couples were flying together or separating) with working models, under the assumption that working models would not affect couples' decisions to fly together. There was a tendency for people separating to have higher Anxiety scores than people flying together ( $r = .14$  for women and  $r = .27$  for men); however, there was also a tendency for couples who were flying together to have been involved for a longer period of time. (Some of them may have been taking a joint vacation.) When relationship length was statistically controlled, separation status accounted for less than 1% of the variance in Anxiety. Therefore, although there were differences in the working models of people who were flying together and those who were separating, these differences could be accounted for by the fact that longer term couples were more likely than shorter term couples to be flying together.

A second limitation of our study is that the setting may have restricted the range of observable behaviors. Because airports are public settings, couples may deliberately inhibit the expression of their emotions to some degree. It may be that the way separating people behave while riding to the airport, or preparing for the flight at home, is a better reflection of the way their attachment systems are organized. It is noteworthy that, although we observed indications of Resistance and Sadness, these were fairly low base-rate behaviors in the airport setting (i.e., the mean levels were low and the variability was small; see Table 2). Some people may have cried on their way home, after dropping their partners off; others may have expressed their frustration over the separation before arriving at the airport. To the extent that these behaviors took place outside of the airport setting, we were not able to include them in our analyses.

A third limitation is that we assessed only a small number of variables. There are several factors that may contribute to attachment dynamics that we did not measure, such as fear of flying, the duration of the separation, how far away the partner

<sup>12</sup> One possibility we considered is that couple members' highly interdependent attachment-related behaviors were orchestrated more by the female members of each couple. If so, then the men's attachment behavior would have been more highly correlated with their partner's attachment style than with their own attachment style. However, no such pattern was evident.

was traveling, and whether the separating individual was traveling for business or personal reasons.

Finally, this study is correlational in nature and does not permit strong inferences about the causal structure among the variables studied. Although we favor the causal explanations offered here, alternative explanations are possible. As one reviewer noted, it is possible that unmeasured variables, such as general mental health and recent relationship disturbances, are causing both people's attachment behavior and the way they report their attachment style. Furthermore, it is possible that the negative association observed between relationship length and attachment behavior among nonseparating couples was due to motives other than attachment motivation, such as sexual attraction. Our initial forays into the naturalistic observation of adult separations leave several questions open to further research.

### Conclusion

In summary, this study provides unique and valuable insights into the operation of the attachment system in adulthood. Our observations suggest that attachment behavior serves similar functions in adulthood and childhood. Moreover, many of the factors contributing to the organization of attachment behavior in children (e.g., availability of the attachment figure, duration of the relationship, and working models of attachment) were associated with the organization of attachment behavior in adults in theoretically meaningful ways. These findings help to substantiate and extend the application of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships.

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(Appendix follows)

## Appendix

## Coding Form for Phase 2

*Contact Seeking*

Kissing  
 Watching from window after partner has boarded  
 Embracing the partner  
 Interrupted leaving (leaving, then coming back;  
 turning back; looking at plane)

*Contact Maintenance*

Contact duration  
 Hugging  
 Unwillingness to let go  
 Clinging, kneading, and so forth  
 Eye-to-eye contact  
 Being near the end of line at boarding  
 "Extended hand stretch"  
 Hands held or body held

*Caregiving*

Petting, stroking  
 Caregiving, reassurance  
 Silent whisper ("I love you")  
 Embracing the other to comfort

*Avoidance*

Looking elsewhere (not directly at partner)  
 Turning away  
 Trying to hurry the separation  
 Breaking off contact

*Sexuality*

Sexual touching  
 Sexual caressing (hand on inner thigh)  
 Intimate kissing

*Sadness*

Tears, crying  
 Facial expressions of sadness

*Resistance*

Wanting to embrace or be held, but also resisting  
 contact  
 Signs of anger, annoyance, or pouting

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