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DUPONT KINGA KRISZTINA

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című program

Programvezető: Dr. Pethesné Dávid Beáta, egyetemi tanár

Témavezető: Dr. Danis Ildikó, tudományos főmunkatárs

ADULT ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONAL CORRELATES IN MOTHERS AND PARENTAL DYADS RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN: VALIDATION, SHORT FORM DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATIONS OF THE HUNGARIAN ECR-R

PhD thesis

Kinga Krisztina Dupont

Semmelweis University Doctoral School
Mental Health Sciences Division

Supervisor:	Ildikó Danis PhD
Official reviewers:	Henk Jan Conradi, PhD Judit Szigeti F., PhD
Head of the Complex Examination Committee:	Helga Feith, PhD
Members of the Complex Examination Committee:	Eszter Berán, PhD Anna Susánszky, PhD

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAI — Adult Attachment Interview

APIM — Actor–Partner Interdependence Model

BDI — Beck Depression Inventory

CAPI — computer-assisted personal interviewing

CFA — confirmatory factor analysis

CFI — comparative fit index

CI — confidence interval

Cohen's d — standardized mean-difference used to measure the magnitude of an effect

D — Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic

D-Cop — Daily Coparenting Scale

df — degrees of freedom

DS1K — Depression Scale Questionnaire

ECR-R — Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised

ECR-R-HU — Hungarian version of the ECR-R

ECR-R-HU-SF — Hungarian ECR-R Short Form

EFOP — Human Resources Development Operational Program (EU co-funded)

EFA — exploratory factor analysis

EFT — Emotionally Focused Therapy

EFCT — Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy

FAD — Family Assessment Device

HADS — Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale

HCA — hierarchical cluster analysis

HMT — Hold Me Tight® (EFT-based prevention program)

IQR — interquartile range

JASP — Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (statistical software)

M — mean

Med — median

MI — modification index (SEM)

N — sample size (total)

n — subsample size

NFI — normed fit index

PAF — principal axis factoring

PCA — principal component analysis

PSS-4 — Perceived Stress Scale

r — effect size for Mann–Whitney U and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests ($Z / \sqrt{N}$)

RQ — Relationship Questionnaire

RMSEA — root mean square error of approximation

RKEB — Research Ethics Committee of Semmelweis University

SAQ — self-administered questionnaire

Sch — school

SD — standard deviation

SEM — structural equation modeling

SE — standard error

SRMR — standardized root mean square residual

SSP — Strange Situation Procedure

TLI — Tucker–Lewis Index

TtP — transition to parenthood

WHO-5 — The World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index

WHO — World Health Organization

Z — Z-statistic (standard normal)

β — standardized path coefficient (beta coefficient)

$\boldsymbol{\varepsilon^2}$ — effect size for Kruskal–Wallis tests (proportion of variance explained)

χ^2 — Chi-square statistic

ρ — Spearman's rank-order correlation (rho)

GLOSSARY[1]

Attachment theory: A developmental framework developed by John Bowlby, proposing that humans form *emotional bonds* with caregivers that shape their socioemotional functioning, and influence cognitive, neurological and personality development across the lifespan.

Attachment lens: An interpretive framework that uses attachment theory to understand relationship behaviors, emotional responses, or interpersonal dynamics.

Attachment system: The neurobiologically preprogrammed behavioral system that motivates individuals to seek proximity to significant others for safety, comfort, and regulation under stress.

Attachment representations: Internal working models or mental schemas about oneself and others in relationships, formed through early attachment experiences and influenced by significant attachment related experiences throughout the lifespan.

Attachment-related internal working models: Enduring mental models that guide expectations, interpretations, and behaviors in close relationships, based on early interactions with caregivers. They may shift toward greater security or insecurity through significant attachment-related experiences throughout the lifespan.

Attachment orientations: Broad dispositional directions in attachment behavior—such as secure, anxious, or avoidant—reflecting how individuals regulate closeness and autonomy.

Attachment dimensions: Underlying continuous scales—typically Anxiety and Avoidance—that capture individual differences in adult attachment.

Primary attachment strategy: The individual's default, adaptive response to distress—typically proximity-seeking behaviors aimed at obtaining comfort or support from attachment figures.

Secondary attachment strategy: Alternative regulatory strategies used when primary strategies fail, characterized by either hyperactivation or deactivation of attachment needs.

[1] Definitions in this glossary are informed by standard usage in attachment research (e.g., Bowlby, 1969/82; Crowell et al., 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a; 2016b).

Attachment patterns: Characteristic ways individuals organize their attachment behaviors, historically observed in infants (e.g., secure, avoidant, ambivalent/resistant, disorganized).

Attachment styles: Relatively stable tendencies in adults' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in close relationships, commonly described along dimensions of Avoidance and Anxiety.

Attachment profiles: Combinations of attachment dimensions that describe a person's characteristic attachment-related functioning.

Attachment pairings: The relational patterns that emerge when two individuals' attachment styles interact (e.g., secure–secure, anxious–avoidant), influencing relationship dynamics.

Symmetrical attachment: A form of attachment observed in adult and romantic relationships, where both partners can serve as attachment figures for one another.

Asymmetrical attachment: A form of attachment characteristic of infant–caregiver relationships, where the caregiver serves as the primary attachment figure and the infant is the care-seeker.

Attachment motivations: The innate drive to seek closeness, safety, and emotional connection with significant others, particularly under conditions of stress or threat.

Attachment behavior: Observable actions—such as proximity seeking, crying, clinging, or reaching out—that function to maintain closeness to attachment figures.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. OVERVIEW

The primary aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate the significance and utility of the validated Hungarian version of the self-report Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised questionnaire (ECR-R-HU) and its short form (ECR-R-HU-SF)–for assessing adult romantic attachment representations. Beyond their value as research instruments, the ECR-R-HU and ECR-R-HU-SF are presented as practical tools for screening and evaluating therapeutic outcomes in clinical practice with couples across the life course. This dissertation places special emphasis on mothers and parents raising young children.

To achieve this, the dissertation is structured around three core objectives:

1) *Validation and development of tools for measuring adult romantic attachment:* It presents the validation of the ECR-R-HU (Dupont et al., 2022), the Hungarian adaptation of the ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000), on a representative adult community sample, and describes the development of its short form, the ECR-R-HU-SF (Dupont et al., 2024). This includes establishing risk thresholds for the two dimensions of adult romantic attachment—Avoidance and Anxiety—both in the representative adult sample and in a large, sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers raising young children (Dupont et al., 2025).
2) *Relational correlates and modeling:* The uniqueness of this dissertation is that it presents its applied use on a large sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers. It identifies four attachment profile groups of mothers based on the continuous ECR-R-HU-SF subscale 75th percentile thresholds: (1) relatively secure, (2) predominantly anxious, (3) predominantly avoidant, (4) predominantly disorganized. These groups are then compared across several relational correlates (partner support, felt security, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with distribution of workload, coparenting), instability and relationship conflict behavior. It also introduces a comprehensive structural equation model of relational functioning during this sensitive life stage, in which ECR-R-HU-SF subscales are predictors of relationship instability via negative conflict responses and relationship quality.
3) *Dyadic analysis of parents:* The focus finally shifts to a dyadic subsample of parents with young children, examining attachment pairings in enduring romantic parental

relationships as part of a pilot study. It explores the relational correlates and conflict behavior of mothers and fathers in different combinations of attachment pairings.

4) *Clinical implications:* Drawing on empirical findings, this section formulates practical recommendations for clinicians and researchers. It outlines how the ECR-R-HU-SF can inform clinical assessment and guide therapeutic interventions.

1.2. ATTACHMENT THEORY

Over the past six decades, attachment theory has become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding early socio-emotional development, affect regulation, interpersonal functioning, and psychopathology. The assessment of attachment has gained importance in both research and clinical practice, with attachment-based interventions emerging as increasingly prominent therapeutic approaches (Favez et al., 2016; Johnson, 2004).

Developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982), attachment theory integrates insights from ethology, developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, learning theory, and systems theory. Bowlby proposed that human infants possess an innate behavioral system, the biobehavioral attachment system, that is neurobiologically preprogrammed to form strong emotional bonds with primary caregivers during early development. This adaptive motivational-behavioral system motivates infants and children to seek proximity to attachment figures, to turn to them as a safe haven for comfort and safety, and to use them as a secure base to explore their environment. Securing the attachment bond promotes safety and survival for the vulnerable infant particularly in times of fear or distress (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a).

Historically, attachment theory focused on the infant-caregiver attachment relationship and was first measured in the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP). This procedure was developed by Ainsworth et al. (1978) to observe infants' balance between exploration and proximity-seeking behavior under medium-level stress, before and after short separations from the caregiver. This led to the identification of three primary attachment patterns: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-resistant. A fourth one, called disorganized attachment, was introduced later to capture patterns marked by a lack of coherent attachment strategy (Main & Solomon, 1990).

Individual differences in attachment representations gradually evolve as infants accumulate attachment-related experiences with their primary caregivers (Crowell,

2016). The infant internalizes attachment-related experiences and progressively develops implicit expectations concerning emotionally meaningful interactions with others. John Bowlby (1973) called these implicit expectations *internal working models* that guide the individual in the relational world.

When caregivers, i.e. attachment figures are responsive, sensitive to infants' needs and predictable, they create a "safe haven" for them to turn to when confronting stressful situations, or experiencing pain or discomfort. An accumulation of appropriate responses to the infant's attachment needs will facilitate the development of a *secure attachment* (i.e. *primary attachment strategy*) between the child and the caregiver. In this case, infants can use their caretakers as a "secure base" for exploration, too (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

When attachment figures repeatedly respond in unresponsive, unpredictable, or even hostile ways, infants develop *secondary attachment strategies*, aimed at securing proximity in the most viable way. The *insecure-avoidant*, or deactivating attachment strategy develops when caregivers are emotionally distant, cool, rejecting, or even hostile, and their responses to the normative proximity seeking of the child is withdrawal, disapproval or anger (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a): a behavior pattern that Bowlby (1969/1982) called "compulsive self-reliance". The *insecure-resistant*, or hyperactivating attachment strategy develops, when inattentive, preoccupied or anxious attachment figures are more likely to respond to the child if normative responses (e.g., calling, crying, clinging) are upregulated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a): a behavior pattern that Bowlby (1969/1982) called "protest." Insecure attachment has been associated with socioemotional maladjustment and impaired social competence (Groh et al., 2017).

A central idea in attachment theory is that early, evolutionarily asymmetrical infant-caregiver relationships are prototypes for later symmetrical adult romantic relationships (Roisman et al., 2005), and adult attachment research has generally assumed continuity in individual differences in infant attachment patterns and adult romantic attachment representations (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a). In adulthood, hyperactivation of the attachment system takes the form of demanding, or pursuing closeness, whereas deactivation manifests as a high need for independence and autonomy.

Although Bowlby emphasized that attachment spans the entire lifespan, writing that it persists "from the cradle to the grave" (1969/1982, p. 208), it was not until the mid-

1980s that researchers began to systematically explore attachment processes in adulthood.[2]

The main focus of this research was to investigate attachment and relational functioning during the early childrearing life cycle among mothers and in a dyadic sample of parents raising young children. Accordingly, the following section explores this developmental phase from an inherently systemic perspective, informed by multiple theoretical models and Emotionally Focused Therapy, an attachment-based therapeutic approach, central to this research.

1.3. THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD AND EARLY MOTHERHOOD

1.3.1. Systemic Approach to the Transition to Parenthood, and Families with Young Children

The transition to parenthood is a major rite of passage in the lives of couples and individuals. The classic Family Development Theory (Duvall, 1957; 1988) identifies the preparation and adjustment to the accommodation of children as the second stage in the life of a family. In the 1950s, the transition to parenthood (TtP) was coined as a period of normative crisis, emphasizing the strain that accompanies the transition, affecting couple relationships and the well-being of the individual (LeMasters, 1957). Today, researchers conceptualize the TtP rather as a period of adaptation that, while challenging for most, can generally be navigated without long-term negative psychological effects (Nelson et al., 2014). It is a unique experience for couples as they experience it both jointly and individually (Mickelson & Marcussen, 2023). The process of intense adjustment to parenthood begins with pregnancy and continues for about two years following childbirth (Doss et al., 2009).

Although there are various theoretical frameworks that may guide our understanding of how the transition to parenthood influences parents' relationships and adjustment in this new family life cycle, this dissertation adopts family systems theory (Cowan & Cowan, 1992) as its guiding framework. This perspective is not only one of the most influential for understanding how this life stage affects couple relationships (Kerig, 2019), but also a foundational model in couple therapy—the practical cornerstone of this dissertation.

[2] For a detailed review of the empirical measurement of adult romantic attachment see chapter 1.8.

Systemic approaches to couple and family therapy view the family—and the couple relationship within it—as a system in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Each family member both influences and is influenced by the others (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The following propositions lead to the conclusion that the interactional patterns of the family function as a kind of organism that is not controlled by any single member of the family: (1) there is not one orchestrator of interactional patterns, (2) all behavior is meaningful in context, (3) no single person can be blamed for family and relational distress, (4) personal characteristics are shaped by the system (Gehart, 2018). Systemic approaches emphasize that individual functioning is shaped by the dynamics of the entire family system (Kerig, 2019; Minuchin, 1985). Family systems are cybernetic and thus "steer" their way towards a dynamic state of homeostasis, striving for stability (Bateson, 1972; Gehart, 2018). At the same time, they are open, living systems and must adapt to any change or challenge that any one of the family members is confronted with (Cox & Paley, 2003).

A fundamental characteristic of family systems is their capacity to respond to challenges by reorganizing their structure and modes of functioning when adaptation through existing patterns, regulated by negative or positive feedback, is no longer sufficient to restore homeostasis. The redefining of systemic rules and boundaries, enables the family to establish a new equilibrium and maintain functional balance under altered circumstances, a process referred to as second-order change (Watzlawick et al., 1967). In the context of the TtP, which is one of the most demanding developmental shifts for couple relationships, the family system quickly necessitates second-order changes.

Several systemic models provide complementary frameworks for understanding the dynamics of couple relationships. The life-span developmental perspective emphasizes that individuals and relationships are continuously evolving and remain open to change across the entire life course (Baltes, 1987), a view that aligns closely with attachment theory. Emotionally Focused Therapy (Johnson, 2004; Furrow et al., 2022) highlights the circular and reciprocal patterns of interaction between partners, conceptualized as negative cycles that are maintained through ongoing feedback processes. EFT is grounded in emotion theory, drawing in particular on Tomkins' (1962; 1963) affect theory, which underscores the primacy of emotion in organizing interpersonal experience and relational regulation. The transactional model (Sameroff,

1975) further explains how partners' behaviors, emotions, and relational contexts mutually influence one another over time through bidirectional processes. Finally, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) situates the romantic relationship within nested and interconnected social systems—ranging from the immediate relational context to broader cultural and societal influences—that continuously shape couple functioning. Together, these systemic approaches offer an integrative lens for understanding the dynamic interplay between partners and provide a foundational framework for interpreting subsequent models focusing on the transition to parenthood.

Systemic thinking has deeply influenced how researchers conceptualize the family's shift from a dyadic to a triadic system during the transition to parenthood (Kuersten-Hogan & McHale, 2021). The transition from a romantic partnership to a family structure gives rise to four dynamic and interrelated subsystems: (1) the original partner dyad, (2) the parental subsystem, and the respective (3) mother–child and (4) father–child dyadic relationships (Minuchin, 1974). The interplay among the dyadic subsystems contributes to the higher-order functioning of the family triadic system (Minuchin, 1985).

Grounded in Minuchin's (1985) theory, Cowan and Cowan (2012) developed a comprehensive family systems model to understand how families navigate through normative transitions such as the transition to parenthood. The authors suggest six interrelated domains of the family system: (1) individual functioning, (2) intergenerational patterns: parent-parent/grandparent relationships, (3) parent-child relationships, (4) sibling-sibling relationships, (5) the balance of life stress and social support available to the family, and the (6) marital relationship. These domains interact dynamically through circular causality, exerting both direct and indirect effects, such that changes in one area can reverberate throughout the system. In their study called "The Pie" (Cowan et al., 1985), in which participants indicated on a blank circle how large each aspect of self feels, the authors found that the larger space allocated to parental identities came at the expense of the "partner" and "lover" aspects of self. In line with their research, Huston and Vangelisti (1995) show a shift in focus and energy from the self and the partner to the baby, with partners spending most of their leisure time together with the baby. In summary, during the TtP, the demands of caring for a baby place the self and couple relationships on the backburner.

When examining parental romantic relationships during the TtP, research has primarily focused on two domains: first, the trajectory of change in relationship functioning (e.g., marital satisfaction), and second, the individual (e.g., adult romantic attachment, depression, anxiety, perceived stress), interpersonal (e.g., communication strategies, relationship conflict, the coparenting relationship, work/family demand, perceived partner support, relationship instability, emotional intimacy, commitment, trust) and infant characteristics (e.g., negative reactivity, sleep patterns) that moderate such changes (e.g., Castellano et al., 2014; Doss & Rhoades 2016; Feinberg, 2002).

Research on the TtP has traditionally focused on the period following the birth of the first child, as this marks a major developmental milestone for the couple and the whole family system. The family's ability to reorganize during early parenthood shapes its long-term functioning. However, when children are born in succession, the dynamics, characteristics and demands of this life stage may extend over a longer period, continuing to shape relational processes. It is therefore not surprising that systemic family theorists—such as Duvall, Hill, Rodgers, Carter, and McGoldrick—have consistently emphasized the early childrearing years as a distinct and significant phase in the family life cycle. On this basis, the present dissertation focuses on both first-time and multiparous mothers and parents, who are raising at least one child aged 0-3 years, corresponding to the early childrearing stage of the family cycle. This present investigation focuses specifically on the role of adult romantic attachment representations in shaping *interpersonal characteristics*—partner support, coparenting, satisfaction with the distribution of workload, felt partnership security, and conflict resolution strategies.

1.3.2. Activation of the Attachment System During the Early Childrearing Stage (Extended Transition to Parenthood)

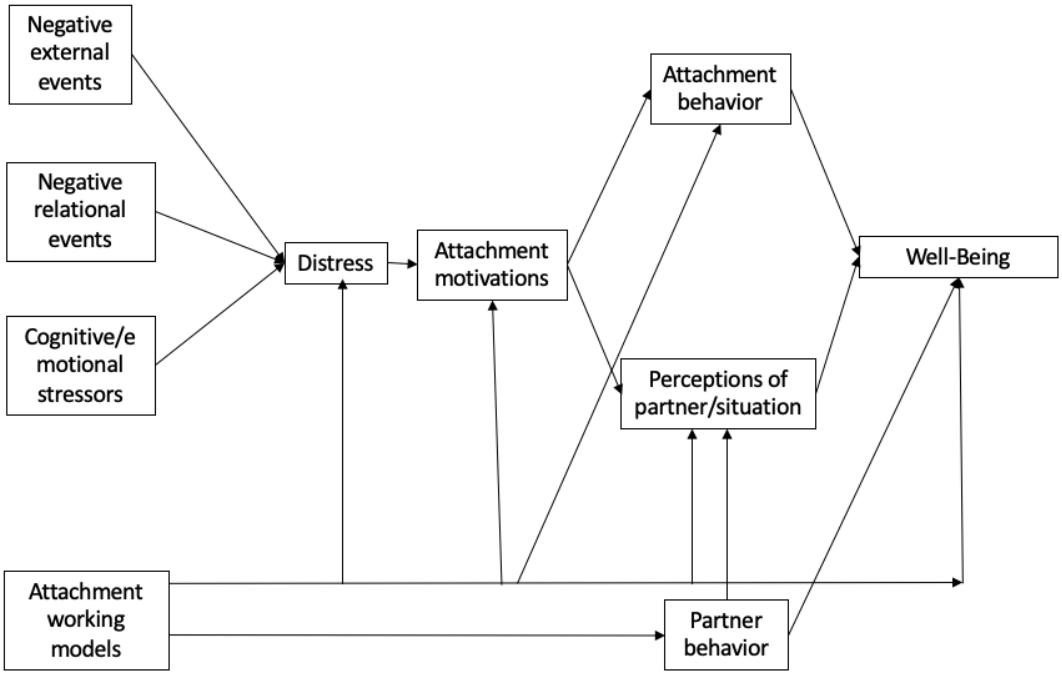
By incorporating internal working models into his framework, Bowlby (1973) expanded attachment theory into a lifespan perspective on developmental change (Crowell, 2016). Bowlby (1973; 1988) proposed that the transition to parenthood is a period when attachment representations are activated and become salient as a result of both the chronic stress associated with this life stage and because of the activation of childhood memories of how individuals were cared for by their own parents. Since then, numerous researchers have conceptualized the TtP as a generalized life stressor that activates attachment representations (Bifulco et al., 2004; Meredith & Noller, 2003;

Simpson & Rholes, 2019; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, & Wilson, 2003), creating fertile ground for their influence on intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes.

Monk et al. (2008) and Robakis et al. (2016) highlight a facet of the activation of the maternal attachment system. They describe how mothers focus on attachment concerns related to their own experiences with caregivers. While women are anticipating their own motherhood, they are stimulated to re-evaluate their own relationship history, in particular with their own mother (Ballou, 1978; Lester & Notman, 1986). Women with early suboptimal or negative experiences may be confronted with shortcomings in parenting schemas resulting in a crisis (Robakis et al., 2016).

The way individuals are treated by significant others—such as early caregivers and romantic partners—during stressful situations, including the TtP, shapes their expectations, attitudes and beliefs about future partners and relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Attachment representations influence personal well-being and couple functioning throughout the TtP, yet their dynamic nature allows them to be shaped by the interpersonal experiences that accompany the transition. These internal working models function as "if/then" propositions (e.g., "If I am upset, my partner will reject me.") and affect how individuals relate to their romantic partners under stressful/threatening circumstances, such as the transition to parenthood (Simpson & Rholes, 2019). These "if/then" propositions may stabilize even further or may shift toward greater security or insecurity, according to the quality of new significant interpersonal experiences. Understanding how insecure attachment representations influence relational functioning is particularly important, as they constitute significant risk factors across numerous domains of functioning and can contribute to the emergence of various personal and relational crises.

Simpson and Rholes (2019) developed the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model, offering a valuable framework for understanding the complexity of how working models of insecure attachment create vulnerability, predisposing parents to maladaptive intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes in response to the TtP.



Note. Adapted from Simpson & Rholes, 2012, p. 291.

Figure 1

The Attachment Diathesis Stress Process Model

The model shows the direct and indirect pathways through which insecure attachment representations are drivers of well-being. Understanding these pathways is valuable; however, the circularity of relational processes could be accentuated within a more systemic framework. An integrative model is presented in the discussion of the present dissertation.

This dissertation focuses specifically on **relational** well-being—and not personal well-being—and the sections below *extend* this model by focusing specifically on how attachment representations may be drivers of well-being during the early childrearing years of the TtP, through certain interpersonal characteristics of relational functioning (coparenting, partner support, satisfaction with division of labor, conflict behavior). These interpersonal characteristics will be briefly discussed by highlighting their associations with attachment representations, the influence of partner behavior, and the combined effects of these factors on relationship well-being among parents raising young children across the TtP.

1.4. Relational Functioning in Early Parenthood Through an Attachment Lens

The following chapters will briefly present key aspects of relational functioning and their associations with romantic attachment representations and relationship satisfaction—specifically focusing on coparenting, partner support, satisfaction with workload distribution, and couple conflict—and will emphasize links between these constructs where possible. This will be followed by an overview of trajectories of marital satisfaction. Relationship instability will be then discussed as an outcome that is closely linked to the previously examined aspects of relationship functioning. Although the literature is richer regarding mothers' relational functioning, fathers' experiences and partner effects will also be addressed. Due to page limitations and the characteristics of the current sample, same-sex couples are not investigated.

1.4.1. Coparenting

Coparenting is broadly defined as the degree to which parents collaborate in fulfilling their parenting responsibilities and addressing their children's needs (Feinberg, 2003; Margolin et al., 2001; McHale & Huston, 1985; McHale et al., 2019). A foundation of coparenting is that both parents perceive their parenting responsibilities as fair and acceptable in scope, and that they understand each other's perspectives (Feinberg, 2002). Within the framework of family systems, it is inherently a characteristic of the parental subsystem (distinct from the romantic couple subsystem). While it is closely linked to couple functioning, it must also be investigated independently (Minuchin, 1985). For example, in optimal cases, coparenting relationships remain intact even following divorce or separation.

Feinberg (2003) proposes a conceptual model of coparenting that distinguishes four interrelated components: agreement in childrearing practices, supportive versus undermining coparental interactions, division of labor, and joint regulation of family processes. While many self-report studies of coparenting focus solely on the mother-father dyad, McHale et al. (2019) accentuates that it must be understood as a triangular family process, specific to an individual child. McDaniel et al. (2017) highlight that coparenting is inherently experienced on a momentary basis by parents and their children.

Parents' relationship quality and psychological adjustment across the early childrearing years of the TtP influence the development of their coparenting relationship (Ryan & Padilla, 2019). However, coparenting and relationship quality appear to be two sides of the same coin. Relationship quality and coparenting are thought to influence one another reciprocally over time. Empirical studies provide evidence of cross-sectional associations and longitudinal findings show a bidirectional and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two (Le et al., 2016). The authors' dyadic approach suggests that relationship quality prior to the birth of the child influences coparenting functioning after birth for both men and women; however, coparenting functioning is associated with later perceptions about the romantic relationship only for women.

Attachment lens. Insecure attachment in general is linked to greater dissatisfaction in adjustment to new parenting responsibilities (Kohn et al., 2012)—associated with the newly developing coparenting skills. In particular, high levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety are associated with less coparenting cooperation and more coparenting conflict (Young et al., 2017). It also appears that mothers with greater attachment security can contain both their own and their partners' conflict-related hostility, and prevent it from spilling over into family interactions, protecting against adverse outcomes (McRae, Overall, Henderson, Low, & Cross, 2021).

Mothers play an important role in shaping fathers' parenting involvement—and thereby in the development of new coparenting skills—by acting as family gatekeepers (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008), a role that is influenced by their attachment anxiety. Highly anxious mothers tend to "close the gate" and discourage fathers' involvement (Aytac & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2023), reinforcing their negative expectations of close others. The same authors report that fathers' attachment avoidance and anxiety are associated with lower father-reported maternal gate opening. The latter underscores the interdependent nature of mother's and father's attachment representations and how specific constellations may shape coparenting dynamics.

1.4.2. Satisfaction with Workload Distribution

Satisfaction with the division of household labor and childcare reflects important aspects of the coparenting relationship. The division of household tasks is known to be a focal issue in the transition to parenthood (Kluwer et al., 1996), tending to become more

traditional across this period (Grote et al., 2002; 2004; Kluwer et al., 2002), even among couples with initially egalitarian attitudes.

Half a century has passed since Becker (1981) introduced the idea of marriage being a union that produces efficiency and increases well-being through specialization of tasks: traditionally, the man concentrated on market work and the woman focused on nonmarket work such as household and childcare. According to the concept of the gender revolution, women's roles, opportunities, and achievements have undergone substantial change since the 1960s, resulting in more egalitarian, dual-earner relationships and less gender-based division of certain spheres (e.g., labor market, housework). Interestingly, while women have entered previously masculinized domains, such as higher education or the labor market, men have not engaged to a similar extent in traditionally female-dominated activities such as childcare and housework (Yavorsky et al., 2015). Certain scholars even suggest that the gender revolution has stalled (Cotter et al., 2011).

Although economically, specialization may seem like the road to proficiency, considering relational functioning, this observed shift is often associated with conflict and perceptions of unfairness (Grote et al., 2004). Even among highly-educated, dual earner couples—a sample in which gendered specialization processes may have been reduced—gender inequalities continue to characterize leisure and work practices, with men's time spent in leisure activities increasing across the transition (Kamp Dush et al., 2018). A three-decade panel study shows that gender asymmetry leaves its mark even on the most egalitarian marriages with husbands specializing in earnings exchanged for wives' time spent on housework depicting that gendered family division of labor continues to persist (Fan, 2024). Satisfaction of workload distribution is theoretically associated with mothers' gate opening behavior and coparenting dynamics. When fathers are encouraged to participate in childcare and assume responsibility, mothers' satisfaction with their involvement is expected to positively influence their satisfaction with the division of labor.

Attachment lens. A common pattern that emerges in response to the asymmetrical conflict—wives expressing dissatisfaction with their husbands' contribution to housework, and husbands seeking to preserve the status quo—is the pursual or demanding approach of women with the withdrawal of their husbands in response to the felt pressure or demand (Kluwer et al., 2000). This pattern is characteristic

of anxious-avoidant attachment dynamics, which often become more pronounced, during the vulnerable period of early parenthood (Domingue & Mollen, 2009).

During this phase, attachment representations are activated, creating fertile ground for either strengthening or eroding attachment security, which may be influenced by levels of perceived partner support. A key contributing factor is that many women enter parenthood expecting a more egalitarian division of labor. When these expectations are violated, it has negative effects on their marital satisfaction (Kluwer, 2010) and is linked to increases in relationship conflict (Huss & Pollmann-Schult, 2020).

Family demands and work-family conflict appear to moderate the connection between avoidance and marital satisfaction (Kohn et al., 2012). When family demand was perceived to be high, highly avoidant people were also less satisfied, and their partners reported lower levels of satisfaction as well. When avoidant partners perceived less family demand, their avoidance was unrelated to marital satisfaction. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973), individuals high in attachment avoidance tend to be apprehensive about assuming caregiving roles. When family demands and work-family conflict intensify, highly avoidant individuals face greater difficulty in maintaining autonomy and avoiding caregiving. These findings show how highly avoidant partners with unmet attachment needs negatively affect not only their own marital satisfaction, but also that of their partners.

Insecure attachment, more broadly, creates vulnerabilities that undermine a couple's ability to adapt to both individual and relational stressors (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kluwer, 2010), potentially initiating a cascade of negative relational outcomes. From an intervention perspective, fostering a sense of fairness and goodness of fit in the division of family labor is critical for maintaining relational health (Danis, 2020).

1.4.3. Partner Support

Perceived partner supportiveness refers to how much individuals experience their partner as caring and emotionally available (Cross et al., 2000). A partner is considered responsive or supportive when they are attuned to the individual's needs and are willing and able to offer comfort, protection, and help (Collins & Ford, 2010). Responsiveness to one's partner, such as meeting their needs, supporting their goals, and affirming their self-esteem, are central to relationship functioning (Clark & Lemay, 2010).

The benefits of giving support are greater than what pure common sense may suggest. For example, social support skills predicted marital outcome two years later, over and above the effects of conflict management (Sullivan et al., 1998), and providing support appears to work as a buffer against emotional distress (Conger et al., 1999; Gillis et al., 2019).

Receiving support however can also carry risks, and in some cases the harm outweighs the benefits (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). While the availability of support generally helps to reduce distress, actually receiving support can sometimes be unhelpful and may even evoke unintended but powerful side effects, such as feelings of inadequacy, indebtedness, or unfairness (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). The manner in which support is given seems to be more important than its content. Different forms of directive support may be perceived as discouraging, as the support provider imposes a particular coping strategy on the recipient. In nondirective forms of support, the support provider allows the recipient to guide the support process, thereby accounting for their autonomy needs (Fisher et al., 1997; Harber et al., 2005).

Attachment lens. A partner's attachment security is thought to promote effective and responsive caregiving in the partner relationship (Feeney & Collins, 2001). Feeney and Collins (2001) show that individuals with a more secure attachment style have a more effective caregiving style, making it clear why their partners actually perceive them as being more supportive (Strauss et al., 2012).

Evidence suggests that when anxiously attached women enter the TtP perceiving less partner support, both partners experience a decrease in marital satisfaction following childbirth (Rholes et al., 2001; Simpson & Rholes, 2002; Simpson et al., 2002). Notably, highly avoidant fathers tend to provide less support to their partners (Wilson et al., 2007). Taken together, these findings indicate that changes in partner support play a key role in shaping marital satisfaction during this period.

There is an optimistic view for insecurely attached individuals. It appears that new, support-related experiences that contradict core features of avoidant internal working models are linked to shifts in attachment avoidance across the TtP (Rholes et al., 2021) creating opportunities for "earned security". Individuals who provide more support to their partners, or perceive they are receiving more support from their partners reported decreasing levels of attachment avoidance during the transition to parenthood (Rholes et

al., 2021). This may be similar for mothers high in attachment anxiety, as findings show that women who perceived higher levels of support from their partner also reported decreased levels of anxiety six months after childbirth (Simpson et al., 2003). However, this pattern may not extend to men high in attachment anxiety, as findings show that perceived support from their partners did not buffer their marital satisfaction (Rholes & Paetzold, 2019). These findings indicate how attachment orientations and perceptions of giving and receiving partner support are in a dynamic relationship and that individuals may even actively influence their attachment orientations through their own choices rather than being passive recipients.

1.4.4. Couple Conflict

Couple conflict refers to the presence of discord, differing perspectives, or incompatibility within the couple (Cahn, 1992). The high level of interdependence between partners promotes intimacy but also creates fertile ground for conflict. Heightened emotionality—a characteristic of intimate relationships—often leads to various interpersonal biases, such as selective attention to negative behavior, decreased perspective-taking and complexity of cognitive processes (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Sillars, 1998).

Couple conflict appears to substantially increase across the TtP compared to levels before childbirth and compared with nonparents (e.g., Crohan, 1996; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; MacDermid et al., 1990). Shifts from partner to parent roles, reduced leisure time, perceptions of an unequal division of household tasks, increased work demands outside the home are all factors that contribute to heightened relationship conflict during the transition to parenthood (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Grote & Clark, 2001; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007). Whether these changes are short or long term largely depends on how couples react to them (Rholes et al., 2014). According to Choi and Marks (2008), marital conflict directly leads to depression and functional impairment. Higher levels of relationship conflict during pregnancy are consistently associated with larger declines in relationship functioning following the birth of the child (Doss & Rhoades, 2016; Doss et al., 2009; Trillingsgaard et al., 2014). Several authors suggest that frequent conflict is rather a determinant than a consequence of declines in relationship quality across the TtP (Huss & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007); however, they also mention the importance of further exploring the underlying factors behind increased relationship

conflict. The above discussed relationship functioning constructs are all expected to play an interrelated role in the development of couple conflict.

Attachment lens. Attachment shapes overall perceptions of romantic relationships; however, its impact is most evident in observable behavior during stressful circumstances (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). Adult attachment styles as underlying factors in couple conflict have been studied in the past two decades. According to an attachment-based model of conflict and relationship functioning, insecure attachment influences how individuals perceive, experience, and behave during conflict, often undermining the overall quality of the relationship (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019). Attachment dimensions appear to predict relationship quality and conflict behavior mediates between the two (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2016b) suggest that differences between avoidant and anxious individuals are rare in terms of conflict behavior and appear to be overshadowed by the secure-insecure contrast. For example, higher levels of attachment insecurity among adults from a community sample, were associated with perceiving more frequent conflicts in their relationship (Dugal et al., 2022). Similarly, prenatal attachment insecurities have been linked to greater use of conflict engagement and withdrawal, and to a lower use of positive problem-solving conflict resolution styles in both mothers and fathers; additionally, partners' attachment insecurities also emerged as significant predictors (Lessard et al., 2025).

Findings from general adult samples also suggest that when both partners have insecure attachment, a special pattern of couple conflict emerges. Research consistently identifies the demand-withdraw pattern as a dysfunctional form of communication, in which one partner pursues change and the other responds by withdrawing from the conflict (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). In a study of parents undergoing the TtP, Kluwer and Mikula (2003) confirm that patterns of conflict behavior change with more demand-withdraw patterns – with women as complainants and men as defenders.

***Security*.** Secure individuals are confident enough to be assertive in conflict situations, as they trust that their partner will respond supportively (Feeney, 1994), making conflict situations less threatening for them. They are more likely to respond positively to conflict and engage in more constructive conflict behavior (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017).

Anxiety. As individuals high in attachment anxiety fear abandonment or unavailability from their partners, they are more likely to perceive conflict situations as threatening and intensify their emotional reactions to them. Certain findings on general adult samples link only attachment anxiety to less constructive conflict, but not more hostile behavior (e.g., Rholes et al., 1999; Tran & Simpson, 2009). Findings indicate that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety perceive greater conflict in their dating relationships, are more likely to intensify conflict situations, and report higher levels of emotional distress (Campbell et al., 2005). Anxious partners also exhibit strong stress and more negative behaviors during conflict and perceive their relationship less positively after a major conflict (Simpson et al., 1996). Their coercive and distrusting behaviors during relationship conflict only contribute to their greatest fear—the alienation of their partner (Feeney, 1999). A study on new parents is in line with these findings, showing that mothers' higher levels of attachment anxiety amplify the harmful effects of relationship conflict on relationship satisfaction (Lessard et al., 2025). It appears that the emotion-focused coping that highly anxious individuals use to manage stressful events typically does not resolve problems—it rather exacerbates anxious individuals' adjustment to their new roles in the TtP. The authors suggest that if anxious individuals never fully adjust, parenthood may be a critical point at which marriages containing at least one highly anxious partner start to deteriorate (Rholes et al., 2014).

Husbands' and wives' anxiety levels also appear to interact to predict women's reports of conflict behavior: when both partners are high in anxiety, wives report more conflict avoidance, while they reported more coercion when paired with non-anxious husbands (Feeney, 2003).

Avoidance. According to studies on general adult samples, more avoidant individuals tend to overestimate the intensity of their partners' negative emotions compared to partners' self-reports and respond with greater hostility and defensiveness to their partners' expressed emotions (Overall et al., 2015). Prior research indicates that individuals with attachment insecurity exhibit stronger physiological stress responses to interpersonal conflict (Powers et al., 2006) and that attachment-related avoidance may also shape inflammatory reactions in the context of marital conflict (Gouin et al., 2009). Conversely, in a sample of parents in the TtP, when both partners were highly avoidant,

their vulnerability to emotional flooding during conflict appeared to be reduced—implying proactive coping mechanisms during conflict (Morgan & Woodin, 2025).

Conflict resolution strategies. Rholes et al. (2014) explore the different types of conflict tactics—collaboration, stalemate, avoidance-capitulation, verbal aggression—and their trajectories that couples engage in across the TtP in relation to attachment orientations in a two-year dyadic longitudinal study. Findings suggest that individuals high in insecure attachment report perceiving greater use of negative conflict tactics by their partners, and that these perceptions are related to their partners' attachment insecurity. Highly avoidant partners used fewer collaborative tactics and engaged in more avoidance-capitulation. More verbal aggression was associated with both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Individuals with partners high in attachment anxiety, perceived their partner's stalemate tactics and verbal aggression steadily rising across the transition, while when their partners were more secure, the perceived increase of these negative tactics following childbirth was followed by a decline after the first year. Overall, there was a tendency for individuals with secure attachment, or those whose partners were more securely attached, to report increased use of positive and decreased use of negative conflict tactics, indicating a positive rebound one year after childbirth. In contrast, relationships in which at least one partner was high in attachment anxiety tended to show a rise in negative conflict behaviors without a return to baseline, suggesting that the transition to parenthood may serve as a critical turning point in the deterioration of these relationships.

Although it has been suggested that similarity in conflict strategies (regardless of whether those strategies are functional or dysfunctional) is a protective factor (Gottman, 1999), a longitudinal study across the TtP indicates that couples in which both partners use destructive conflict resolution strategies and or when at least one partner uses destructive conflict resolution, are more susceptible to separation or divorce 5 years after childbirth (Houts et al., 2008).

1.4.5. Trajectories of marital satisfaction

Research concerning marital satisfaction across the TtP has been in the focus for over 40 years. Until the turn of the 21st century, with the exception of three studies where no change was detected, more than fifty longitudinal studies had already shown a decline in marital satisfaction after childbirth (Cowan & Cowan, 2012). Evidence for decline has

continued to grow (Bogdan et al., 2022; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Kohn et al., 2012; Simpson & Rholes, 2019), with research designs and statistical methods of analysis allowing to paint a much more nuanced picture of decline trajectories, heterogeneity of new parents and moderators of decline.

There is evidence to support that relationship satisfaction changes in tandem with a typical U-shaped trajectory for both members of the couple after they become parents—a decline for which changes in work hours and household labor could not account for (Keizer & Scheck, 2012). This abrupt decline following the birth of the first child has been reported in many studies (e.g., Bogdan et al., 2022; Doss et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2008; Schulz et al., 2006; Twenge et al., 2003). In contrast, non-parents, typically exhibit a more gradual, linear decline in relationship functioning over time, without sudden changes. The rebound of relationship satisfaction in new parents appears to result in an eventual equivalence between non-parents and parents when their child reaches school age (Keizer & Schenk, 2012).

Another important aspect to consider when tracking relational trajectories is that new parents are not one single group. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that declining trajectories are not normative; rather they are driven by a small subset of individuals who experience sharper drops (Don & Mickelson, 2014; Galatzer-Levy et al., 2011; Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Leonhardt et al., 2021).

Attachment lens. Longitudinal studies consistently show that individuals with insecure attachment, particularly those high in attachment anxiety, tend to experience lower levels, and/or steeper declines in relationship satisfaction (Feeney et al., 2001; Mazzeschi et al., 2015; Möller et al., 2006; Paley et al., 2002; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016; Simpson & Rholes, 2019; Trillingsgaard et al., 2014).

Individuals with high attachment anxiety are particularly vulnerable to declines in relationship satisfaction when they perceive their partners being less supportive and indulging in more frequent negative relationship exchanges (Kohn et al., 2012; Rholes et al., 2001). Individuals high in attachment avoidance experience larger declines in relationship satisfaction when they perceive declines in their autonomy or independence. In particular, when they are faced with increasing conflict while managing work and family demands (Kohn et al., 2012), or if they perceive that they are doing too much childcare (Fillo et al., 2015). When both partners report insecure attachment, the decrease

in marital satisfaction is higher than when each or at least one partner is securely attached (Velotti et al., 2011).

Findings from a representative community sample of couples suggest that individuals' own attachment avoidance exerts the strongest negative impact on relationship satisfaction (Conradi et al., 2021), likely reflecting the progressive erosion of connectedness between the partners due to deactivating attachment strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a).

1.4.6. Relational Instability and Divorce

Alongside relationship satisfaction, relationship instability is a central dependent variable in relationship science (Monk et al., 2025). Although it is thoroughly studied, its definition and conceptualization are unclear and vary across studies (e.g., dissolution of the relationship, consideration of dissolution, shifting satisfaction, relationship transitions). In an attempt to define and operationalize relational instability Monk et al. (2025), define it as a process of dramatic change in relationship experiences, centered on fluctuations in commitment. This approach requires longitudinal studies with repeated assessments to understand the nonlinear trajectories of relationship instability. According to their RIP (relationship instability process) model, primary manifestations of relationship instability are fluctuations in commitment and satisfaction; secondary manifestations are dissolution considerations and relationship transitions, with divorce or dissolution considered the critical outcome (Monk et al., 2025). The authors also identify several factors that contribute to relationship instability, including economic hardship, hostile conflict, negativity, and parenting stress**.**

Divorce rates in the US have been declining since the 1980s. In 2023, about one third of ever-married adults reported that their first marriage had ended in divorce. Among divorces finalized in 2023, approximately 16% occurred within the first five years of marriage and 24% in years 5-9 (Pew Research Center, 2025), indicating a meaningful concentration of divorce events during the early childrearing years. At the same time, early research suggests that the presence of young children is associated with lower hazards of marital disruption compared with childless couples (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Waite & Lillard, 1991).

Hungarian trends are broadly comparable, with a temporal shift, as the decline in divorce began in 2008. The total divorce ratio has stabilized in recent years

(approximately .37-.38), suggesting that around 37-38% of marriages are expected to end in divorce. Cohort analyses further indicate that about 16% of marriages formed in 2010 dissolved within seven years, versus approximately 12% for the 2015 cohort of those formed in 2015, reflecting a relative decline in divorce rates in the early childbearing years. Notably, nearly half (47%) of divorces in 2022 occurred in marriages without minor children (Makay & Szabó, 2024).

These data indicate that the stressful period of the early childrearing years of the TtP may contribute to a concentration of divorce events in the first few years following marriage, but that the presence of children—particularly in the preschool years—has been linked to greater marital stability compared to childless couples.

Marital quality[3] (usually a composite variable comprising several measures, such as marital satisfaction, quality couple time and frequency of conflict) is one of the strongest predictors of divorce (Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012). In the present research, relationship quality was assessed as a composite construct derived from five indicators—perceived partner support, felt partnership security, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution, and coparenting. According to Tach and Halpern-Meekin (2012), the relationship between marital quality and divorce is moderated by premarital cohabitation, increasing the likelihood of marital dissolution regardless of marital quality. Numerous studies (Heaton, 2002; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012) have likewise shown that premarital cohabitation is linked to marital instability. However, other findings argue that once observed and unobserved characteristics (e.g., demographic and socioeconomic variables) are controlled for, the risk of marital dissolution among premarital cohabitators is actually significantly lower than among couples who marry directly (Kulu & Boyle, 2010). These mixed results highlight the need for caution in interpreting the effects of premarital cohabitation.

Attachment lens. *Insecure attachment* is linked to heightened perceptions of conflict, which in turn contribute to diminished relationship quality and stability (Johnson et al., 2018; Sheng et al., 2023). Reduced relationship quality—associated with insecure

[3] Marital quality is a composite measure consisting of multiple varying measures depending on the study, but always assessing relationship functioning and marital satisfaction. In this dissertation marital quality is used as a composite made up of five different variables regarding relationship functioning: partner support, relationship satisfaction, felt partnership security, satisfaction with workload distribution, and coparenting.

attachment—indeed appears to be a key predictor of separation and divorce (Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012). In a study by Houts et al. (2008), conflict behavior—destructive, mixed, constructive—during pregnancy and in the first two years following the birth of their child, was a predictor of marriage dissolution. It is also important to note that the association between couple conflict and perceptions of the relationship are complex and bidirectional. Specifically, higher levels of conflict and withdrawal are associated with lower relationship satisfaction and heightened perceived instability, while perceptions of instability are linked with less frequent conflict (Johnson et al., 2018).

Recent results from a representative community sample of couples indicate that *partner avoidance* is associated with less satisfying and more instable relationships (Conradi et al., 2021). Consistent with Conradi et al. (2012), Fakhri et al. (2018) found that only attachment avoidance and poor family problem solving skills, but not attachment anxiety were significant predictors of the likelihood of divorce. This aligns with the idea that avoidant partners have a tendency to be unavailable and unresponsive to their partners' attachment needs, contributing to their partner's dissatisfaction, further destabilizing the relationship.

1.5. Sociodemographic Associations With Attachment and Relational Functioning in the Transition to Parenthood and the Early Childrearing Years

Sociodemographic risk factors (e.g., having more than four children, very young or old parental age, low income, minority status) remain understudied, as much of the existing research has been conducted with highly educated couples. Yet, when examining the complexity of the early childrearing years during the transition to parenthood, it is crucial to account for the sociodemographic backgrounds of emerging parents. Prior research indicates that financial instability is associated with lower levels parental well-being and adverse outcomes in children's social and cognitive development (Dunifon et al., 2005; Perry-Jenkins & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2019). The following section provides a brief review of sociodemographic associations with attachment styles and relational functioning, while also highlighting existing gaps.

Higher birth-rate has been associated with poverty (Perry-Jenkins & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2019), which may add vulnerabilities to those parents, who are already in a risk

group. Not to mention that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also have less spousal support and social support, which is in turn associated with lower relational outcomes throughout the TtP (Chong & Mickelson, 2013). Interestingly, findings from a meta-analysis suggest that couples with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to experience a steeper decline in marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood and the early childrearing years (Twenge et al., 2003). It has also been proposed that many relational processes that are adaptive in middle-class and financially secure couples may function differently in economically disadvantaged couples, raising concerns about the broader applicability of prevailing theoretical models (Karney & Bradbury, 2020).

Prior research indicates that married mothers report greater attachment security when compared with cohabiting mothers (Jurič, 2011). Findings in the literature have been mixed regarding cohabitation with certain studies supporting the negative cohabitation effect in regard to relationship satisfaction (Mortensen et al., 2012; Stafford et al., 2004), while others have suggested similar benefits of cohabitation and marriage with regard to happiness (Blekesaune, 2018). Cross-cultural findings suggest that cohabiting couples experience greater reductions in life satisfaction during the transition to parenthood in contexts characterized by stricter norms against having children outside the marriage (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015).

Early maternal age of first time mothers has been associated with adverse outcomes, such as poorer mental health (Schmidt et al., 2006), educational underachievement and poorer economic circumstances (Boden et al., 2008). Prior research on general adult samples indicates higher levels of attachment anxiety among younger adults, and less dramatic differences in avoidance by age (Chopik et al., 2013).

This dissertation aims to deepen our knowledge concerning the understudied associations between sociodemographic background variables (age, number of children, partnership status, financial situation), adult romantic attachment and relational functioning.

1.6. Dyadic Patterns and Dynamics

At the onset of research on adult romantic attachment with self-report measures, Hazan and Shaver (1987) argued that relationship quality is shaped by both partners. Nonetheless, early research tended to focus rather on the individual and did not take the partner into account. Simpson and Howland (2012) argue that attachment research has

largely overlooked the role of the romantic partner, despite the partner functioning as the primary attachment figure in adulthood. They suggest that future research should examine how different attachment pairings relate to relationship quality and stability.

The Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model (Simpson & Rholes, 2012) offers a complex model in which one can understand how attachment representations play a crucial role in the well-being of individuals following stressful events, and also demonstrated the interrelated mediating role of the partner's behavior (also influenced by his or her attachment style). Results from dyadic studies demonstrate the importance of the interdependence between partners, suggesting that husbands' characteristics play an important role in wives' marital satisfaction and vice-versa (Bogdan et al., 2022; Don & Mickelson, 2014). Interdependence can be detected in trajectories of marital satisfaction: new parents tend to have similar trajectories (Don & Mickelson, 2014), with steeper declines occurring when the satisfaction of the partner has a more pronounced decrease (Bogdan et al., 2022).

The sections above focusing on relational functioning during the TtP through an attachment lens aimed at including a dyadic perspective where possible. Nonetheless, the study of specific attachment pairings and their links to relationship satisfaction and instability is scarce in research on romantic couples (Conradi et al., 2021; Rodriguez, Coy, & Hadden, 2021; Wang et al., 2023) and novel among parents across the transition to parenthood (Morgan & Woodin, 2025).

To explore how partners come together in relationships and which pairings are likely to endure through parenthood, I will briefly review the three main hypotheses related to partner preference.

1.6.1. Partner Preference

There are three main hypotheses of attachment-related partner preference and selection in the literature reviewed by Holmes and Johnson (2009). There is evidence in support of all three hypotheses: similarity (Frazier et al., 1996), complementarity (Collins & Read, 1990) and attachment security (Chappell & Davis, 1998).

According to the *similarity hypothesis,* individuals prefer partners that have similar attachment styles to their own. The *complementarity hypothesis* asserts that individuals will select partners with complementary attachment styles, implying a preference for opposite regions on attachment dimensions (e.g., an individual high in

attachment anxiety will prefer a partner low in anxiety and high in avoidance).The *security hypothesis* illustrates that security is preferred over insecurity, and preoccupied (high in anxiety) is preferred over fearful (high in anxiety and avoidance) and dismissing (high in avoidance) attachment styles (Strauss et al., 2012). Strauss et al. (2012) examined these hypotheses by using the two-dimensional measure of attachment (Brennan et al., 1998). With regard to ideal partner preference, Strauss et al. (2012) found that individuals preferred similar and *more* secure partners, a finding in line with Holmes and Johnson (2009) earlier review.

1.6.2. Perceptions of the Actual Partner

Findings indicate that perceptions of the actual partner align most consistently with the similarity hypothesis. At the same time, it appears that individuals do not always get what they would like, especially when they report high levels of attachment insecurity. Strauss et al. (2012) found a reciprocal pattern in partner perceptions: avoidant individuals attributed higher anxiety to their partners and anxious individuals attributed higher avoidance. Importantly, these perceptions were not necessarily aligned with partners' self-assessed attachment dimensions. The authors also indicate that similarity between the ideal partner's attachment style and perceptions of the current partner's attachment style predicted relationship outcome. These findings suggest that individuals in a relationship with partners having similar or more secure attachment styles results in better relationship functioning.

Once partners form romantic relationships based on mutual preference, an important question concerns which combinations of attachment styles are most likely to characterize these enduring relationships? Using the three-category measure of attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), Millwood and Waltz (2008) examined the distribution of attachment pairings across couples, and distinguished between secure (both partners securely attached), mixed (one secure and one insecure partner) and insecure (both partners insecurely attached) constellations. Of the 147 dating couples participating in the study, 44% were secure, 34% were mixed, and 22% were insecure. Interestingly the majority (84%) of insecure couples consisted of the anxious-avoidant combination, with the remaining 16% of the couples presenting the avoidant-avoidant pattern, without the presence of the anxious-anxious combination.

A more recent study of adults in long-term relationships by Lakatos (2020), using the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) identified six attachment constellations with cluster analysis: secure man-slightly anxious woman; anxious man-slightly avoidant woman; secure man-secure woman; slightly anxious man-highly anxious woman; slightly avoidant man-highly avoidant female; secure woman-slightly anxious man. In this sample, only 15% of couples were classified as secure-secure. Taken together, the limited number of studies and the divergence in their findings, suggest that attachment constellations remain un underexplored area of research. The present dissertation therefore aims to investigate attachment constellations among parents raising young children.

The dimensional approach to adult attachment has provided a more nuanced understanding of individual differences in attachment, and has led to a growing number of dyadic studies using the actor-partner interdependence model (e.g., Conradi et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2021). However, this focus has also hindered progress toward developing a more refined categorical framework useful for clinicians (e.g., based on cut-off values of the continuous attachment dimensions). Specific dyadic attachment combinations among parents in the early childrearing years and in the general population as well form a gap in research. The following section summarizes findings on attachment pairings of romantic couples in general.

1.6.3. Attachment combination in dyads and relationship functioning

The impact of attachment similarity versus dissimilarity on relationship functioning has yet to be established, given the inconsistency of existing findings (Wang et al., 2023).

Attachment dynamics are central to closeness-distance struggles in couple relationships, as connection vs. autonomy is a core relational dilemma. Forming a close bond requires partners to sacrifice a measure of autonomy, yet excessive connectedness may undermine individual identities. Proximity seeking is a cornerstone of attachment behavior; however, its manifestations vary according to attachment representations. Closeness-distance struggles have been linked to attachment insecurities, and in particular to the pairing of two insecure partners (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). Differences in partners' attachment orientations reflect divergent needs for emotional closeness and autonomy and may increase the likelihood of dysfunctional interaction patterns, such as

the pursue-withdraw cycle (Millwood & Waltz, 2008). In this dynamic, anxious partners tend to intensify attachment-related behaviors to seek closeness, whereas avoidant partners are more likely to disengage and emphasize independence.

Research specifically examining attachment-based demand-withdraw dynamics and their impact on relationship functioning remains limited, despite the extensive literature on demand-withdraw as a form of destructive communication (Conradi et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that the presence of even a single insecurely attached partner may be enough to provoke this maladaptive communication pattern (Millwood & Waltz, 2008). Demand-withdraw patterns are common in couples seeking therapy, with diverging needs for intimacy, and are relatively hard to modify (Conradi et al., 2021). Prior studies have associated this pattern most strongly with anxious-avoidant attachment pairings (Millwood & Walz, 2008; Conradi et al., 2021).

Attachment Similarity. Early research—conducted prior to the use of the two-dimensional model of attachment—suggested that attachment similarity among couples with insecure attachment (avoidant-avoidant, anxious-anxious pairings) was relatively rare (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). In fact, these combinations were entirely absent in their sample of seriously dating couples (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). The two-dimensional approach to attachment offers a more nuanced approach to exploring attachment pairings compared to earlier research based on categorical classifications.

Recent findings on a representative community sample suggest that similarity in attachment styles may predict relationship stability, but not relationship satisfaction (Conradi et al., 2021). It appears that mutual understanding of the partner's blaming or withdrawal does not enhance relationship satisfaction; however, relationship instability is not fueled by struggles for intimacy vs. autonomy as partners may be more accepting towards one another's insecure attachment behavior. Findings also suggest that in couples with *mild* and similar attachment insecurity, the adverse effects of insecurity may be attenuated by the benefits of attachment similarity (Conradi et al., 2021).

***Anxious-Anxious*.** In anxious-anxious pairings, both partners hyperactivate their attachment strategies to regulate their distress: they call attention to their own distress, express it intensely, and repeatedly seek reassurance from their partner. As both partners

use hyperactivation as their secondary attachment strategy[4], it is unlikely that they will be able to comfort one another. Conflict situations may quickly escalate with one partner's attachment anxiety amplifying the other partner's anxiety: partners may be absorbed by their own distress and needs, use blaming, or attempt to control one another (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Feeney, 2003).

However, there is a more positive perspective as well. When two anxiously attached individuals form a romantic partnership, their mutual desires for closeness may be met, and they may be able to offer to one another the reassurance they seek, resulting in better relationship outcomes. Hadden et al. (2014) found that anxious individuals in relationships with similarly anxious individuals, reported greater fulfillment of relatedness but lower levels of autonomy. As autonomy holds less significance for anxious individuals (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a), this reinforces the idea that they may experience greater relationship satisfaction when paired with more anxious partners (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Wang et al. (2023) provided partial support for this assumption, suggesting a U-shaped association between anxiety and relationship quality, such that two highly anxious partners may, in fact, develop a relatively satisfying relationship together.

Avoidant-Avoidant. In avoidant-avoidant couple pairings, deactivation of the attachment system is the predominating secondary attachment strategy. There appears to be little evidence that would suggest that avoidant-avoidant pairings may function poorly (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a), suggesting that the desires of two avoidant individuals may be relatively aligned, or that their internal working models are well matched. Hadden et al. (2014) found that avoidant-avoidant couples experienced the greatest fulfillment of competence needs, that is, feeling capable and effective in the presence of their partner. Although individuals in avoidant-avoidant relationships, with matched internal working models, may not be pushed into unwanted intimacy, which may be satisfying in the short-term (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007); however, their ultimate human need for closeness and connection will most likely remain unfulfilled, causing worse relationship outcomes in the long run. Rodriguez et al. (2021) found that when both partners are highly avoidant, their interaction may reinforce expectations that others are untrustworthy, thereby undermining commitment. Consistent with this, Wang et al. (2023) observed that highly

[4] A secondary attachment strategy refers to ways in which individuals adapt their attachment behaviors when the primary attachment strategy (i.e., seeking comfort and proximity from an attachment figure) is not effective or available.

avoidant attachment pairings reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction in samples of dating and married couples (Wang et al., 2023).

Attachment Dissimilarity. In this section, attachment dissimilarity describes complementary attachment pairings (avoidant-anxious) and also attachment style combinations in which one partner reports low scores on Avoidance or Anxiety (i.e., secure attachment) and the other partner reports higher levels on one of the attachment dimensions.

Anxious-Avoidant. Theoretically, the combination of an anxious partner with an avoidant partner may be especially dissatisfying, due to conflicting secondary attachment strategies. Early research (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994) has supported the notion that such attachment combinations in romantic relationships although less satisfying, remain stable over time.

Individuals with more attachment anxiety have a stronger desire for closeness coupled with a fear of rejection and abandonment. Research suggests that they may experience poorer relationship outcomes with avoidant partners, whose emotionally distant and disengaged behavior (Shallcross et al., 2011) can exacerbate their fears and insecurities, undermining relationship satisfaction and trust. More recent research, using the ECR-R to measure attachment dimensions, supports early findings: anxiously attached individuals report lower relationship quality in relationships with avoidant partners (Rodriguez et al., 2021). In terms of gender, early research—prior to the usage of the two attachment dimensions—has found that when one of the members of a romantic dyad was an anxious-ambivalent woman, then both partners were less satisfied with their relationships (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). The single study using a longitudinal sample across the TtP supports the above (Morgan & Woodin, 2025). Findings show that attachment avoidance in men interacted with attachment anxiety in women to predict higher levels of emotional flooding in men during conflict prenatally (Morgan & Woodin, 2025).

Avoidant individuals feel uneasy with closeness and prefer to limit intimacy, due to negative expectations about their partners. In relationships with anxious partners, outcomes may be worse, as anxious partners seek higher levels of intimacy than avoidant individuals are willing to tolerate (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Perceived violations of autonomy—which is of high importance for avoidant individuals—would result in lower

relationship satisfaction and lower levels of trust. At the same time—as stated above—this combination appears stable over time (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), due to reinforcement of early schemas of close relationships and/or self-reinforcing negative cycles of pursue/withdraw (Johnson, 2019). Rodriguez et al. (2021) underline the above suggesting that the avoidant-anxious relationship combination is particularly dissatisfying for both individuals. Contradicting these results, Conradi et al. (2021) found that the demand-withdraw (anxious-avoidant) pattern did not add explanatory value for negative relational outcomes beyond the main effects of individuals' own and their partners' insecure attachment representations.

Secure-Avoidant/Anxious. Secure individuals have been consistently found to be more resilient in the face of challenges to autonomy or intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a), regardless of their partner's attachment style (Rodriguez et al., 2021). However, evidence regarding the buffering effect of security remains mixed. Certain findings from young romantic couples indicate that the presence of one or two securely attached partners is associated with better relationship quality and less reliance on dysfunctional conflict resolution strategies (González-Ortega et al., 2020), whereas findings from a general adult sample of romantic couples suggest that secure partners do not necessarily "buffer" the effects of an insecurely attached partner (Lozano et al., 2021). Evidence also suggests, that the presence of one insecurely attached partner may be enough for destructive demand-withdraw communication patterns to emerge (Millwood & Waltz, 2008). In this sense, secure attachment does not always act as a protective factor: when attachment-related negative communication is initiated by the insecure partner, it can evoke reciprocal maladaptive responses even from the secure partner (Millwood & Waltz, 2008).

Moreover, secure attachment appears to influence avoidance and anxiety in different ways. Evidence suggests that security plays a more protective role in relation to avoidance than to anxiety. Couples with high discrepancy in avoidance (i.e., one avoidant and the other low in avoidance) reported higher relationship quality, suggesting a buffering effect of security in relation to avoidance (Wang et al., 2023). In contrast, incongruence in anxiety (i.e., anxious-secure pairing) showed no significant association with relationship quality (Wang et al., 2023). The absence of a significant relationship, however, may indicate that the effects of security differ across couples—buffering in

some, but not in others—thereby reducing statistical power. This possibility warrants further investigation. Taken together, the literature offers mixed evidence concerning the buffering effect of security in insecure-secure pairings; however, Wang et al. (2023) suggest that anxious-secure constellations may be more vulnerable than avoidant-secure ones.

Disorganized Attachment. A brief section is dedicated to attachment disorganization, a concept utilized in this dissertation. The conceptualization of disorganized attachment in adulthood is still unclear and forms a gap in research during the TtP. Moreover, to my knowledge, there is no research concerning disorganized attachment constellations within romantic couples.

Disorganized attachment was originally designated to categorize infants lacking an "organized" attachment strategy, displaying confused and contradictory approach and withdrawing behaviors (Main & Solomon, 1990). It has been linked with subsequent externalizing and internalizing behaviors in childhood (Fearon et al., 2010). In adulthood, the most widely used indicator of disorganized attachment has been the Adult Attachment Interview classification code "Unresolved state of mind with respect to loss or trauma", or "U" (Main et al., 1985; George et al., 1985), though this measure has faced methodological criticism (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2005). Research further indicates that adult disorganized attachment is associated with personality disorders and impairments in interpersonal functioning, and that most personality disorders and insecure attachment have similar developmental antecedents (Beeney et al., 2017; Brennan & Shaver, 1998)[5]. Building on this line of thought, Levy and Blatt (1999) suggested a different approach to disorganized attachment by capturing the differences in severity of attachment disturbance within insecure attachment styles.

Although there is a line of research arguing that disorganization is a distinct theoretical construct, existing alongside attachment avoidance and anxiety, interrelated and overlapping with the two latter (Paetzold et al., 2015), numerous researchers have conceptualized adult disorganization as a mixed attachment strategy, one that is high on both romantic attachment dimensions—Avoidance and Anxiety—(Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson & Rholes, 2002b; Pollard et al., 2023) characterized by an oscillation

[5] Connections to specific personality disorders, such as borderline or narcissistic personality disorder, fall outside the scope of this dissertation.

between approach and avoidance behaviors (Pollard et al., 2023), an approach consistent with Levy & Blatt (1999). This view is based on the "fearful avoidant" category of the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These researchers suggest, that such a "mixed" attachment strategy may foster confusion, disorientation and uncertain behaviors with romantic partners (Paetzold et al., 2015). When conceptualized as fearful avoidant attachment, it has been associated with having an abusive or neglectful parent (Brennan et al., 1991; Shaver & Clark, 1994), and being less trusting (Shaver & Clark, 1994). Interpersonal partner violence, a form of externalizing behavior, has been associated with one's own attachment avoidance and a partner's attachment avoidance and anxiety (Sommer et al., 2017)—of which the latter could in fact be associated with disorganized attachment.

An important aspect of disorganized attachment and of the attachment system in general is fear. Fear of intimacy (in highly avoidant individuals) leads to less support-seeking and caregiving, and less constructive conflict resolution (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Paetzold et al., 2015) while fear of abandonment (in highly anxious individuals) leads to more jealousy, more frequent anger toward partner behaviors in support-seeking situations, to cope with stress ineffectively and higher levels of depression compared with highly avoidant individuals (Mickelson et al., 1997: Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Paetzold et al., 2015). Fear drives highly avoidant individuals to further distance themselves from their partners for self-protection, while it encourages highly anxious individuals to approach attachment figures in order to ensure that abandonment does not take place. Disorganized individuals differ in that their fear does not provoke a systematic response. It encourages contradictory and confused behavior, appearing to be incoherent and chaotic, in which approach and distancing may occur simultaneously (Paetzold et al., 2015).

Researchers using the ECR or the ECR-R have not yet investigated the effects of disorganized attachment. Consistent with numerous researchers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson & Rholes, 2002b; Pollard et al., 2023), *the present work conceptualizes disorganization as a mixed strategy, high on both attachment dimensions*.

1.7. COUPLE INTERVENTIONS ACROSS THE TTP

Interventions targeting the transition to parenthood—preparing romantic partners for the early childrearing years—have accumulated (Pinquart & Teubert, 2010; Refaeli et

al., 2024) and indicate that it is possible to promote individual, marital and parental aspects of the TtP by intervening in communication, problem-solving skills, and parenting practices (de Oliveira et al., 2023). Certain studies suggest that couple interventions across the TtP may be more effective for higher-risk couples (Doss et al., 2014; Kan & Feinberg, 2014; Petch et al., 2012). A recent systematic review of emotional and psychological interventions targeting first-time parents indicates that most studies focus generally on mothers instead of applying a dyadic approach (Refaeli et al., 2024). There are however numerous couple based psychoeducational approaches, some of which focus on coparenting, such as the Family Foundation Program (Feinberg & Kan, 2008) the Brief Coparenting and Relationship Intervention (Doss et al., 2014), or The Bringing Baby Home Workshop—a psycho-communicative-educational intervention program (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005)—just to name a few. Therapeutic techniques, such as mindfulness have also been applied to relationship education programs (Gambrel & Piercy, 2015). Welch et al. (2019) calls for next generation interventions, such as brief video interventions to increase accessibility and decrease cost and time investment. In a review of psycho-educational programs enhancing couples' transition to parenthood, Petch and Halford (2008) indicate that four out of five universally targeted couple intervention programs prevented the steep decline in relationship satisfaction associated with the TtP.

One study by Lee and Feinberg (2025) explores how a couple-focused intervention program (i.e., Family Foundations) can alleviate the negative effects of attachment insecurity on coparenting relationships. Their study highlights the influence of attachment representations but they are not the target of the intervention. Findings suggest that attachment avoidance and anxiety are not only associated with lower outcomes in mental health and relationship functioning, but may also serve as driving mechanisms underlying these outcomes, as proposed by the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Interventions that target these core attachment representations, are expected to produce broader changes across related domains, compared to approaches focusing solely on surface-level variables.

It is perhaps unsurprising that none of these approaches identified in this review directly targeted attachment representations. Shifts in long-lasting working models of attachment are beyond the scope of brief, skills-oriented approaches. Moreover, for the

majority of couples transitioning to parenthood, an attachment-oriented approach may not be necessary, given that a review of attachment distributions in adult samples based on self-reports suggests that approximately 55-65% of individuals are securely attached (Magai et al., 2016). Based on the relative high prevalence of secure attachment and the security hypothesis regarding partner preference, it can be expected that most dyadic constellations include at least one securely attached partner. In this light, screening for attachment insecurity before couples enter parenthood may serve as a valuable preventive approach.

1.7.1. Attachment focused therapy: EFT

Attachment theory offers marital therapists a "map to the terrain of adult love relationships" (Johnson, 2004, p. 8). Bowlby, the father of attachment theory, stated: "All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 62).

Rholes et al. (2021) found that perceived support-giving is associated with decreases in attachment avoidance, suggesting that individuals may influence their attachment orientations through their own choices and behaviors. The authors also suggest that their findings could have implications for the development of therapeutic approaches aimed at modifying insecure attachment orientations, such as encouraging clients to enter uncomfortable situations and engage in behaviors that counter their avoidant tendencies. In terms of emotional support giving and receiving, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) actually embodies what the authors suggest in choreographing partners through these change events.

Multiple outcome studies have indicated the efficacy of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT)—a modality of EFT—in treating couples (Santos et al., 2017; Wiebe et al., 2017; 2019), by repeatedly showing decreases in attachment insecurity and enduring increases in relationship satisfaction from pre- to post- therapy into follow-up measures. Kindt (2020) highlights how EFCT could be an effective treatment for couples in the postpartum period; however, only a single study was found centered on EFCT applied to parents with young children (Sotoodeh Navroodi et al., 2020), in which the authors confirm its efficacy.

Results from a representative adult community sample (Conradi et al., 2021) further confirm that attachment-based couple dynamics are key determinants of relationship satisfaction, suggesting that interventions should focus on these crucial patterns. The focus of EFT is the modification of insecure attachment representations toward more secure ones: replacing secondary attachment strategies (de- and hyperactivation of the attachment system) with the secure primary attachment strategy. Johnson (2019) briefly reviews six important ways in which EFT captures the essence of attachment theory and applies it in practice: (1) It focuses on the active processing and regulation of emotion, fostering emotional balance through structured steps and positive interpersonal emotional coregulation. This is fundamentally a bottom-up process, arising from tuning into one's "felt sense" vs. top-down teaching of emotional containment and coping skills. (2) It highlights the importance of creating in-session emotional safety, in which therapy becomes a safe haven for the client and a secure base for exploring new and difficult emotions – therapeutic alliance and attunement are essential. (3) It emphasizes the continuous focus on internal and interpersonal experience, viewing the self as an ongoing construction, defined in interaction with others. (4) It shares a humanistic understanding of health and dysfunction, arguing that an individual will naturally reach for others and embrace longings for connection when given fertile ground and support. (5) It acknowledges the influence of past experiences, but fundamentally focuses on the present process. It tunes into in-session experience and interactions, and highlights the importance of corrective (disconfirming old models of self and other) emotional experiences. (6) Like attachment theory, it is grounded in empiricism and committed to the process of observation (e.g., delineating negative cycles). Attachment science fundamentally offers EFT therapists an empirically based map of common human misery and motivation. The exploration of key attachment related themes (e.g., abandonment, rejection, isolation, inadequacy) and how the individual deals with them (deactivating the attachment system and shutting down, or hyperactivating the system and becoming reactive) is guided by attachment science and placed into an existential context.

Seedall and Wampler (2012) emphasize the importance of "corrective emotional experience" when working with highly avoidant partners—a foundation of effective ECFT and a prerequisite of doing deeper emotional work with more anxious, demanding partners. However, the study also cautions that emotionally focused interventions may

not be immediately effective and are best introduced gradually. The findings reveal that avoidant individuals often show an incongruence between their felt emotions and what they report, a pattern consistent with repressive coping. As such, interventions should be tailored to normalize their experience, enhance emotional awareness, and support the reappraisal of their internal states. In EFCT, pushing avoidant partners too quickly into emotionally laden internal states is a common pitfall for therapists.

Corrective emotional experience for the more anxious partner in EFT has been coined the core "softening" event of the therapeutic process. This event represents a redefinition, or shift in the relationship toward greater mutual accessibility and responsiveness (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). A new second-order interactional pattern emerges (Watzlawick et al., 1967), characterized by the open expression of attachment-related fears and needs, accompanied by confidence that the partner will respond with comfort and acceptance (Bradley & Furrow, 2004).

1.7.2. Attachment focused prevention

While Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) is a well-established therapeutic approach primarily used with couples in distress, it is also true that prevention is more effective—and more time- and cost-efficient—than intervention after problems emerge. Introducing an emotionally focused preventive program for couples preparing for the transition to parenthood could help buffer against the relational challenges that often arise following the birth of a child.

Hold Me Tight® is a research-informed, emotionally focused prevention program, grounded in EFT, and designed to enrich and strengthen couple relationships. A recent meta-analysis supports that it may be an effective program for couples (McKibben et al., 2025). Several adaptations of the program already exist to meet the needs of specific populations, such as (1) Hold Me Tight®/Let Me Go, for parents and their teenage children, (2)Hold Me Tight®/Let Me Be Me, for parents and their adult children, (3) Created for Connection, for Christian couples, (4) Healing Hearts Together, for couples coping with cardiac disease (Tulloch et al., 2021), (5) Hold Me Tight® Online, for couples seeking a flexible, self-guided option. Given this foundation, a version tailored to expectant parents, such as Hold Me Tight®/Taking Root, could offer valuable support during this formative life stage and help couples establish a secure emotional base as they enter parenthood.

1.8. EMPIRICAL MEASUREMENT OF ADULT ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT

The preceding sections illustrate the central role of attachment theory across multiple domains of research, underscoring the importance of its rigorous empirical measurement. Therefore, the following chapter provides an overview of the empirical measurement of adult attachment, beginning with a brief historical and developmental perspective. This is followed by a review of self-report measures of adult romantic attachment, with a particular emphasis on the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (Fraley, 2000; ECR-R). The section concludes with an overview of existing measures currently available in Hungary.

1.8.1. A Developmental Perspective: Focus on the Asymmetrical Relationships

Although Bowlby's theory implied the significance of attachment in adulthood, it was not until the mid-1980s that adult attachment research emerged. Initially, the measurement of adult attachment was approached through developmental psychology. Main et al. (1985) developed the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), which is a semi-structured, one-hour interview probing individuals' childhood experiences with their caregivers and their reflective coherence. By assessing adults' memories of their early (asymmetric) attachment relationships with their caregivers, the AAI became the gold standard in developmental research for adult attachment (Booth-LaForce & Roisman, 2014). The AAI classifications (secure-autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, and unresolved) parallel the attachment styles identified in infancy. The tool also enabled longitudinal investigations of the stability of asymmetric attachment to caregivers from infancy into adulthood. Despite its strengths, the AAI has limitations: it is costly and time-intensive, requiring extensive training for administration and coding.

1.8.2. Self-Report Measures: Focus on the Symmetrical Relationships

Interest in symmetrical romantic adult attachment emerged in the late 1980's, influenced by developments in social and personality psychology that introduced more accessible and time-efficient approaches. This shift brought about a paradigm change in attachment research, favoring the use of self-report questionnaires, enabling the study of large samples in primarily lab-based, cross-sectional designs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Steele et al., 2009). Self-report methods assess different facets of attachment representations than interview methods and thus do not consistently converge (Roisman

et al., 2007). While the AAI is designed to reflect unconscious processes and states of mind regarding early asymmetrical attachment experiences, self-report methods aim to measure conscious appraisals of feelings and behaviors in close, symmetrical relationships (Ravitz et al., 2010). The two have very weak associations (e.g., Roisman et al., 2007), despite having similar correlations with other variables and should not be viewed as substitutes for one another (Crowell, 2016).

Among the various approaches to assessing adult romantic attachment (e.g., attachment-relevant scripts and behavioral assessments; for a review see Crowell, 2016), self-report methods are the most widely used. The first attempt to measure attachment styles in symmetrical romantic relationships employed a self-report method. It dates back to the late 1980s when Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ)**,** a brief three-category measure composed of short self-descriptions reflecting individuals' feelings in romantic relationships based on the Ainsworth-type classification. This instrument was grounded in the theoretical premise that internal working models of attachment persist into adulthood and are expressed in romantic bonds. The AAQ represented the first in a series of self-report measures designed to assess attachment styles in adult, symmetrical romantic relationships.

In an effort to address the limitations of the AAQ, a number of questionnaires were developed in the next decade to measure adult attachment styles, as comprehensively reviewed by Ravitz et al. (2010). Several of these are highlighted below. The Relationships Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) extended and reworded the original Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) into a four-category model and proposed that attachment styles can be understood based on two dimensions: model of self and model of others. The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney et al., 1994) was designed to address conceptual questions regarding core dimensions of adult attachment and to allow assessment in individuals with limited romantic relationships experience. The Relationship Style Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) integrated items from the AAQ (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the RQ (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990). Two years later, Collins (1996) developed the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), which assesses relationship building abilities and self-reported tendencies in forming close attachments. By the end of the 1990s it was hard to keep track of the various

dimensions and categories proposed by researchers striving to capture the construct of adult attachment.

1.8.3. The ECR and the ECR-R

The ECR. A major advance came with the development of the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) questionnaire (Brennan et al., 1998). The authors initially included all the items from previously published questionnaires in their study. After eliminating redundant items, a pool of 323 items remained, which were administered to 1086 undergraduate students. Following a detailed analysis of the items and factor analysis, results yielded 36 items and two-factors: *attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety*. High Avoidance indicates the deactivation of the attachment system, leading to dismissal and downplaying of potential threats, the suppression and denial of worries and vulnerabilities coupled with the denial of the need for a significant other's presence, often manifesting in a high desire for independence and autonomy. High Anxiety scores reflect the hyperactivation of the attachment system, predisposing an individual to engage in excessively dependent behavior, with an intense and frequent desire for closeness coupled with a fear of abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a).

The ECR-R and its short forms. To improve the accuracy and reliability of the questionnaire, Fraley et al. (2000) revised the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire resulting in the ECR-R. Reanalysis of the initial 323 items using factor analysis and item-response theory resulted in a partially new 36-item version of the original ECR questionnaire with items retained on the basis of their discriminatory values and combined again in a revised two factor model with 18-items for both *Avoidance and Anxiety*. The ECR-R has since become one of the most widely used tools in adult romantic attachment research, with consistently high reliability and validated psychometric properties (Fairchild & Finney, 2006; Sibley & Liu, 2004). According to a meta-analysis of self-report measures of adult romantic attachment, the ECR-R had the highest average reliability (Graham & Unterschute, 2015).

Since its development, the ECR-R has been translated into 20 languages, 14 of which are European (including Czech, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, and Spanish) and 6 non-European (Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Thai, and Turkish). In the majority of

validation studies (16 out of 20), researchers confirmed that the measure's psychometric properties were best represented by the two-factor model originally proposed by Fraley et al. (2000). One of the main challenges that authors have mentioned is a methodological issue related to reverse-coded items, which several authors have addressed through the use of method factors. For a detailed review, please see Dupont et al., 2022; 2024, 2025.

In recent years, there has been a growing number of published short versions of the ECR-R, highlighting the demand for a time-efficient instrument, suitable not only for research but also for screening and ongoing assessment in clinical contexts. Such brief instruments should demonstrate solid psychometric properties and ideally contain no more than 10 to 15 items (Brenk-Franz et al., 2018). To this day, thirteen different short forms (consisting of 8 to 18 items) of the ECR-R have been developed in various languages, including Arabic, Czech, French, Hungarian, Korean, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, and two separate versions each in Thai and German. Close to all of short forms support the expected two-factor structure of the measure with relatively good psychometric properties, although the problematic nature of reverse-coded items has also been mentioned and addressed (e.g., Lee et al., 2023). For a detailed review, see Dupont et al. (2024).

1.8.4. Self-Report Assessment of Attachment in Hungary

Since the early 2000s, Hungarian researchers have adapted six different self-report measures of adult attachment: The Relationship Scales Questionnaire, RSQ (Csóka et al., 2007; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), the Attachment Style Questionnaire, ASQ (Feeney et al., 1994; Hámori et al., 2016), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale, RAAS (Collins, 1996; Őri et al., 2021), the Experiences in Close Relationships, ECR (Brennan et al., 1998; Nagy, 2005), and the Experiences in Close Relationships Relationship Structures, ECR-RS (Fraley et al., 2011; Jantek & Vargha, 2016). In the 2020s, our research group adapted the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000; Dupont et al., 2022), and developed its short form, the Experiences in Close Relationships Revised Short Form (ECR-R-HU-SF; Dupont et al., 2024). For a detailed overview of the tool's practical applications, its use as a screening instrument, and the establishment of risk thresholds, see Dupont et al. (2025).

This dissertation only briefly summarizes the Hungarian validation of the ECR-R (ECR-R-HU) and the development of its short form (ECR-R-HU-SF), as the primary

focus of this work is the application of the short form to a special sample of mothers and parent dyads. For a detailed account of the validation, see Dupont et al. (2022; 2024; 2025), included in the appendix of this dissertation.

In summary, this introduction has outlined the theoretical foundations of adult romantic attachment and its relevance during the transition to parenthood, a period in which attachment representations are particularly salient. It then reviewed parental relational functioning through an attachment lens, then shifted focus toward investigating attachment constellations within romantic dyads and their links to relational outcomes, highlighting gaps in the literature. A brief section also addressed sociodemographic correlates of attachment representations and the limited research on these factors in the TtP. Therapeutic and preventive interventions targeting insecure attachment representations during this sensitive period were then discussed. Finally, a brief presentation of the empirical assessment of romantic attachment concluded the introduction. The following chapters build on this foundation to present the aims, methods and results of the present research.

2. AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

One of the overarching aims of this doctoral thesis was to adapt and validate the Hungarian version of a widely used measure of adult romantic attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R), and to develop and validate its short form (ECR-R-HU-SF), in a nationally representative adult sample (Study 1). A second aim was to investigate the relational correlates of adult romantic attachment in a sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers and in a subsample of parent dyads raising young children (up to 3 years) (Study 2). This dissertation has clinical relevance, too, aiming to examine and illustrate issues that frequently come up in systemic couple, family or individual therapy. Figure 2 summarizes the studies and samples included in this dissertation to provide a clear overview for the reader.

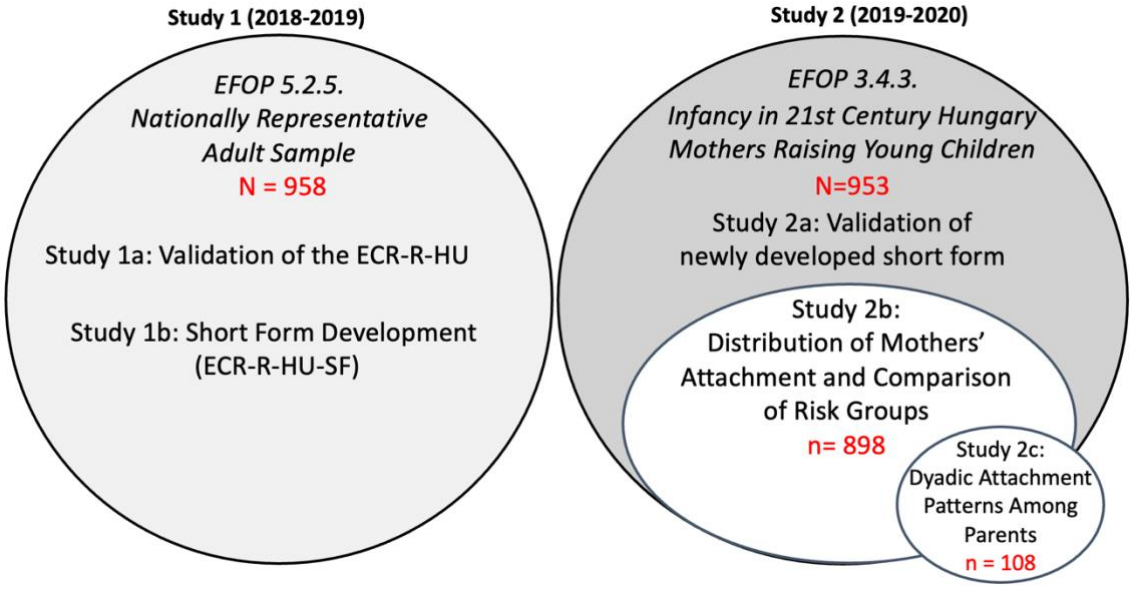


Figure 2

Studies and Samples Included in the Dissertation

2.1. PRELIMINARY STUDIES: VALIDATION AND SHORT FORM DEVELOPMENT (STUDIES 1A-2A)

This dissertation briefly provides a brief overview of the validation process of the preliminary studies. A detailed review of the theoretical background, methods, and results can be found in Dupont et al. (2022; 2024; 2025).

AIM 1: Hungarian validation of the ECR-R (Study 1a)

The first primary aim of this dissertation was to adapt the widely used Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R) questionnaire into Hungarian, using a nationally representative adult sample (Study 1; N = 958), for application in both academic research and clinical practice. Another aim was to examine the relationship of the ECR-R-HU subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) with demographic data (age, gender, type of residence, number of children, family size), as well as with relationship status (in a romantic relationship/not in a romantic relationship at the moment) and to measure associations of the two ECR-R-HU subscales with theoretically related constructs for (convergent) construct validity.

Hypothesis 1a. The ECR-R-HU is expected to have a similar two-factor structure (Avoidance and Anxiety) as its original English version (Fraley et al., 2000) with good psychometric properties.

Hypothesis 1b. ECR-R subscale scores (Avoidance and Anxiety) are expected to be lower for those currently in a romantic relationship. Due to inconsistent findings and a gap in research, no specific hypotheses were formulated regarding associations with age, gender, type of residence, and education

Hypothesis 1c. The two subscales of the ECR-R-HU (Avoidance and Anxiety) are expected to be negatively associated with well-being, and positively associated with perceived stress, depressive mood, and family functioning problems.

AIM 2: Development and validation of the short form: ECR-R-HU-SF

The aim of ***Study 1b*** was to **develop a short version** of the Hungarian ECR-R for use in large multivariate studies and as a brief, time-efficient screening tool. The same representative community sample of Hungarian adults (Study 1; *N* = 958) was used for its development.

Hypothesis 2a. The Hungarian short version (ECR-R-HU-SF) demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties and aligns with the theoretically expected two-factor structure.

Hypothesis 2b. The subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) are expected to correlate positively with family functioning problems, perceived stress, and depressed mood, and negatively with well-being.

According to methodological guidelines (Smith et al., 2000), it is important to use independent samples for short form validation. The aim of ***Study 2a*** was therefore to **validate** the newly developed short form (ECR-R-HU-SF) on a large, sociodemographically diverse, independent sample of mothers raising young children (Study 2; $N = 980$). Study 2 was conducted as part of the national project *Infancy in 21st Century Hungary* (Danis et al., 2020; 2021). As no significant gender differences emerged in the representative adult sample, as reported in the *Results* section, a female sample was deemed appropriate for validation.

Hypothesis 2c. The factor structure and the psychometric properties of the subscales are expected to be similarly adequate in the sample of Hungarian mothers of 3 to 36 months old children as in the representative adult sample in Study 1b.

Hypothesis 2d. The ECR-R-HU-SF subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) are expected to correlate positively with perceived stress and depressed mood, and negatively with well-being.

AIM 3: Determining risk thresholds (Studies 1a and 1b)

A further objective of this dissertation was to identify risk thresholds in the nationally representative adult sample (18+), based on the 75th and 90th percentiles of the two subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) in both the ECR-R-HU and the ECR-R-HU-SF, to support clinicians in screening and risk assessment.

Hypothesis 3. Risk thresholds for Avoidance and Anxiety on both the **ECR-R-HU** and the ECR-R-HU-SF were expected to differentiate individuals based on mental health and family functioning: those scoring above the thresholds would report higher levels of perceived stress, depressive mood and family functioning problems, and lower levels of well-being.

2.2. APPLICATION OF THE ECR-R-HU-SF: MOTHERS RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN (STUDY 2B)

AIM 4: To examine associations between sociodemographic background variables and attachment dimensions

Hypothesis 4. Mothers with high demographic risk (aged below 20 or above 40, having a maximum educational attainment of vocational school, residing in a village, raising four or more children, or living with financial difficulties) were expected to

demonstrate higher levels of attachment insecurity—higher scores on both Avoidance and Anxiety.

AIM 5: To investigate the distributions of attachment profiles based on the continuous ECR-R-HU-SF subscales

This aim focuses on examining the distributions of the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) and their risk thresholds in a new sample. Defining these thresholds enables comparisons between high- and low-risk mothers in terms of attachment across relational correlates in a period—mothers raising young children during the period of the transition to parenthood—that is highly relevant for studying adult romantic attachment.

Hypothesis 5. Distribution of mothers' adult romantic attachment representations (secure, avoidant, anxious, disorganized) according to the pre-determined risk thresholds are expected to reflect cross-cultural norms of adult samples.

AIM 6: To explore relational correlates and conflict resolution styles among mothers of young children across different attachment profiles (Study 2b)

Hypothesis 6. More securely attached mothers were expected to exhibit higher levels of relationship functioning, less frequent conflict, less destructive conflict resolution patterns, and greater relationship stability compared with mothers showing more insecure attachment profiles (i.e., high levels of Avoidance, high levels of Anxiety, or high levels of Avoidance and Anxiety).

AIM 7: Exploring the relationship between attachment dimensions and relationship instability: The mediating roles of conflict resolution styles and relationship quality (Study 2b)

Could attachment dimensions be predictors of relationship instability? According to previous findings conflict behavior mediates between attachment dimensions and relationship quality (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a). This aim extends previous findings and focuses on the development of a structural equation model to explore how attachment dimensions can be predictors of relationship instability through the potential mediation of negative conflict behavior and relationship quality.

Hypothesis 7. Both ECR-R-HU-SF subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) were expected to be predictors of relationship instability via conflict behavior and relationship quality. Conflict behavior was measured by five variables: conflict frequency and four

different conflict resolution strategies (constructive/avoidant/attacking/escalation to physical violence). Relationship quality was measured by five different variables related to relationship functioning (perceived emotional support, felt security, relationship satisfaction, coparenting, satisfaction with workload distribution). The indirect path via mediators was expected to better capture the predictive value of attachment dimensions than the direct path.

2.3. EXPLORING ATTACHMENT PAIRINGS IN PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN (STUDY 2C): A PILOT STUDY

The main objective of this pilot study is to identify emerging patterns of parental attachment pairings in families with young children and to compare them across relational correlates.

AIM 8: Exploring patterns of attachment in parents with young children

What attachment pairings—defined by levels of Avoidance and Anxiety—emerge among romantic couples who are in enduring relationships, raising young children together? This aim seeks to identify patterns of attachment configurations within romantic couples based on individual levels of attachment-related avoidance and anxiety.

Hypothesis 8. Cluster analyses will be conducted to identify distinct patterns of attachment configurations within the dyadic sample, based on the similarity, complementarity, and security hypotheses (see Introduction). It is expected that multiple configurations will emerge, with the secure-secure pairing anticipated to being the most prevalent. There are no expectations regarding gender. Although previous research has not yet examined disorganized pairings, clinical intuition suggests that configurations involving disorganized profiles are also likely to appear.

- Avoidant-Avoidant: high scores on Avoidance, low scores on Anxiety for both partners
- Anxious-Anxious: high scores on Anxiety, low scores on Avoidance for both partners
- Secure-Secure: low scores on both Avoidance and Anxiety for both partners
- Anxious-Avoidant: one partner demonstrates high scores on Anxiety but low on Avoidance, while the other partner demonstrates high scores on Avoidance and low scores on Anxiety.

- Secure-Anxious: low scores on both subscales (Avoidance, Anxiety) for one partner and high scores on Anxiety paired with low scores on Avoidance for the other partner
- Secure-Avoidant: low scores on both subscales (Avoidance, Anxiety) for one partner and high scores on Avoidance paired with low scores on Anxiety for the other partner
- Disorganized-Anxious/Avoidant/Disorganized/Secure

AIM 9: Comparing distinct attachment pairings of couples across conflict resolution strategies and relational functioning[6]

Can particular attachment pairings present a risk for parents with young children in their relational functioning? This aim compares distinct couple clusters based on attachment pairings across relational functioning (relationship satisfaction, perceived partner support, felt security, satisfaction with workload distribution, coparenting) and negative conflict behavior (conflict frequency, constructive/avoidant/attacking/escalation to physical violence conflict resolution strategies).

Hypothesis 9a. Secure-secure couples are expected to represent the lowest risk constellation, characterized by the highest levels of relationship functioning, more stable relationships, significantly more constructive and less destructive conflict resolution strategies, and less frequent conflict compared with other clusters. Although the relational correlates of constellations involving disorganized profiles have not yet been empirically examined, theoretical considerations and clinical intuition suggest that these pairings would represent the highest-risk constellation with the poorest relational outcomes.

Hypothesis 9b. Avoidant-avoidant, anxious-anxious and avoidant-anxious attachment constellations are expected to present significantly lower relational outcomes with higher levels of perceived conflict and destructive conflict resolution styles compared with the secure-secure cluster. As prior findings (Rodriguez et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023) suggest that two highly anxious partners can cultivate rather satisfying relationships, this pairing is expected to have better outcomes than the other insecure-insecure pairings.

Hypothesis 9c. Clusters with at least one secure partner will show buffering effects in regard to relational functioning, conflict resolution strategies, and frequency of conflict and thus present better relational outcomes than insecure-insecure constellations.

[6] Although the term "outcome" is used for analytical clarity, the present study adopts a systemic perspective in which outcomes are conceptualized as emergent expressions of ongoing relational processes rather than as linear effects.

3. METHODS

3.1. PRELIMINARY STUDIES: VALIDATION AND SHORT FORM DEVELOPMENT ON A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE ADULT SAMPLE (STUDIES 1A & 1B)

This work was supported by the Human Resources Development Operational Program (Grant No. EFOP-5.2.5-18-2018-00011) and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Semmelweis University (License No. RKEB 197/2018). Owing to page limitations, the methods of the preliminary phase are summarized only briefly. For a detailed review, see the three articles included in the appendix (Dupont et al., 2022; 2024; 2025).

3.1.1. Participants and Data Collection

Data collection carried out in the winter and spring of 2018-2019 on a **nationally representative online sample** by a Hungarian research company (Társadalomkutató Kft.) with expertise in social surveys and data collection. Participants were randomly selected following the stratification (according to gender, age, education, and settlement type) in order to obtain a final, nationally representative adult (18+) sample. The ECR-R was offered only to participants who had been in a romantic relationship before, resulting in a total sample size of $N = 958$. To assess temporal stability, a second wave of data collection was carried out on a smaller subsample ($n = 98$) four months later.

Sample Characteristics. Table 1 presents the sample characteristics of studies 1a&1b. See also Dupont et al., 2022, pp. 3-4; 2024, pp. 5-6; 2025).

Table 1

Sample Characteristics of Studies 1a &1b

		Study 1a & 1b Wave 1 ($N = 958$)	**Study 1a & 1b Wave 2 ($N = 98$)**
		Frequency (valid %)	**Frequency (valid %)**
CATEGORICAL VARIABLES			
Gender	Male	467 (48.7%)	53 (54.1%)
	Female	491 (51.3%)	45 (45.9%)
Age	18–29 years	110 (11.5%)	9 (9.2%)
	30–39 years	169 (17.6%)	22 (22.4%)
	40–49 years	237 (24.7%)	23 (23.5%)
	50–59 years	224 (23.4%)	17 (17.3%)
	60 years or older	218 (22.8%)	27 (27.6%)
Type of residence	Capital (Budapest)	194 (20.2%)	20 (20.4%)

	Cities and towns	544 (56.8%)	56 (57.1%)
	Villages	220 (23.0%)	22 (22.4%)
Education	Primary school or less	46 (4.8%)	2 (2.0%)
	Skilled worker / vocational school	275 (28.7%)	30 (30.6%)
	Secondary school	373 (38.9%)	35 (35.7%)
	College, university	264 (27.6%)	31 (31.6%)
In a relationship currently?	Yes	749 (78.2%)	77 (78.6%)
	No	209 (21.8%)	21 (21.4%)
		***M* (SD) (Range)**	***M* (SD) (Range)**
CONTINUOUS VARIABLES			
Age		47.89 (13.85) (18–89)	48.85 (14.63) (22–78)
Length of being without a partner (years) Wave 1: n = 209; wave 2: n = 21		4.95 (5.08) (0–25)	4.00 (4.91) (0–20)
Number of children		1.38 (1.21) (0–5)	1.32 (1.18) (0–5)
Number of people living in the same household		2.75 (1.28) (1–8)	2.45 (1.07) (1–5)

3.1.2. Measures

The Hungarian Version of the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R-HU). The ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000) has been translated into many languages and is widely used around the world. The ECR-R-HU (Gervai et al., 2018) is the Hungarian translation of the ECR-R. This self-report measure assesses adult romantic attachment representations with two subscales (Avoidance, Anxiety), each comprising 18 items. Respondents rate the items on a 7-point Likert-type scale. For clarity, Table 2 summarizes essential information concerning the long and short form variants of the Hungarian ECR-R and the references used when referring to these scales.

Table 2

Summary of the Hungarian versions of the ECR-R

Name of the Measure	Abbreviation	Published Validation	Study	Expert team that translated / developed the measure
Hungarian Version of the Experiences in Close Relationship Revised	ECR-R-HU	Dupont et al., 2022	Study 1a	Gervai et al., 2018[7]
Hungarian Version of the Experiences in Close Relationship Revised-Short Form	ECR-R-HU-SF	Dupont et al., 2024	Studies 1b, 2a	Gervai et al., 2019[8]

[7] https://www.ttk.hun-ren.hu/wp-content/uploads/kpi-modszer/Tapasztalatok_Szoros_Kapcsolatokban_ECR-R-HU.pdf

[8] https://www.ttk.hun-ren.hu/kpi/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/09/Tapasztalatok-Szoros-Kapcsolatokban-rovid-valtozat-ECR-R-HU-SF.pdf

The World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5). The WHO-5 (Bech, 1999; translated into Hungarian by Susánszky et al., 2006) is a self-report instrument measuring psychological well-being with 5 items on a 4-point Likert-type scale. It demonstrates high internal consistency in its Hungarian validation (α = .85). The Cronbach's alpha in the present study was α = .87.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4). The PSS-4 (Cohen et al., 1983; translated into Hungarian by Stauder & Konkolÿ Thege, 2006) assesses perceived stress using 4 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The Hungarian version showed acceptable internal consistency (α = .79). The Cronbach's alpha in the present study was α = .80.

The Depression Scale Questionnaire (DS1K). The DS1K (Halmai et al., 2008) is an 11-item scale developed by Hungarian researchers to screen for depressive symptoms, less severe stages, and a predisposition to depression based on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck et al., 1961) and the Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale (HADS; Zigmond & Snaith; 1983). Items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The scale had high validity and reliability (α = .88) in the original study, and is already widely used in Hungary. In the present study, a 10-item version had good psychometric properties and was used. Cronbach's alpha of the 10-item version was α = .83.

Family Assessment Device (FAD). The FAD (Epstein et al., 1983; translated into Hungarian by Danis et al., 2005; 2022) measures family functioning problems with 60 items on 6+1 subscales (affective involvement, affective responsiveness, behavioral control, communication, problem-solving, roles in the family + problematic family functioning in general) rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The subscales have good reliability (α = .70 to α = .87) and are widely used in Hungary (Danis et al., 2005; 2022). In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas of the six subscales of this measure ranged from α = .64 to α = .89.

3.1.3. Statistical Analyses

Study 1a: Validation of the Hungarian ECR-R (Long version) on a Nationally Representative Hungarian Adult (18+) Sample. ECR-R-HU item distributions were assessed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests to determine appropriate statistical methods. To test the original two-factor model (Fraley et al., 2000), Confirmatory Factor

Analyses (CFA) were conducted in AMOS 21.0**,** testing several first-order models (Gignac, 2006; Shek & Yu, 2014) with two substantive factors (Avoidance and Anxiety), with or without method factors handling straightforward and reversed items. Model fit was evaluated using χ^2/df, RMSEA, CFI, TLI, and NFI, and Chi-square difference tests identified the best-fitting model (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

An intermediate Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (HCA) were also performed to confirm the latent structure. Internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, and non-parametric tests (Spearman correlations, Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney) were used for further analyses. Cohen's d was calculated for effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). For a more detailed summary, see Dupont et al. (2022; 2025).

Study 1b: Development of the Short Form (ECR-R-HU-SF). A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted on a randomly split subsample (n = 477) of Study1 for data reduction and item selection, based on factor loadings and theoretical considerations. The PCA results aligned with those from PAF (Principal Axis Factoring), consistent with previous research (Avşar, 2021; Schreiber, 2021).

Confirmatory Factor Analyses were performed on the second subsample (n = 481) of Study 1 to test the original two-factor model (Fraley et al., 2000) using AMOS 21.0 with maximum likelihood estimation. Model fit was assessed using χ^2/df, RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, TLI, and NFI (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Internal consistency of the two subscales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega. Due to non-normal distributions (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test), non-parametric tests (Spearman correlations, Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis) were used to assess reliability, temporal stability, group differences, and convergent validity. For a more detailed summary, see Dupont et al. 2024, 2025.

3.2. MOTHERS AND PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN (STUDIES 2A-2C)

Study 2 was supported by the Human Resources Development Operational Program in Hungary (EU-cofunded Grant No. EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00007) and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Semmelweis University (License No. RKEB 240/2019).

3.2.1. Infancy in 21st Century Hungary: Participants and Data Collection

The *Infancy in 21st Century Hungary* project (Danis et al., 2020;2021) provided an opportunity to investigate the relational well-being of mothers and parents within a large, sociodemographically diverse, and previously understudied sample. It was the first Hungarian national representative parent survey designed to examine early childhood mental health problems and their associated risk and protective factors, such as couple relationship functioning and parental mental health. The study focused on families in the transition to parenthood, who were raising children between 3-36 months. The sample was nationally representative with respect to the *children's* age, gender and type of residence—ensuring a high level of sociodemographic diversity on the maternal sample as well. This distribution reflects the demographic reality in Hungary, where disadvantaged women tend to give birth to more children. Within the framework of this dissertation, this provided an opportunity to examine romantic attachment representations and relational functioning among at-risk women raising young children.

To test the short instrument developed in Study 1b, the *Infancy in 21st Century Hungary* survey (Danis, 2020; 2021) provided a sociodemographically diverse maternal sample (N = 980). There was also a dyadic subsample of mothers and their husbands/partners (n = 122). Data were collected in the winter of 2019–2020 by a Hungarian research company (TÁRKI Zrt.) using CAPI interviews and self-administered questionnaires (SAQ). The measures included in our study were a part of the SAQ package designed by an interdisciplinary team led by the Institute of Mental Health, Semmelweis University.

For validation of the short form **(Study 2a)**, the full maternal sample that completed the ECR-R-HU-SF questionnaire was used (n = 953).

For investigation of mothers' relational correlates **(Study 2b)**, a more homogeneous subsample was selected (n = 898), by excluding mothers not living in the same household as the child's father (i.e., single, divorced/separated, remarried, widowed).

For investigation of dyadic attachment constellations **(Study 2c)**, a dyadic subsample—constructed using quotas to approximate the larger sample—was used (n = 108). Couples that were included had data for ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and were living in the same household raising their child or children together (n = 108).

Sample Characteristics. Table 2 summarizes the sample characteristics of the three studies (2a, 2b, 2c) conducted as part of the **Infancy in 21st Century Hungary** project.

Table 3

Sample Characteristics of Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c

		Study 2a	**Study 2b**	**Study 2c**	
		***N* = 953**	***n* = 898**	***n* = 108**	
		Frequency (valid %)			
CATEGORICAL VARIABLES					
				Mothers	**Fathers**
Age	18-20	457 (47.9%)	18 (2%)	3 (2.8%)	1 (1.0%)
	21-29		407 (45.3%)	48 (44.4%)	35 (33.7%)
	30-39	447 (46.9 %)	426 (47.4%)	49 (45.4%)	55 (52.9%)
	40-49	50 (5.2%)	47 (5.2%)	8 (7.4%)	11 (10.6%)
	50+	0 (0%)	0	0	2 (1.9%)
Place of residence	Municipality	317 (33.3%)	296 (33%)	32 (29.6%)*	
	City	407 (51.1%)	442 (49.2%)	56 (51.9%)*	
	Budapest	148 (15.6%)	160 (17.8%)	20 (18.5%)*	
Education	Maximum Primary School	108 (11.3%)	89 (9.9%)	12 (11.1%)	8 (7.7%)
	Vocational School	216 (22.7%)	207 (23.1%)	20 (18.5%)	42 (40.4%)
	High School Diploma	456 (48.0%)	435 (48.4%)	55 (50.9%)	39 (37.5%)
	Minimum University Degree	171 (20.0%)	165 (18.4%)	21 (19.4%)	15 (14.4%)
Financial Situation	Lives without financial difficulties		598 (66.8%)	83 (76.9%)	82 (78.8%)
	Lives with financial difficulties		297 (33.2%)	25 (23.1%)	22 (21.2%)
How many children are in your household?	1		562 (62.7%)	68 (63.6%)*	
	2		227 (25.3%)	23 (21.5%)*	
	3		74 (8.2%)	10 (9.3%)*	
	4 +		34 (3.8%)	6 (5.6%)*	
Partnership status	Married		687 (77%)	73 (67.6%)	69 (66.3%)
	Cohabiting Partnership		205 (23%)	35 (32.4%)	35 (33.7%)
Socio-demographic Risk	No risk		315 (35.3%)	46 (43%)*	
	Very low risk		315 (35.3%)	32 (29.9%)*	
	Low risk		171 (19.2%)	22 (20.6%)*	
	Medium to high risk		91 (10.2%)	7 (6.5%)*	
In a relationship currently?	Yes	899 (94.6%)			
	No	52 (5.4%)			

	***M* (SD) (Range)**			
CONTINUOUS VARIABLES				
Age	30.32 (5.8) (18-47)	30.43 (5.27) (18-47)	30.81 (5.60) (18-45)	32.87 (6.12) (18-52)
How many years have you been together with your partner?		6.92 (4.62) (0-34)	6.59 (3.81) (1-19)	
Number of children	1.57 (.98) (1-10)	1.56 (.93) (1-7)	1.62 (1.03) (1-6)	
Number of people in the same household	3.70 (1.16) (2-10)			

Note. * All information regarding both mothers and fathers was obtained from maternal reports.

3.2.2. Measures

Hungarian Version of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire Short-Form (ECR-R-HU-SF) (Studies 2a, 2b, 2c). The ECR-R-HU-SF (Gervai et al., 2019) is the newly developed short form of the ECR-R-HU (Gervai et al., 2018) and aims to measure adult romantic attachment. It contains 8 items and two subscales that measure attachment-related Avoidance and Anxiety. Participants rate items on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Measured on a representative sample of Hungarian adults (see Study 1b), Cronbach's alphas were .91 and .92, for Avoidance and Anxiety, respectively. On the full sample of mothers (Study 2; n = 953) in the Infancy in 21st Century Hungary project, Cronbach's alpha values were similar for Avoidance (α = .91) and a bit lower for Anxiety (α = .81). On the selected more homogenous sample of mothers (Study 2b; n = 898), the Cronbach's alphas were good for Avoidance (α = .89) and acceptable for Anxiety (α = .78). The ECR-R-HU-SF (Gervai et al., 2019) demonstrated good Cronbach's alphas for mothers and fathers on the Avoidance subscale (α = .87 and α = .81, respectively) and acceptable internal consistency on the Anxiety subscale (α = .70 and α =.73, respectively) in the dyadic subsample (Study 2c; n = 108), too.

Perceived Stress Scale-4 (PSS-4) (Study 2a). The PSS-4 was used in Study 2a as well. For details see Methods section of Studies 1a & 1b. Cronbach's α in Study 2a was .70.

Depression Scale Questionnaire (DS1K) (Study 2a). The DS1K was also used in this study. For details see Methods section of Studies 1a & 1b. Cronbach's α was .77 in Study 2a (a 10-item version for more appropriate psychometric properties).

Relationship Functioning (Studies 2b, 2c). Several single-item measures – commonly employed by sociologists – as well as a few short scales were used from various modules of the *Infancy in 21st Century Hungary* project. Some of these were used to develop latent constructs.

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship Satisfaction was measured with a single item rated on a 10-point Likert-type scale: "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?" This item has been used in previous studies (Gödri, 2001; Pilinszki, 2014; Pongrácz, 2009; see Danis, 2020, 2021).

Felt Partnership Security. Felt partnership security was measured with a single item: "Please rate on a 10-point scale how safe you feel in your partnership." The item was part of a newly developed scale designed to measure felt security across several areas of everyday life. It was developed by Dávid et al., 2019 for the project based on earlier work (Dávid et al., 2016).

Perceived Partner Support. Perceived partner support was assessed as part of the Social Support Assessment Module using a single item: "How do you perceive your emotional relationship with your partner and to what extent can you rely on his support in difficult situations?" Participants rated the item on a 5-point Likert-type scale. This item originated from a scale measuring general social support developed in an earlier project by Tóth and Danis (2008) and was included in the *Infancy in 21st Century Hungary* Project (Danis et al, 2020, 2021).

Satisfaction with Workload Distribution. Following a set of questions concerning who is responsible for certain house chores and for tasks around childcare, satisfaction concerning workload was assessed with a single question frequently used by sociologists (e.g., Gödri, 2001, Pongrácz & Murinkó, 2009; Pilinszki, 2014): "How satisfied are you with the workload distribution between you and your partner?" Participants rated the item on a 10-point Likert-type scale.

Coparenting. Coparenting was assessed with the Hungarian adaptation (Danis et al., 2019) of the Daily Coparenting Scale (D-Cop; McDaniel et al., 2017). In this study, an alternative version of the method was used to assess general perceptions of coparenting —the way that partners collaborate in rearing their children—based on their experiences over the past two weeks, rather than daily reports. The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale. It demonstrated good internal consistency in the full maternal

sample (Study 2a; α = .85) and in the more homogenous subsample (Study 2b; α = .83). In the dyadic subsample, internal consistency was also good for both mothers and fathers (Study 2c; α = .82 and α =.83, respectively).

Conflict (Studies 2b, 2c). Relationship conflict was assessed by five single item measures regarding the frequency of conflict and different conflict resolution strategies. *Conflict Frequency* was measured with a single question rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale: "How often do you have serious conflicts with your partner?" Four different *"Conflict Resolution Strategies"* (Constructive, Avoidant, Attacking, Escalation to Physical Violence) were measured by one item each on a 5-point Likert type scale. All items regarding conflict were based on previous studies (Antal, 2008; Gödri, 2001; Pilinszki, 2013; Spéder, 2001; see Danis, 2020).

Relationship Instability (Studies 2b, 2c). Relationship instability was assessed with a single item asking respondents to rate the perceived likelihood of getting a divorce in the future: "Of course, it is difficult to predict what will happen in a relationship, but in your opinion, how likely is it that you and you partner are going to get divorced/separated?" Participants rated the item using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The item was based on previous studies (Antal, 2008; Gödri, 2001; Pilinszki, 2013; Spéder, 2001; see Danis, 2020).

Relationship Quality – composite variables (Studies 2b, 2c). Relationship quality was conceptualized as a latent construct developed separately for both studies and was based on five measures detailed above: relationship satisfaction, perceived emotional support, felt relationship safety, satisfaction with workload distribution and daily coparenting. A Principal Axis Factor Analyses (PAF) with varimax rotation was conducted on all three subsamples (Study 2a & 2b: maternal, Study 2c: mother and father) as a preliminary validation to determine whether these items could be treated as a unified construct. The resulting factor scores were standardized (M = 0, SD = 1)

Relationship Quality$_{Mothers}$ (Study 2b). The analyses supported a single-factor structure, accounting for 49.03% of the total variance. All items showed moderate to strong loadings (.57 to .83) and acceptable communalities (.32 to .68), indicating good internal coherence. The items demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α = .78), supporting the use of the factor score for subsequent analyses.

Relationship Quality$_{DyadMothers}$ (Study 2c). The analyses supported a single-factor structure, accounting for 60.16% of the total variance. All items showed strong loadings (.66 to .87) and acceptable communalities (.44 to .76), indicating good internal coherence. The items demonstrated good internal consistency (α = .83) for the mothers, supporting the use of the factor score for subsequent analyses.

Relationship Quality$_{DyadFathers}$ (Study 2c). The analyses supported a single-factor structure, accounting for 42.23% of the total variance. Although some items showed lower communalities (.27 to .62), such as perceived partner support (.27), the overall one-factor solution was theoretically consistent. To maintain comparability across mothers and fathers in subsequent analyses, none of the items were excluded for the father's factor score. All items showed strong loadings (.52 to .79). The items also demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α = .73), supporting the use of the factor score for subsequent analyses.

Socio-Demographic Background Data and Risk-Indexes (Studies 2a[9], 2b, 2c). Collected background variables in Studies 2b and 2c included respondents' age, type of residence, level of education, financial situation, number of children in the household, partnership status (married or cohabiting partnership) and the number of years spent in partnership with the child's father.

The financial situation was assessed with a *binary financial status risk* variable derived from a four-category ordinal measure. Participants were classified as experiencing financial difficulties if they reported "barely making ends meet and the end of the month", "having financial difficulties every month", or "living in hardship". Those who reported "living without any financial problems", or "managing well by budgeting" were classified as not experiencing financial difficulties (Study 2b, 2c).

A *cumulative sociodemographic risk index* (range: 0-5) was calculated based on five criteria by adding up the dichotomous values (1: risk; 0: no risk) reached on each variable: mothers' age (below 20 or above 40); education level (maximum vocational

[9] As Study 2a was used for validation of the ECR-R-HU-SF on the full maternal sample, some of the socio-demographic background variables differed. These included gender, age, type of residence, education, partnership status, length of being without a partner in years, the number of people in the household, and the number of children. See K. Dupont et al. (2024) for details and sample characteristics.

school); type of residence (living in a village); number of children in the household (more than four); financial situation (lives with financial difficulties).

3.2.3. Statistical Analyses

Study 2a: Validation of the Newly Developed ECR-R-HU-SF on an Independent Sample. CFA were conducted to test the original (Fraley et al., 2000) two-factor model for the 8-item short form, using AMOS 21.0 with maximum likelihood estimation. Model fit was assessed using χ^2/df, RMSEA, SRMR, CFI, TLI, and NFI (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Internal consistency of the Avoidance and Anxiety subscales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega. Due to non-normal distributions (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test), non-parametric tests – Spearman's rank-order correlations, Mann–Whitney U tests, Kruskal–Wallis tests – were used to assess reliability, temporal stability, group differences, and convergent validity.

Study 2b: Well-Being and Relational Correlates of the ECR-R-HU-SF in Early Motherhood. As ECR-R-HU-SF subscale scores were not normally distributed, non-parametric statistical tests (Spearman rank-order correlations, Mann–Whitney U Tests, Kruskal–Wallis Tests) were used for the analyses. For ease of interpretation, mean scores are reported. For Kruskal-Wallis tests effect sizes were calculated using ε^2, a measure of variance explained, and interpretation was based on conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988; Fiel Peres, 2026): negligible (< .01), small (.01–.06), medium (.06–.14), large (≥ .14). For Mann-Whitney U tests, effect sizes were expressed as $r\,(Z / \sqrt{N})$, where Z is the standardized test statistic and N is the total number of observations, and interpreted using conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988; Fiel Peres, 2026): small (.10–.29), medium (.30–.49), large (≥ .50). Owing to space limitations, some non-significant comparisons are not presented.

The 75th percentile for Avoidance and Anxiety was computed to determine cut-off points for thresholds of secure (75% of the sample) vs insecure attachment (25% of the sample[10]) trends. Using the cut-off points, four groups of mothers with distinctive

[10] The ECR-R is not a classification instrument such as the SSP or the AAI. Based on statistical frequency, the 25th percentile is designated as the presumed range of insecurity. For the sake of simplicity, categories are used in the following, but readers should always interpret these as trends or characteristics, and by no means as classifications.

attachment representations were distinguished: (1) *Secure:* below 75th percentile on both Avoidance and Anxiety, (2) *Anxious:* above the 75th percentile on Anxiety and below the 75th percentile on Avoidance, (3) *Avoidant:* above the 75th percentile on Avoidance and below the 75th percentile on Anxiety, (4) *Disorganized:* above the 75th percentile on both Avoidance and Anxiety. The four groups were compared with Kruskal-Wallis tests, using Bonferroni correction for pairwise comparisons. To display the distribution of the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales, a minimal jitter was applied to the data points in Excel using the following formula (= x + ((RAND() - 1/2) * 1/10)), in order to prevent overlap and improve visualization of the data.

To examine the complex relationships between adult romantic attachment (measured by the ECR-R-HU-SF scales), conflict resolution styles, relational functioning, and relationship instability, several structural equation models (SEM) were developed and tested using JASP 0.19.3. SEM was chosen to account for both direct and indirect associations among latent and observed variables within theory-driven models. Model fit was evaluated using a combination of absolute**,** incremental**,** and parsimony-adjusted fit indices. These included the Chi-square (χ^2) test**,** Comparative Fit Index (CFI)**,** Tucker–Lewis Index (McRae et al.), Normed Fit Index (NFI)**,** Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with 90% confidence intervals, and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Model fit was considered acceptable if CFI, TLI, and NFI values were ≥ .90, RMSEA was ≤ .08, and SRMR was ≤ .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Modification indices and standard residuals were reviewed where necessary to improve model fit.

Study 2c: Attachment Pairings and Relational Functioning Among Parents with Young Children. Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were conducted to examine whether the ECR-R-HU-SF scales and the measured relationship constructs followed a normal distribution.

Because the distributions were non-normal, Mann–Whitney and Kruskal–Wallis Tests were performed to explore associations between the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and categorical sociodemographic variables (among both mothers and fathers). Spearman rank-order correlations were calculated to examine associations between the measured constructs within both the mother and father subsamples. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to compare mothers and fathers in both the full dyadic sample and within

clusters. For ease of interpretation, mean scores are reported. Effect sizes were calculated as described in Study 2b: ε^2 was reported for Kruskal-Wallis tests and r for Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, with interpretation based on conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988; Fiel Peres, 2026). Owing to space limitations, some non-significant comparisons are not presented.

A hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted on the dyadic subsample to identify distinct patterns of adult romantic attachment representations within couples. Four variables were included: Avoidance and Anxiety scores for both mothers and fathers. Each dyad was treated as a single unit of analysis. Using Ward's method with squared Euclidean distance, the dendrogram and agglomeration schedule indicated a six-cluster solution. Based on these results, a K-means cluster analysis was performed to refine cluster membership. The procedure was constrained to six clusters to match the hierarchical solution. The final cluster structure revealed meaningful distinctions in attachment patterns across dyads.

Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests indicated non-normal distributions for the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and other relational and well-being measures. Accordingly, Kruskal–Wallis Tests were conducted to compare mothers and fathers across the six clusters on the ECR-R-HU-SF scales, as well as on relational functioning measures. Post hoc pairwise comparisons were performed using Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels.

4. RESULTS

4.1. VALIDATION AND SHORT FORM DEVELOPMENT (STUDIES 1A-2A)

Results are presented here in a concise summary; full details can be found in the articles included in the appendix (Dupont et al., 2022; 2024; 2025).

4.1.1. Study 1a: Validation of the ECR-R-HU

The Factor Structure of the ECR-R-HU. Initial CFA did not confirm the theoretical two-factor structure of the ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000). Both EFA and HCA demonstrated that the two major constructs (Avoidance and Anxiety) were systematically decomposed into two factors with high loading items: (a) from items that pointed toward the construct meaning and (b) from reversed items with opposite content. In summary, a four-factor solution with two substantive factors (Avoidance, Anxiety) and two further reversed-item method factors best described the ECR-R-HU. By resolving the problems caused by reversed items, the factor structure corresponded to the theoretically expected dimensions of attachment styles ($\chi^2 = 1961.363$, $df = 545$; $p < .01$) and all model fit indices were satisfactory (NFI = .895; TLI = .909; CFI = .921; RMSEA = .052, 90% CI [.050-.055]). The use of method factors contributes to the field by highlighting the problem of reverse-coded items causing misfits that other validation studies have found (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Lubiewska et al., 2016)). For further details see (Dupont et al., 2022).

Internal Consistency. Both the 18-item Avoidance ($\alpha = .91$) and the 18-item Anxiety subscale ($\alpha = .92$) demonstrated excellent internal consistencies.

Descriptive Statistics and Associations with Sociodemographic Background Data. As expected, the two subscales were moderately correlated ($\rho = .49$; $p < .001$). Mann-Whitney tests indicated that participants in a relationship scored significantly lower on both the Avoidance and Anxiety subscales (M (SD) = 2.58 (1.07) vs. M (SD) = 3.04 (1.02), $Z = -5.64$; $p < .001$, $d_{Cohen} = .371$ and Anxiety (M (SD) = 2.80 (1.18) vs. M (SD) = 3.47 (1.30); $Z = 6.53$; $p < .001$, $d_{Cohen} = .432$). No other significant differences were observed across the remaining sociodemographic variables.

Construct Validity. Avoidance and Anxiety were moderately correlated (absolute values ranged from .24 to .59 and from .28 to .53, respectively) in the expected directions with family functioning problems (FAD subscales), perceived stress (PSS-4), and depressed mood (DS1K), and were negatively correlated with well-being (WHO-5).

Higher scores on either attachment-related subscale were associated with greater family functioning problems, stress, depressed mood, and poorer well-being. For detailed scores, see Dupont et al. (2022, Table 4, p. 9).

Temporal Stability. Internal consistency of the subscales was excellent (Cronbach's alpha values were .93 for both Avoidance and Anxiety) in the second wave of data collection on a smaller subsample ($n = 98$) four months later. Spearman rank-order correlations were strong (Avoidance: $\rho = .79$; $p < .001$, Anxiety: $\rho = .81$; $p < .001$) between data from Wave 1 and Wave 2. See Dupont et al. (2022; 2025) for details.

Risk Thresholds. 75th (Avoidance: 3.50 and Anxiety: 3.83) and 90th (Avoidance: 4.06 and Anxiety: 4.61) percentile risk thresholds were determined for both ECR-R-HU subscales. Subsequent analyses indicated that individuals above both risk thresholds reported significantly lower levels of well-being, and higher levels of perceived stress, depressive mood and family functioning problems. See Dupont et al. (2025) for details.

4.1.2. Study 1b: Short Form Development (ECR-R-HU-SF)

Data Reduction and Item Selection. Data analyses were conducted on two randomly split subsamples (n = 477 and 481) of the full sample in Study 1. Principal component analysis (PCA) was used for data reduction. For the rotated component matrix, see Dupont et al. (2024, p. 8, Table 2). To obtain a tool with simple and clear psychometric characteristics, eight items (four Avoidance and four Anxiety) with factor loadings above .65 on the two substantive factors were selected, considering experts' opinions, coverage of content dimensions, and the avoidance of redundancy between the items.

The Factor Structure of the ECR-R-HU-SF. The theoretical factor structure of the newly developed short form was tested and confirmed using CFA on the other randomly split subsample ($n = 481$). The Chi^2 test was significant ($\chi 2 = 95.79$, df = 19; $p < .001$) and all model fit indices were satisfactory (NFI = .941; TLI = .929; CFI = .952; RMSEA = .092, CI [.074 – .110]); SRMR = .067). CFA was subsequently conducted on the full sample and resulted in further confirmation of the theoretical two-factor structure (Fraley et al., 2000) of the ECR-R-HU-SF. For details, see Dupont et al. (2024; 2025).

Associations Between the Subscales of the ECR-R-HU-SF and the ECR-R-HU. Both four-item subscales (Avoidance, Anxiety) were strongly correlated with their

corresponding 18-item subscales of the original measure (Avoidance: ρ = .88, p < .001; Anxiety: ρ = .90, p < .001).

Internal Consistency. Both the four-item Avoidance (α = .85) and the four-item Anxiety subscale (α = .83) demonstrated high internal consistencies.

Descriptive Statistics and Associations with Sociodemographic Background Data. All four Avoidance items were reversed items, therefore measuring the lack of Avoidance. When items were reversed, there was a moderate positive correlation between the two subscales as expected (ρ = .42, p < .001). Distributions and mean scores between the short and original versions were aligned. For descriptive statistics, see Dupont et al., (2024, p. 11, Table 3).

Mann-Whitney tests indicated that participants in a current relationship scored significantly lower on both the Avoidance and Anxiety subscales *M* (SD) = 2.57 (1.40) vs. *M* (SD) = 2.92 (1.26), Z = –3.97; p < .001; Cohen's d = .26; and *M* (SD) = 2.56 (1.45) vs. M (SD) = 3.33 (1.59), Z = –6.33; p < .001; Cohen's d = .42, respectively). No other significant differences emerged across the rest of the sociodemographic variables. For further details and non-significant results, see Dupont et al. (2024; 2025).

Construct Validity. Avoidance and Anxiety were moderately correlated (absolute values ranged from .24 to .53 and .24 to .50, respectively) in the expected directions with family functioning problems (FAD subscales), perceived stress (PSS-4), and depressed mood (DS1K), and were negatively correlated with well-being (WHO-5). Higher scores on either subscale were associated with greater family functioning problems, perceived stress, depressed mood, and poorer well-being. For detailed results, see Dupont et al. (2024, p. 12, Table 4) and Dupont et al. (2025).

Temporal Stability. Findings show evidence for the temporal stability of the ECR-R-HU-SF. (1) It maintained its theoretical two-factor structure four months later in the Wave 2 subsample (n = 98). For details, see Dupont et al. (2024). (2) The internal consistencies of the subscales remained high for both Avoidance (α = .87) and Anxiety (α = .89) after the four-month period. (3) In Wave 2, Spearman correlations were strong between the subscales of the ECR-R-HU-SF and the ECR-R-HU subscales (Avoidance: ρ = .90, p < .001; Anxiety: ρ = .88, p < .001). (4) Spearman correlations between the subscales of Wave 1 and Wave 2 were also strong (Avoidance: ρ = .74, p < .001, Anxiety: ρ = .79, p < .001). For further details concerning mean scores, see Dupont et al. (2024).

Risk Thresholds. 75th (Avoidance: 3.75 and Anxiety: 3.81) and 90th (Avoidance: 4.50 and Anxiety: 4.75) percentile risk thresholds were determined for both ECR-R-HU subscales. Subsequent analyses indicated that individuals above both risk thresholds reported significantly lower levels of well-being, and higher levels of perceived stress, depressive mood and family functioning problems. See Dupont et al. (2025).

4.1.3. Study 2a: New validation of the ECR-R-HU-SF

Factor structure of the ECR-R-HU-SF. CFA was used to confirm the expected two-factor structure of the ECR-R-HU-SF in a large, sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers (*Infancy in 21st century Hungary*; Danis et al., 2020). The χ^2 test was significant (χ^2 = 182,791, df = 19; $p < .001$) and all model fit indices were satisfactory (NFI = .958; TLI = .944; CFI = .962; RMSEA = .095, CI [.083 – .108]; SRMR = .031).

Internal Consistency. Both the four-item Avoidance (α = .91) and the four-item Anxiety subscale (α = .81) demonstrated high internal consistencies.

Descriptive Statistics and Associations with Sociodemographic Background Data. Both subscales were non-normally distributed and skewed even more towards lower values (attachment security). Mean scores were slightly lower for both subscales [.24 (9%) lower for Avoidance and .56 (21%) lower for Anxiety] in early motherhood, when compared with the nationally representative adult sample. A moderate positive correlation was observed between the two subscales (ρ = .46, p < .001), as expected.
Single mothers (n = 52) had significantly higher Avoidance scores (Z = -9.01, $p < .001$; M (SD) = 4.78 (1.76) vs. M (SD) = 2.27 (1.47); Cohen's d = .58) and higher Anxiety scores (Z = -1.99, p = .05; M (SD) = 2.76 (1.78) vs. M (SD) = 2.14 (1.26); Cohen's d = .12) than mothers in a relationship. Findings also revealed significant differences on the two attachment subscales by education level and type of residence: higher Avoidance and Anxiety scores were associated with lower educational attainment and living in smaller settlements (cities, town, villages) compared to the capital. (Notably, the proportion of mothers with a college degree was much higher in the capital than in other regions). For specific pairwise comparison results see Dupont et al. (2024, p. 13).

Construct Validity. Construct (convergent) validity was assessed by computing Spearman's rank-order correlations (ρ) between the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and measures of depressive mood (DS1K) and perceived stress (PSS-4). As expected, both Avoidance and Anxiety showed moderate correlations with depressive mood (Avoidance:

ρ = .42, p < .001; Anxiety: ρ = .43, p < .001) and with perceived stress (Avoidance: ρ = .53, p < .001; Anxiety: ρ = .43, p < .001). See Dupont et al. (2024) for details.

4.2. APPLICATION: MOTHERS RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN (STUDY 2B)

4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics and Sociodemographic Background Data

As shown in Tables 4a and 4b, mean Avoidance and Anxiety scores in the maternal sample of Study 2a were lower than in the representative sample of Study 1a/1b with a more positively skewed distribution (see means and medians). This trend was even more pronounced in the more homogenous maternal sample (Study 2b).

Table 4a

Summary of Avoidance Subscale Descriptives Across Studies

	N	*M* (SD)	Range	Median	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
							D	*p*
AVOIDANCE								
ECR-R-HU (Study 1a)	958	2.68 (1.08)	1-5.56	2.61	0.31 (.08)	-0.75 (.16)	.07	<.001
ECR-R-HU-SF (Study 1b)	958	2.65 (1.38)	1-7	2.50	0.70 (.08)	0.00 (.16)	.12	<.001
ECR-R-HU-SF (Study 2a)	953	2.41 (1.59)	1-7	2.00	1.26 (.08)	0.97 (.16)	.19	<.001
ECR-R-HU-SF (Study 2b)	898	2.24 (1.43)	1-7	1.75	1.33 (.08)	1.34 (.16)	.20	<.001

Note. D = Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic.

Table 4b

Summary of Anxiety Subscale Descriptives Across Studies

	N	*M* (SD)	Range	Median	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
							D	*p*
ANXIETY								
ECR-R-HU (Study 1a)	958	2.95 (1.23)	1-6.83	2.83	0.49 (.08)	-0.31 (.16)	.07	<.001
ECR-R-HU-SF (Study 1b)	958	2.73 (1.52)	1-7	2.50	0.69 (.08)	-0.28 (.16)	.13	<.001
ECR-R-HU-SF (Study 2a)	953	2.17 (1.30)	1-7	1.75	1.17 (.08)	0.91 (.16)	.18	<.001
ECR-R-HU-SF (Study 2b)	898	2.14 (1.26)	1-7	1.75	1.19 (.08)	.96 (.16)	.20	<.001

Note. D = Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic.

Descriptive statistics of relational correlates are summarized in Table 5 and show non-normal distributions. Mean relationship functioning scores indicate very high outcomes in this maternal sample.

Table 5

Summary of Descriptive Statistics (Study 2b)

	N	*M* (SD)	Range	Median	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
							D	*p*
Perceived Partner Support	890	4.86 (.41)	2-5	5.0	-3.19 (.08)	11.19 (.16)	.52	<.001
Felt Safety	894	9.31 (1.36)	1-10	10.0	-2.66 (.08)	8.38 (.16)	.39	<.001
Relationship Satisfaction	849	9.03 (1.32)	2-10	10.0	-1.69 (.08)	3.28 (.17)	.28	<.001
Satisfaction with Workload Dis.	841	8.37 (1.9)	0-10	9.0	-1.35 (.08)	1.66 (.17)	.23	<.001
Daily Coparenting	833	5.73 (.92)	3.1-7.00	6.0	-0.52 (.09)	-0.60 (.17)	.11	<.001
Conflict Frequency	714	1.08 (.81)	0-5	1.0	1.03 (.09)	2.53 (.18)	.32	<.001
Constructive Conflict	879	3.97 (1.16)	0-5	4.0	-1.1 (.08)	0.72 (.17)	.25	<.001
Avoidant Conflict	877	1.88 (1.42)	0-5	2.0	0.29 (.08)	-0.75 (.17)	.15	<.001
Attacking Conflict	875	1.04 (1.27)	0-5	0.0	1.2 (.08)	0.61 (.17)	.29	<.001
Escalation to Physical Violence	881	0.40 (1.05)	0-5	0.0	2.65 (.08)	5.95 (.17)	.51	<.001
Relationship Instability	853	1.48 (.9)	1-5	1.0	1.92 (.08)	2.92 (.17)	.43	<.001
Relationship Quality	752	0.00 (.92)	-5.15-.92	0.38	-1.54 (.09)	2.73 (.18)	.17	<.001

Note. D = Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic.

4.2.2. Associations with Sociodemographic Background Data

In the following, I examine the two attachment dimensions (Avoidance, Anxiety) in relation to *categorical* (age, type of residence, education, financial situation, number of children, partnership status) and *continuous* (mothers' age, years spent in partnership, number of children, sociodemographic risk) sociodemographic background variables.

Categorical Variables

Age. Younger mothers in their 20s reported significantly higher Anxiety scores than mothers in their 30s; however, the overall effect was small. The pairwise difference between mothers aged 21-29 and 30-39 was also very small in magnitude (Table 6a). Comparisons across other age groups did not reveal significant differences, and no significant age-related differences were found for Avoidance scores.

Table 6a

Significant Differences in Attachment Dimensions by Maternal Age

				Kruskal-Wallis			Pairwise Comparisons		
		M (SD) (*n*)	*M* (SD) (*n*)	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	ε^2	*Z*	*p*	*r*
Anxiety	$30\text{-}39_a$ & $21\text{-}29_b$	2.04 (1.23) (426)	2.27 (1.30) (407)	11.61 (3)	<.01	.01	2.7	<.05	.10

Note. Effect sizes are reported as ε^2 for Kruskal–Wallis tests and r ($Z/\sqrt{N}$) for pairwise comparisons.

Type of Residence. Mothers living in the capital city of Budapest had significantly lower scores on both attachment dimensions compared to all other types of residence (see Table 6b). The effect of place of residence was of medium magnitude for Avoidance, but only small for Anxiety, indicating that differences by residence were more pronounced for Avoidance than for Anxiety (see Table 6b).

Table 6b

Significant Differences in Attachment Dimensions by Type of Residence

				Kruskal-Wallis			Pairwise Comparisons		
		M_a (SD) (*n*)	M_b (SD) (*n*)	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	ε^2	*Z*	*p*	*r*
Avoidance	Budapest$_a$-Cities $_b$	1.40 (.68) (160)	2.43 (1.56) (442)	86.7 (2)	< .001	.10	-8.56	< .001	.35
	Budapest $_a$-Village. $_b$		2.39 (1.37) (296)				-8.57	< .001	.40
Anxiety	Budapest$_a$-Cities $_b$	1.74 (.85) (160)	2.22 (1.30) (442)	11.12 (2)	< .01	.01	-3.14	< .01	.13
	Budapest $_a$-Village $_b$		2.22 (1.34) (296)				-2.98	< .01	.14

Note. Effect sizes are reported as ε^2 for Kruskal–Wallis tests and r (Z/√N) for pairwise comparisons.

Education. Mothers with lower educational attainment had higher scores on both attachment dimensions; however, the overall effect of education level on attachment dimensions was small. Post hoc comparisons revealed small effect sizes across all significant group differences, indicating that differences by education level were modest in magnitude (See Table 6c).

Table 6c

Significant Differences in Attachment Dimensions by Level of Education

				Kruskal-Wallis			Pairwise Comparisons		
		M_a (SD) n	M_b (SD) n	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	ε^2	*Z*	*p*	*r*
Avoidance	University Degree$_a$-Max. Primary Sch.$_b$	1.97 (1.28) 165	2.51 (1.53) 89	9.13 (3)	.03	.01	2.91	< .05	.18
Anxiety	University Degree$_a$-High School Dip. $_b$	1.85 (1.11) 165	2.15 (1.23) 435	13.04 (3)	.005	.01	2.91	< .05	.12
	University Degree$_a$-Vocation Sch.$_b$		2.22 (1.33) 207				2.73	< .05	.14
	University Degree$_a$-Max. Primary Sch.$_b$		2.40 (1.40) 89				3.18	< .01	.20

Note. Effect sizes are reported as ε^2 for Kruskal–Wallis tests and r (Z/√N) for pairwise comparisons.

Financial Situation. Mothers living with financial difficulties reported significantly higher scores on both attachment dimensions, with effect sizes ranging from small to medium (See Table 6d).

Table 6d

Significant Differences in Attachment Dimensions by Financial Situation

					Lives without financial difficulties		Lives with financial difficulties	
	Mann Whitney *U*	***Z***	***p***	***r***	***N***	***M* (SD)**	***N***	***M* (SD)**
Avoidance	56139.5	-9.14	< .001	.31	598	1.93 (1.23)	297	2.85 (1.61)
Anxiety	70135.0	-5.22	< .001	.17	598	1.98 (1.20)	297	2.45 (1.32)

Note. Effect sizes are reported as *r* (Z/√N) for pairwise comparisons.

Number of children. Primiparous mothers reported significantly higher Anxiety scores than mothers with two or three children; however, the effect sizes for these differences were small, indicating limited practical significance. Comparisons across other groups revealed no significant differences. For details, see Table 5e. Differences in Avoidance were statistically not significant and demonstrated no trends.

Table 6e

Significant Differences in Anxiety by Number of Children

	Comparison (number of children)				***Kruskal-Wallis***			***Pairwise comparisons***		
		M_a* (SD) *n	***M_b* (SD) *n***	***N***	***χ^2 (df)***	***p***	***ε^2***	***Z***	***p***	***r***
Anxiety	1_a-3_b	2.25 (1.25) 562	1.80 (1.14) 73	897	26.84 (3)	< .001	.03	3.57	< .01	.14
	1_a-2_b	2.25 (1.25) 562	1.90 (1.20) 227					4.32	< .001	.15

Note. Effect sizes are reported as ε^2 for Kruskal–Wallis tests and r (Z/√N) for pairwise comparisons.

Partnership Status. There were no statistically significant differences in attachment dimensions according to partnership status.

Continuous Variables: Mothers' Age, Years in Partnership, Number of Children Demographic Risk

Mothers' age showed negative negligible to weak significant correlations with Avoidance (ρ = -.075; p < .05) and Anxiety (ρ = -.11; p < .01). The number of years spent in partnership with the child's father was similarly negligible to weakly correlated with Avoidance (ρ = -.11; p < .01), and was unrelated to Anxiety. The number of children in the household was weakly and negatively correlated with Anxiety (ρ = -.15; p < .01), but showed no association with Avoidance. The demographic risk index was weakly but significantly correlated with both Avoidance (ρ = .24; p < .001) and Anxiety (ρ = .14; p < .001).

4.2.3. Attachment Profiles Among Mothers Raising Young Children

Associations with relational functioning, conflict behavior and relationship instability were explored among mothers raising young children with different attachment patterns.

Correlations. Spearman rank-order correlations revealed significant low to moderate associations in the expected directions between the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and measures of relational functioning. Conflict frequency showed no significant association with attachment-related anxiety, while a very weak but statistically significant positive correlation emerged with attachment-related avoidance. Avoidant conflict resolution was more strongly associated with attachment-related anxiety than with avoidance, for which the correlation was significant but very weak. Constructive and destructive conflict resolution strategies showed moderate negative/positive associations with both ECR-R-HU-SF subscales, consistent with expectations. Table 7 presents the results.

Table 7

Correlations Between ECR-R-HU-SF Subscales, Relationship Functioning and Conflict

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1 Avoidance	-													
2 Anxiety	.49** (898)	-												
3 Partner Support	-.31** (890)	-.24** (890)	-											
4 Felt Partnership Safety	-.34** (894)	-.21** (894)	.49** (886)	-										
5 Relationship Satisfaction	-.56** (849)	-.46** (849)	.35** (841)	.44** (845)	-									
6 Satisfaction with Workload Distribution	-.53** (841)	-.37** (841)	.35** (834)	.44** (837)	.70** (821)	-								
7 Coparenting	-.63** (833)	-.63** (833)	.33** (826)	.39** (829)	.58** (787)	.54** (782)	-							
8 Conflict Frequency	**.18**** (714)	**.05** (714)	-.20** (709)	-.12** (711)	-.23** (689)	-.22** (690)	-.16** (658)	-						
9 Avoidant Conflict	**.11**** (877)	**.33**** **(877)**	.01 (871)	-.08* (873)	-.15** (833)	-.11** (825)	-.28** (816)	-.03 (701)	-					
10 Constructive Conflict	-.43** (879)	-.36** (879)	.27** (872)	.22** (875)	.42** (835)	.43** (827)	.42** (818)	-.25** (704)	-.16** (872)	-				
11 Attacking Conflict R.	.46** (875)	.43** (875)	-.27** (868)	-.23** (871)	-.44** (831)	-.46** (823)	-.47** (814)	.34** (699)	.16** (870)	-.52** (871)	-			
12 Escalation to Physical Violence	.37** (881)	.41** (881)	-.23** (874)	-.18** (877)	-.33** (837)	-.28** (829)	-.45** (820)	.03 (705)	.21** (876)	-.36** (877)	.53** (875)	-		
13 Relational Instability	.38** (853)	.46** (853)	-.38** (847)	-.33** (849)	-.45** (813)	-.40** (810)	-.51** (793)	.15** (690)	.14** (839)	-.35** (842)	.38** (838)	.40** (844)	-	
14 Relationship Quality	-.64** (752)	-.57** (752)	.48** (752)	.61** (752)	.86** (752)	.84** (752)	.78** (752)	**-.23**** (614)	-.25** (739)	.51** (740)	-.50** (736)	-.36** (742)	-.52** (725)	-

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Defining Attachment Risk Groups Based on the 75th Percentile[11]. The 75th percentile risk threshold for both Avoidance and Anxiety was lower among mothers with young children (Study 2a) compared to the representative community sample (Study 1a) and even lower in the more homogenous sample of mothers (Study 2b). For this reason, risk groups were defined according to the 75th percentile of this study (Study 2b) for both ECR-R-HU-SF subscales. See Figure 3 for the distribution and Table 8 for scores. (Avoidance and Anxiety). Mothers were divided into four attachment profile groups—secure, avoidant, anxious and disorganized—based on their ECR-R-HU-SF scores, presented in Figure 4.

Secure mothers were below the 75th percentile on both Avoidance and Anxiety. Avoidant mothers were above the 75th percentile on Avoidance but not Anxiety. Anxious mothers were above the 75th percentile on Anxiety but not Avoidance. Disorganized mothers were above the 75th percentile on both Avoidance and Anxiety.

Table 8

Cut-Off Scores Based on the 75th Percentiles for ECR-R-HU-SF Subscales Across Studies

	Avoidance 75th percentile	Anxiety 75th percentile	N
Hungarian representative adult sample (Study 1b)	3.75	3.81	958
Sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers (Study 2a)	3.25	3.00	953
Mothers in a relationship & cohabiting with the child's father (Study 2b)	**3.00**	**2.75**	**898**

[11] The ECR-R is not a classification system such as the SSP or the AAI. It is a scale in which attachment representations are continuous variables. Readers should always interpret risk thresholds as trends or characteristics, and by no means as classifications.

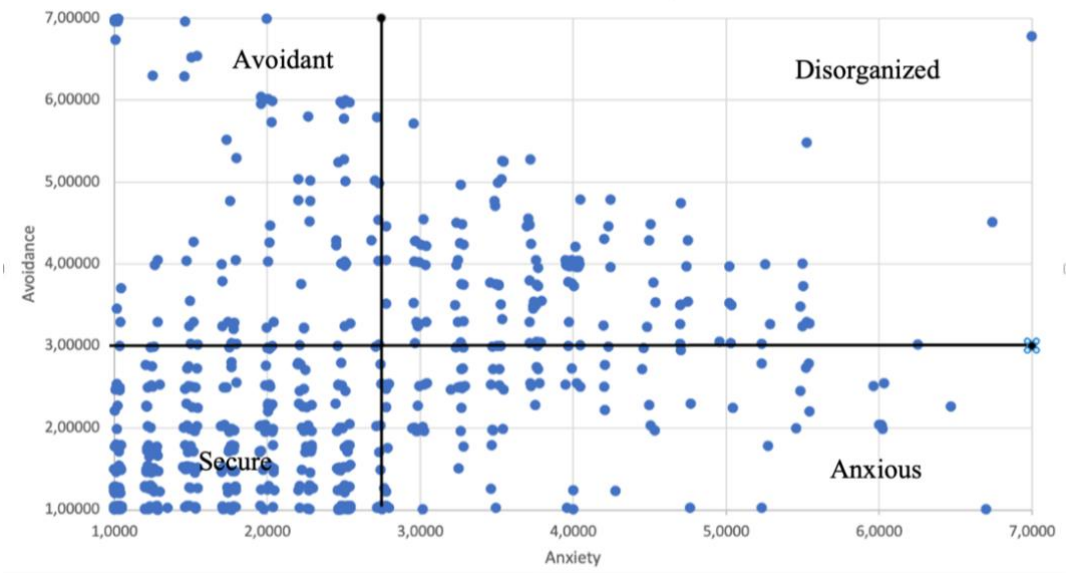


Figure 3

The Distribution of Attachment Representations on Continuous ECR-R-HU-SF Subscales With 75th Percentile Risk Thresholds

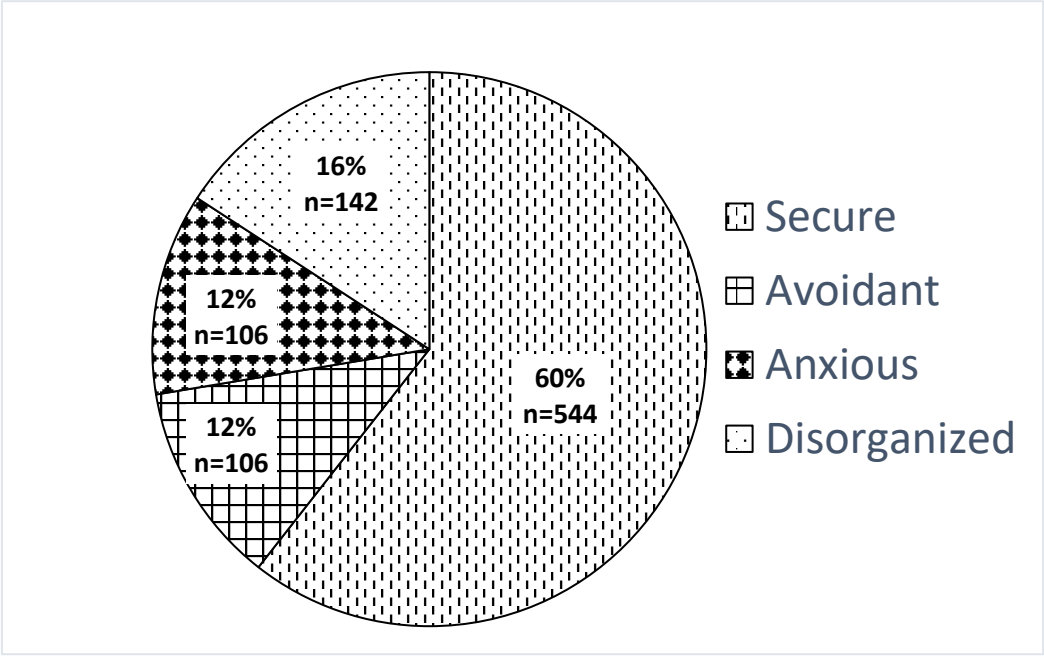


Figure 4

Risk Groups Based on Levels of Attachment Avoidance and Anxiety

Differences Among Groups of Mothers Defined by the 75th Percentile Risk on the ECR-R-HU-SF Subscales. Mean scores, significant differences between groups and effect sizes were calculated using non-parametric analyses and are presented in Table

9. Effect sizes ranged from small (ε^2 = .015 for conflict frequency) to large (ε^2 = .39 for daily coparenting).

The Secure Group. The secure group reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution, coparenting, relationship quality, more constructive conflict, and engaged significantly less in attacking conflict resolution and escalation to physical violence compared with the three other risk groups (Avoidant, Anxious, Disorganized). They also consistently demonstrated significantly better outcomes in perceived partner support, felt partnership security, and relational instability compared with the Avoidant and Disorganized groups.

The Disorganized Group. The disorganized group showed significantly poorer outcomes than all three other groups on most measures of relational functioning (perceived emotional support, felt partnership security, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution, relationship instability, coparenting and relationship quality). They were more likely to engage in destructive rather than constructive conflict resolution compared with other groups. Specifically, they scored significantly worse than secure and avoidant mothers in constructive, avoidant, and attacking conflict resolution, and reported significantly more escalation to physical violence than all three other groups. They also reported significantly more frequent conflict than the secure group.

The Avoidant Group. Avoidant mothers had consistently worse outcomes on all relationship functioning measures compared with secure mothers, but better outcomes than the disorganized group.

Their perception of relationship instability was similar to secure mothers and significantly more stable compared with disorganized and anxious mothers.

In terms of conflict resolution, avoidant mothers systematically reported better outcomes on both constructive and destructive (avoidant, attacking, escalation to physical violence) strategies than disorganized mothers, but worse outcomes than secure mothers. Interestingly, *avoidant conflict resolution* was an exception: while differences with the secure group were non-significant, they reported significantly less avoidant conflict resolution strategies when compared with anxious and disorganized mothers. They also reported significantly less escalation to physical violence than anxious mothers.

The Anxious Group. Anxious mothers had systematically better relationship functioning outcomes than disorganized mothers, but worse outcomes than the secure group, except for perceived partner support and felt partnership security, where differences from the secure group were not statistically significant. Their relationship functioning scores were similar to those of the avoidant mothers. However, they perceived their relationships as significantly more unstable than both the secure and avoidant groups, though still significantly more stable than the disorganized group.

In conflict resolution, they reported even worse outcomes than avoidant mothers. They were the least likely, after the disorganized group, to use constructive conflict resolution, with scores not significantly different from the disorganized group. They reported the *highest levels of avoidant conflict resolution*, with significantly higher levels than both the secure and avoidant groups. They also reported significantly higher levels of attacking conflict resolution than secure mothers, with scores comparable to the disorganized group. Although they reported less escalation to physical violence than disorganized mothers, their levels were significantly higher than those of both secure and avoidant mothers.

Table 9

Significant Differences Among Mother Groups Defined by the 75th Percentile Risk on the ECR-R-HU-SF Subscales

								M **(SD)** ***n***			
		Kruskal-Wallis Tests			**Pairwise Comparisons**			**Secure**	**Avoidant**	**Anxious**	**Disorganized**
	N	χ^2	***p***	ε^2	***Z***	***p***	r				
Perceived Partner Support	890	84.60	<.001	.09	3.71	.001	.24		4.80 (.45) 102		4.60 (.62) 142
					4.93	<.001	.32			4.85 (.46) 102	4.60 (.62) 142
					9.02	<.001	.34	4.94 (.28) 542			4.60 (.62) 142
					3.41	< .01	.13	4.94 (.28) 542	4.80 (.45) 102		
Felt Security	894	71.80	<.001	.08	2.84	.03	.18		9.16 (1.30)106		8.29 (2.05) 139
					4.48	<.001	.29			9.22(1.56) 106	8.29 (2.05) 139
					8.13	<.001	.31	9.62 (.88) 543			8.29 (2.05) 139
					3.83	.001	.15	9.62 (.88) 543	9.16(1.30) 106		

		Kruskal-Wallis Tests			Pairwise Comparisons			Secure	Avoidant	Anxious	Disorganized
	N	χ^2	*p*	ε^2	*Z*	*p*	r				
Relationship Satisfaction	849	212.32	<.001	.25	4.54	<.001	.30		8.65(1.37) 93		7.66 (1.65) 134
					5.70	<.001	.37			8.75(1.43) 102	7.66(1.65) 134
					13.78	<.001	.54	9.51(.82) 520			7.66 (1.65) 134
					6.42	<.001	.26	9.51 (.82) 520	8.65(1.37) 93		
					5.41	<.001	.22	9.51 (.82) 520		8.75(1.43) 102	
Satisfaction with Workload Distribution	841	151.39	<.001	.18	3.09	.012	.21		7.66(2.16) 92		6.79(2.11) 127
					4.64	<.001	.30			8.01(2.04) 103	6.79 (2.11) 128
					11.33	<.001	.45	8.95(1.45) 519			6.79 (2.11) 129
					6.18	<.001	.25	8.95(1.45) 519	7.66(2.16) 92		
					4.69	<.001	.19	8.95 (1.45) 519		8.01(2.04) 103	
Conflict Frequency	714	13.48	.004	.02	-3.38	.004		1.00 (.75) 447			1.37 (1.03) 97
Avoidant Conflict	877	56.71	<.001	.06	-5.35	<.001	.21	1.68(1.43) 535			2.33 (1.31) 136
					-6.05	<.001	.24	1.68(1.43) 536		2.50(1.14) 105	
					-3.55	.002	.23		1.72(1.46) 101		2.33 (1.31) 136
					-4.29	<.001	.30		1.72(1.46) 101	2.50(1.14) 105	
Constructive Conflict	879	144.52	<.001	.16	3.24	.007	.21		3.65(1.26) 102		3.18 (1.20) 135
					10.46	<.001	.40	4.30(1.02) 538			3.18 (1.20) 135
					6.96	<.001	.27	4.30(1.02) 538		3.62 (.98) 104	
					5.39	<.001	.35	4.30 (1.02) 538	3.65(1.26) 102		
Attacking Conflict	875	208.01	<.001	.24	-6.16	<.001	.24	.59 (.97) 535	1.32(1.25) 100		
					-9.65	<.001	.38	.59 (.97) 535		1.85(1.42) 105	
					-11.84	<.001	.46	.59 (.97) 535			1.99 (1.34) 135
					-3.56	.002	.25		1.32(1.25) 100		1.99 (1.34) 135
Escalation to Physical Violence	881	198.70	<.001	.22	-3.82	.001	.15	.06 (.38) 538	.45 (1.09) 101		
					-7.60	<.001	.30	.06 (.38) 538		1.01(1.64) 106	
					-13.03	<.001	.50	.06 (.38) 538			1.23 (1.48) 136
					-2.83	.03	.20		.45 (1.09) 101	1.01(1.64) 106	
					-6.37	<.001	.41		.45 (1.09) 101		1.23 (1.48) 136
					-3.42	.004	.22			1.01(1.64) 106	1.23 (1.48) 136

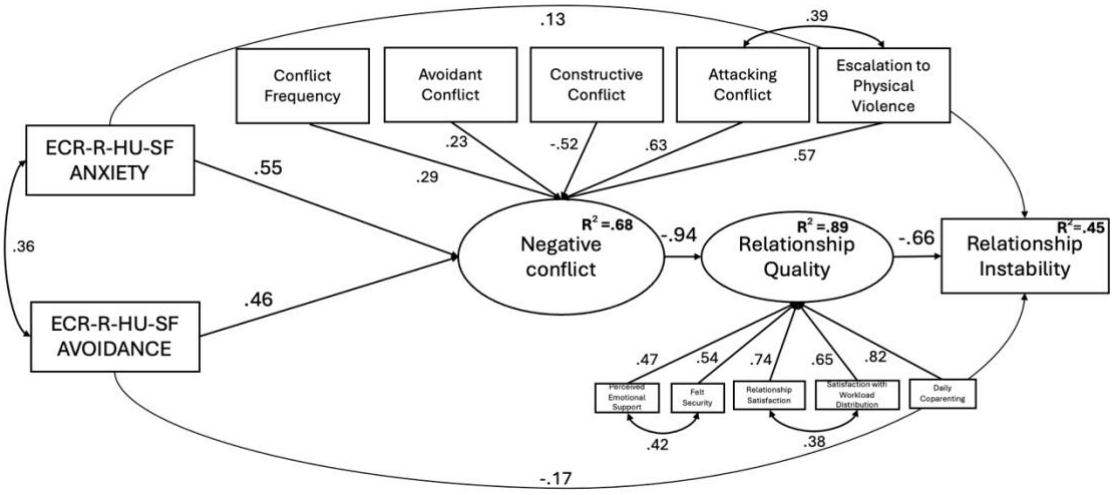
		Kruskal-Wallis Tests			Pairwise Comparisons			Secure	Avoidant	Anxious	Disorganized
	N	χ^2	*p*	ε^2	*Z*	*p*	r				
Relationship Instability	853	168.96	<.001	.19	-6.72	<.001	.27	1.21 (.57) 533		1.94(1.22) 102	
					-12.13	<.001	.47	1.21 (.57) 533			2.28 (1.15) 127
					-3.07	.013	.22		1.45 (.85) 91	1.94(1.22) 102	
					-6.66	<.001	.45		1.45 (.85) 91		2.28 (1.15) 127
					-3.55	.002	.23			1.94(1.22) 102	2.28 (1.15) 127
Daily Coparenting	833	329.96	<.001	.39	4.48	<.001	.29			5.30 (.85) 104	4.63 (.72) 138
					4.77	<.001	.31		5.31 (.86) 104		4.63 (.72) 138
					16.47	<.001	.65	6.19 (.61) 500			4.63 (.72) 138
					8.57	<.001	.35	6.19 (.61) 500		5.30 (.85) 104	
					8.94	<.001	.36	6.19 (.61) 500	5.31 (.86) 104		
Relationship Quality	752	247.58	<.001	.33	4.31	<.001	.30		-.29 (.85) 86		-1.07 (1.08) 119
					4.37	<.001	.31			-.31 (.93) 84	-1.07 (1.08) 119
					14.37	<.001	.60	.39 (.56) 463			-1.07 (1.08) 119
					7.38	<.001	.32	.39 (.56) 463	-.29 (.85) 86		
					7.20	<.001	.30	.39 (.56) 463		-.31 (.93) 84	

Note. All Kruskal-Wallis tests had df = 3. Effect sizes are reported as ε^2 for Kruskal–Wallis tests and *r* (Z/√N) for pairwise comparisons.

4.2.4. Adult Attachment Dimensions as Predictors of Relationship Instability

Structural Equation Models were developed for testing complex associations of relationship functioning among mothers raising young children to explore if adult romantic attachment insecurity (Avoidance and Anxiety) could be predictors of relationship instability. As a preliminary step, the correlation matrix presented in (Table 7) was examined. The results indicated that (1) both relationship instability and relationship quality were moderately to strongly correlated with the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales; (2) the five indicators of relationship functioning (partner support, felt partnership safety, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution, and coparenting) were positively interrelated; (3) conflict frequency and conflict resolution styles were also interrelated. These patterns provided empirical justification for testing three theoretical structural equation models.

In Model 1, our theoretical model involved Negative Conflict as a latent factor and Relationship Quality as another latent factor, both theoretically serving mediating functions between the observed exogenous (ECR-R-HU-SF Avoidance and Anxiety) and the endogenous (Relationship Instability) variables. The Negative Conflict latent variable was defined by five observed variables: conflict frequency, avoidant-, constructive-, and attacking conflict behavior, and escalation to physical violence. The latent factor of Relationship Quality was also defined by five observed variables: perceived partner support, felt partnership security, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution and coparenting. SEM 1 is presented below (Figure 5).



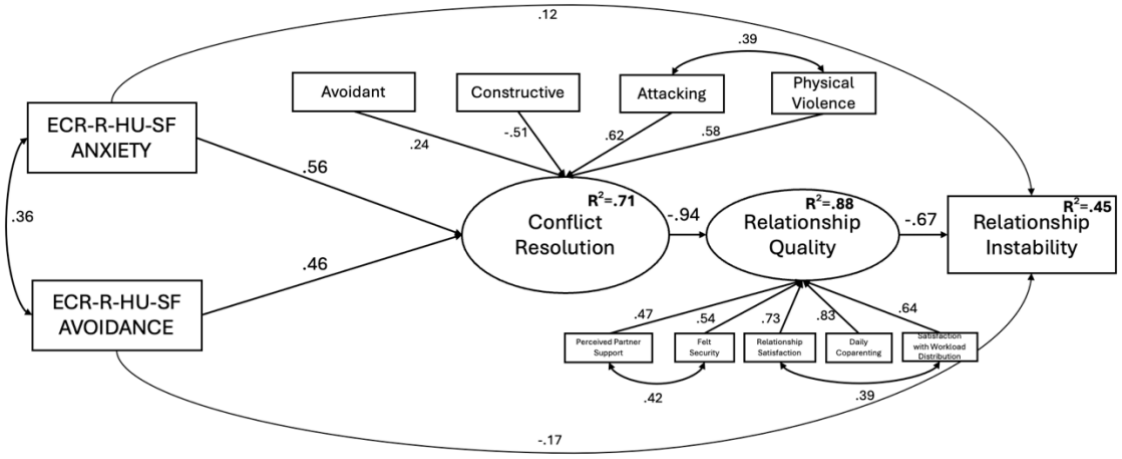
Note. Pathways are all standardized and significant.

Figure 5

Initial SEM 1

The baseline fit of SEM 1 was unsatisfactory ($\chi^2(58) = 445.097$; $p < .001$). However, given the large sample size, the χ^2 statistic was interpreted with caution (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). Further model fit indices were unsatisfactory as well (RMSEA = .09, 90% CI [.08, .09]); CFI = .91; TLI = .87; NFI = .89; SRMR = .06, and $\chi^2/df = 7.67$). The model explained 45% of the variance in Relationship Instability ($R^2 = .45$), 89% in Relationship Quality ($R^2 = .89$) and 68% in Conflict Resolution ($R^2 = .68$). Conflict frequency showed high modification indices with attacking conflict resolution (*MI* = 83.18) and escalation to physical violence (MI = 57.11), indicating a substantial model misfit. It also differed conceptually from the other four observed items

of the "Negative Conflict" latent factor, as it was not a conflict resolution strategy. Preliminary analyses showed that it had very low correlations with other constructs (see Table 7). Based on these theoretical and empirical considerations, SEM 1 was rejected and SEM 2 was tested by removing conflict frequency from the initial model (Figure 6).



Note. Pathways are all standardized and significant.

Figure 6

SEM 2

SEM 2 showed improved fit, $\chi^2(47) = 298.79$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, TLI = .91, NFI = .93; RMSEA = .077, 90% CI [.07, .09], SRMR = .05, and $\chi^2/df = 6.36$. ECR-R-HU-SF Avoidance had a significant indirect effect on Relationship Instability through Negative Conflict Resolution and Relationship Quality ($\beta = .28$; SE = .03; $z = 8.86$; $p < .001$; 95% CI [.22-.35]. ECR-R-HU-SF Anxiety also had a significant indirect effect on Relationship Instability through the same mediators ($\beta = .35$; SE = .04; $z = 10.04$; $p < .001$; 95% CI [.28-.42]. Although the direct paths from ECR-R-HU-SF subscales to Relationship Instability were significant, the indirect effects via the mediators were stronger. The model explained 45% of the variance in Relationship Instability ($R^2 = .45$), 88% in Relationship Quality ($R^2 = .88$) and 71% in Conflict Resolution ($R^2 = .71$).

This model proved satisfactory and was retained as the final model. It was named *Attachment Dimensions as Predictors of Relationship Instability: The Mediating Roles of Conflict Resolution and Relationship Quality.*

4.3. APPLICATION: A PILOT STUDY OF PARENTAL DYADS (STUDY 2C)

This pilot study aimed to explore emerging patterns of parental attachment pairings in a subsample of mothers from Study 2b and their partners. Preliminary analyses of associations with sociodemographic background variables in the dyadic subsample pointed in the same direction as those observed in Study 2b. Given the limited size of the dyadic subsample and length constraints, analyses of the associations between ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and sociodemographic background variables are therefore not presented.

4.3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the dyadic sample are presented in Table 10. Mean scores of the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales were even lower in the dyadic sample than in the homogenous sample of mothers [Avoidance: *M* (SD) = 2.24 (1.43); Anxiety: *M* (SD) = 2.14 (1.26) in Study 2b].

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics of the Dyadic Sample

	N	*M* (SD)	Range	Med.	Skew. (SE)	Kurt. (SE)	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
							D	*p*
MOTHERS' DESCRIPTIVES								
ECR-R-HU-SF Avoidance	108	2.10 (1.44)	1-7	1.5	1.47 (.23)	1.68 (.46)	0.23	< .001
ECR-R-HU-SF Anxiety	108	2.05 (1.19)	1-5.5	1.75	1.15 (.23)	0.69 (.46)	0.19	< .001
Perceived Emotional Support	107	4.84 (.48)	3-5	5	-3.07 (.23)	8.51 (.46)	0.52	< .001
Felt Partnership Safety	108	9.36 (1.52)	1-10	10	-3.19 (.23)	11.30 (.46)	0.41	< .001
Relationship Satisfaction	105	9.19 (1.48)	2-10	10	-2.85 (.24)	9.66 (.47)	0.32	< .001
Satisfaction with Workload Distribution	104	8.61 (2.15)	1-10	10	-1.89 (.24)	3.15 (.47)	0.29	< .001
Coparenting	98	5.95 (.91)	3.2-7	6.1	-0.96 (.24)	0.32 (.48)	0.13	< .001
Conflict Frequency	91	1.01 (.61)	0-3	1	0.61 (.25)	1.89 (.50)	0.36	< .001
Avoidant Conflict Response	107	1.81 (1.49)	0-5	2	0.31 (.23)	-0.88 (.46)	0.17	< .001
Constructive Conflict	108	3.93 (1.30)	0-5	4	-1.31 (.23)	1.22 (.46)	0.24	< .001
Attacking/Shouting Conflict Response	106	0.84 (1.14)	0-4	0	1.27 (.24)	0.66 (.47)	0.32	< .001
Escalation to Physical Violence Conflict Response	108	0.26 (.83)	0-4	0	3.15 (.23)	8.76 (.46)	0.52	< .001
Relationship Instability	107	1.35 (.89)	1-5	1	2.76 (.23)	6.88 (.46)	0.48	< .001
Relationship Quality	94	0.00 (.95)	-4.77-.65	.29	-2.75 (.25)	8.78 (.49)	0.25	< .001

	N	*M* (SD)	Range	Med.	Skew. (SE)	Kurt. (SE)	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
							D	*p*
FATHERS' DESCRIPTIVES								
ECR-R-HU-SF Avoidance	108	2.27 (1.28)	1-7	2	0.94 (.23)	0.53 (.46)	0.16	< .001
ECR-R-HU-SF Anxiety	108	1.88 (1.08)	1-5	1.38	1.07 (.23)	0.16 (.46)	0.25	< .001
Perceived Emotional Support	103	4.89 (.37)	3-5	5	-3.70 (.24)	13.98 (.47)	0.53	< .001
Felt Partnership Safety	103	9.61 (.88)	6-10	10	-2.35 (.24)	4.75 (.47)	0.47	< .001
Relationship Satisfaction	106	9.26 (1.17)	6-10	10	-1.61 (.24)	1.58 (.47)	0.36	< .001
Satisfaction with Workload Distribution	104	8.85 (1.66)	0-10	10	-2.18 (.24)	7.11 (.47)	0.27	< .001
Coparenting	100	5.92 (.87)	3.8-7	6.1	-0.80 (.24)	-0.31(.48)	0.13	< .001
Conflict Frequency	77	0.81 (.61)	0-3	1	0.48 (.27)	1.33 (.54)	0.34	< .001
Avoidant Conflict	107	1.88 (1.43)	0-5	2	0.12 (.23)	-1.03 (.46)	0.19	< .001
Constructive Conflict	106	4.07 (1.08)	0-5	4	-1.29 (.24)	1.59 (.47)	0.24	< .001
Attacking Conflict	106	0.86 (1.06)	0-4	1	1.26 (.24)	0.90 (.47)	0.27	< .001
Escalation to Physical Violence	107	0.36 (.95)	0-4	0	2.75 (.23)	6.53 (.46)	0.50	< .001
Relationship Instability	106	1.49 (.95)	1-5	1	2.01 (.24)	3.39 (.47)	0.43	< .001
Relationship Quality	91	0.00 (.90)	-3.1-.86	.30	-1.51 (.25)	1.86 (.50)	0.17	< .001

Note. D = Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic.

4.3.2. Correlations Between Attachment Dimensions and Relational Functioning

Correlations were computed separately for mothers and fathers and compared descriptively, as formal tests of differences between dependent correlations were beyond the scope of the present analyses.

Mothers' associations are reported in the lower (white) triangle, while fathers' correlations are reported in the upper (grey) triangle of the correlation matrix in Table 11. As expected, mothers' correlations with ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and other variables measuring relational functioning closely resembled those observed in Study 2b.

The directions of significant associations were largely similar among mothers and fathers. Conflict frequency was an exception, as fathers' Avoidance was positively associated with conflict frequency, while mothers' Avoidance was unrelated. A few further subtle differences emerged. Fathers' Avoidance was less strongly related to measures focusing on relationship quality (e.g., perceived partner support, felt partnership safety, relationship satisfaction), but showed stronger associations with attacking conflict resolution and escalation to physical violence. Fathers' Anxiety was unrelated to perceived partner support, and felt partnership safety, and less strongly associated with

attacking conflict resolution, but had a stronger link with relationship instability. Two further differences were noted. For fathers, satisfaction with workload distribution was less related to relationship instability and unrelated to perceived partner support. In addition, avoidant conflict resolution had a weak but significant association with attacking conflict resolution for fathers, while these two constructs were unrelated for mothers.

Table 11

Correlation Matrix of the Dyadic Sample (Associations Between the ECR-R-HU-SF Subscales and Relational Functioning)

	Avoidance	Anxiety	Per. Partner Support	Felt Safety	Rel. Satisfaction	Satisfaction w/ W. D.	Daily Cop.	Confl. Freq.	Avoidant Confl.	Constr. Conflict	Attacking Confl.	Esc. to Physical V.	Rel. Inst.	Rel. Quality
Avoidance	-	.33** (108)	-.22* (103)	-.18 (103)	-.36** (106)	-.46** (104)	-.44** (100)	**.29**** (77)	.06 (107)	-.26** (106)	.42** (106)	.42** (107)	.36** (106)	-.50** (91)
Anxiety	.45** (108)	-	-.12 (103)	-.17 (103)	-.42** (106)	-.36** (104)	-.57** (100)	-.08 (77)	.27** (107)	-.30** (106)	.27** (106)	.35** (107)	.45** (106)	-.55** (91)
Perceived Partner Support	-.31** (107)	-.27** (107)	-	.47** (103)	.35** (101)	.19 (99)	.25* (95)	-.18 (74)	.01 (102)	.14 (101)	-.20* (101)	-.26** (102)	-.25* (101)	.43** (91)
Felt Safety	-.25** (108)	-.19* (108)	.56** (107)	-	.35** (101)	.26* (99)	.27** (95)	-.06 (74)	.01 (102)	.23* (101)	-.19 (101)	-.19 (102)	-.37** (101)	.51** (91)
Relationship Satisfaction	-.47** (105)	-.39** (105)	.41** (104)	.41** (105)	-	.60** (104)	.48** (98)	-.19 (77)	-.16 (105)	.47** (104)	-.43** (104)	-.31** (105)	-.47** (104)	.83** (91)
Satisfaction with Workload Distr.	-.56** (104)	-.41** (104)	.34** (103)	.40** (104)	.63** (103)	-	.56** (96)	-.24* (75)	-.10 (103)	.48** (102)	-.46** (102)	-.25* (103)	-.34** (102)	.72** (91)
Daily Coparenting	-.54** (98)	-.60** (98)	.32** (98)	.33** (98)	.50** (95)	.54** (95)	-	-.06 (70)	-.31** (99)	.36** (98)	-.40** (98)	-.32** (99)	-.47** (98)	.78** (91)
Conflict Frequency	.20 (91)	.08 (91)	-.16 (90)	-.09 (91)	-.25* (89)	-.30** (89)	-.24* (81)	-	-.15 (77)	-.32** (76)	.18 (76)	.16 (77)	.06 (76)	-.12 (65)
Avoidant Conflict	.08 (107)	.25** (107)	.02 (106)	.04 (107)	-.17 (104)	-.03 (103)	-.35** (97)	-.001 (91)	-	-.19 (106)	**.21*** (106)	.21* (107)	.09 (105)	-.20 (90)
Constructive Conflict	-.45** (108)	-.53** (108)	.25* (107)	.25** (108)	.40** (105)	.38** (104)	.49** (98)	-.24* (91)	-.10 (107)	-	-.38** (105)	-.27** (106)	-.20* (104)	.46** (89)
Attacking Conflict Response	.38** (106)	.41** (106)	-.15 (105)	-.12 (106)	-.48** (103)	-.52** (102)	-.34** (96)	.37** (89)	.12 (105)	-.46** (106)	-	.52** (106)	.33** (104)	-.51** (89)
Escalation to Physical Violence	.32** (108)	.37** (108)	-.27** (107)	-.15 (108)	-.39** (105)	-.26** (104)	-.35** (98)	.16 (91)	.25** (107)	-.38** (108)	.42** (106)	-	**.48**** (105)	-.35** (90)
Relational Instability	.36** (107)	.33** (107)	-.41** (106)	-.37** (107)	-.58** (104)	-.48** (103)	-.58** (97)	.17 (90)	.15 (106)	-.30** (107)	.30** (105)	.35** (107)	-	-.51** (89)
Relationship Quality	-.56** (94)	-.49** (94)	.48** (94)	.65** (94)	.80** (94)	.76** (94)	.70** (94)	-.18 (79)	-.21* (93)	.52** (94)	-.50** (92)	-.34** (94)	-.55** (93)	-

Note. Mothers' associations are reported in the lower (white) triangle and fathers' associations in the upper (grey) triangle. Full construct labels are provided in the leftmost column.

*p<.05, **p<.001

4.3.3. Comparison of Mothers' and Fathers' Responses in the Dyadic Sample

Wilcoxon Paired Samples Test indicated that mothers and fathers did not differ significantly on the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales, as expected. There was a slight trend for mothers to have higher mean Anxiety scores and lower mean Avoidance scores, but these differences were not statistically significant (see Table 12). Overall, mothers and fathers did not differ significantly in conflict behavior, and perceived their relationships similarly, with only one significant difference observed in felt partnership safety; however, the mean difference was very small suggesting limited practical significance. Consistent with these findings, effect sizes were small across the attachment subscales and for felt partnership safety, suggesting that differences between mothers and fathers were generally modest in magnitude.

Table 12

Differences Between Mothers and Fathers in the Dyadic Sample

		Mothers				Fathers						
	N	***M***	**SD**	**Min**	**Max**	***M***	**SD**	**Min**	**Max**	***Z***	***p***	***r***
ECR-R-HU-SF Avoidance	108	2.17	1.44	1	7	2.27	1.28	1	7	-1.82 [a]	.07	.18
ECR-R-HU-SF Anxiety	108	2.07	1.19	1	5.5	1.88	1.08	1	5	-1.5 [b]	.14	.14
Felt partnership safety	103	9.36	1.52	1	10	9.61	0.88	6	10	-2.40 [a]	< .05	.24

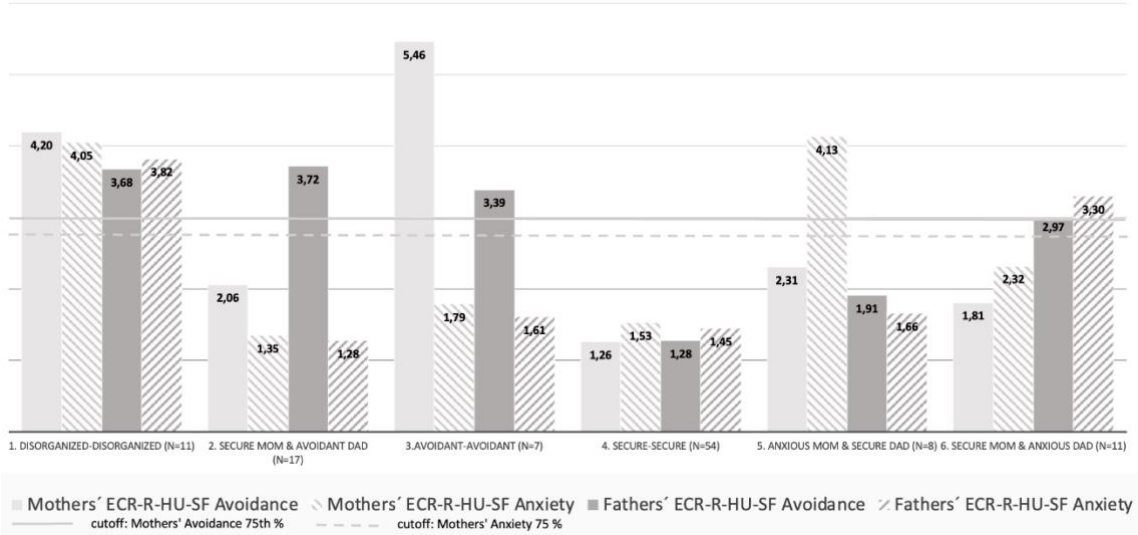
Note. Effect sizes are reported as r (Z/√N). [a] Based on negative ranks. [b] Based on positive ranks.

4.3.4. Attachment Pairings Among Parents with Young Children

K-means cluster analysis was constrained to six clusters to align with the results of the hierarchical cluster analysis. Convergence was achieved due to no or small changes in cluster centers with 5 iterations. The analysis identified six different attachment pairings: (1) disorganized-disorganized; (3) avoidant-avoidant; (4) secure-secure; (2) secure mother and avoidant father; (5) anxious mother and secure father; (6) secure mother and anxious father.

Mothers' and fathers' mean ECR-R-HU-SF subscale scores in insecure clusters (anxious, avoidant, disorganized) always fall above the 75th percentile risk threshold of this sample (see Figure 7), and also above the slightly higher risk thresholds of both the sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers (Study 2a) and the representative adult sample (Study 1b). Cluster means are also indicated in Figure 7, to draw a more nuanced

picture of the clusters, showing that these categories were derived from the continuous ECR-R-HU-SF subscales and must be treated carefully.



Note. Lines represent 75th percentile maternal risk thresholds of ECR-R-HU-SF subscales in Study 2b. There are no 75th percentile reference points for fathers.

Figure 7

Dyadic Clusters Based on Attachment Representations (Continuous Subscales of ECR-R-HU-SF)

Cluster sizes and proportions of different attachment pairings are presented in Figure 8. Clusters with solid fills represent symmetrical attachment pairings between mothers and fathers, whereas clusters with line patterns indicate asymmetrical configurations.

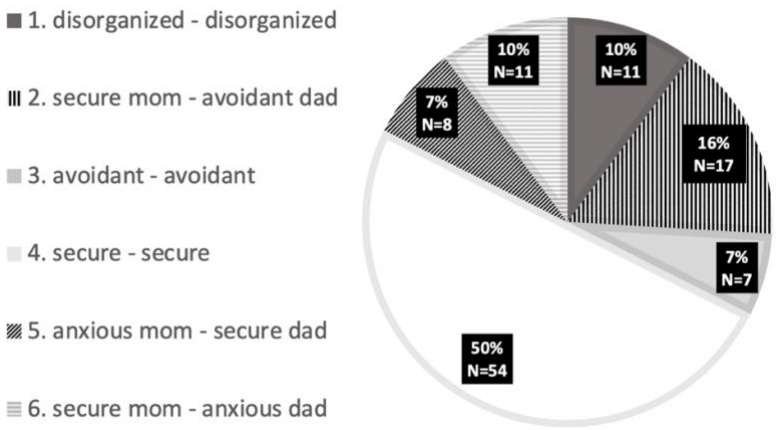


Figure 8

Distribution of Dyadic Clusters

4.3.5. Mothers' Relational Functioning Based on Attachment Pairing Cluster Membership[12]

Kruskal–Wallis tests revealed large effects across all variables (ε^2 = .20–.29), and post hoc comparisons indicated predominantly large to very large effect sizes (r = .45–.96), particularly for contrasts involving the disorganized–disorganized constellation.

Relationship Functioning. Results indicate that mothers in the disorganized-disorganized attachment pairing (Cl 1), consistently report significantly worse outcomes on all measures of relationship functioning, as well as higher levels of relationship instability. Although avoidant mothers paired with avoidant fathers (Cl 3) and anxious mothers paired with secure fathers (Cl 5) report better outcomes than disorganized mothers, these differences were not always statistically significant, as reflected on their outcomes on the overall relationship quality (see Figure 9). Secure mothers paired with avoidant fathers (Cl 2) fared quite well across all relationship functioning measures, with significantly better outcomes than the disorganized-disorganized pairing (Cl 1). Mothers in the disorganized-disorganized pairing (Cl 1) reported the highest relationship instability and had significantly higher levels of instability than mothers in all of the other attachment pairings, except for the anxious mom-secure dad pairing (See Figure 10). See Table 13 for significant differences.

Conflict Behavior. Differences are less systematic across conflict behavior, and there were no significant differences across clusters in conflict frequency and avoidant conflict resolution. Mothers in disorganized-disorganized pairings reported significantly higher levels of escalation to physical violence than clusters 2, 4, and 5 (see Figure 11). For similarity in frequency of conflict, between mothers across different attachment pairings, see Figure 12. Significant differences across clusters are presented in Table 13.

[12] Due to the very small subsample sizes, the results of the following group comparison analyses should be interpreted with caution. The analyses are intended merely as an illustration of the patterns that might be expected in larger samples across different groups.

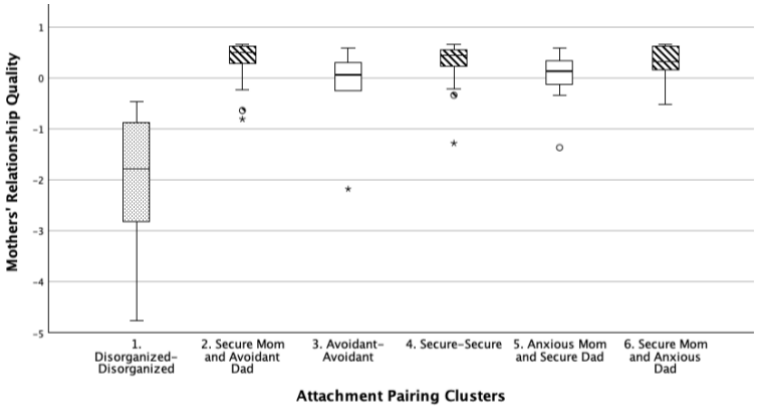
Table 13

*Significant Differences in Mothers' Relational Functioning and Conflict Behavior Across Attachment Pairings**

		Kruskal-Wallis test							Pairwise comparison		
	N	χ^2 *(df)*	*p*	ε^2	**Clusters* (a-b)**	**Cluster $_a$ M (SD)**	**Cluster $_b$ M (SD)**	***n* Cluster a-b**	***Z***	***p***	***r***
Perceived Partner support	107	25.49 (5)	<.001	.20	1_a-5_b	4.09 (.94)	4.88 (.35)	11-8	-2.99	< .05	.69
					1_a -6_b	4.09 (.94)	4.91 (.3)	11-11	-3.50	< .01	.75
					1_a -2_b	4.09 (.94)	4.94 (.25)	11-16	-4.03	.001	.78
					1_a -4_b	4.09 (.94)	4.94 (.3)	11-54	-4.98	< .001	.62
Felt Partnership Safety	108	26.92 (5)	<.001	.21	1_a -4_b	6.45 (2.94)	9.63 (.71)	11-54	-4.12	.001	.51
					1_a -5_b	6.45 (2.94)	9.63 (.74)	11-8	-2.96	< .05	.68
					1_a -2_b	6.45 (2.94)	9.94 (.24)	11-17	-4.64	< .001	.88
					1_a -6_b	6.45 (2.94)	10 (0.0)	11-11	-4.48	< .001	.96
Relationship Satisfaction	105	30.75 (5)	<.001	.26	1_a -2_b	6.2 (2.66)	9.47 (1.07)	10-17	-4.27	< .001	.82
					1_a -4_b	6.2 (2.66)	9.7 (.54)	10-54	-5.15	< .001	.64
Satisfaction w/Workload Distribution	104	31.04 (5)	<.001	.27	1_a -6_b	4.9 (2.69)	9.0 (1.0)	10-11	-3.17	< .05	.69
					1_a -2_b	4.9 (2.69)	8.94 (1.6)	10-17	-3.90	.001	.75
					1_a -4_b	4.9 (2.69)	9.34 (1.43)	10-53	-5.19	< .001	.65
Daily Coparenting	98	29.55 (5)	<.001	.27	1_a -2_b	4.47 (.80)	5.99 (.92)	11-16	-3.57	< .01	.69
					1_a -6_b	4.47 (.80)	6.12 (.84)	11-11	-3.51	< .01	.75
					1_a -4_b	4.47 (.80)	6.35 (.52)	11-45	-5.14	< .001	.69
Constructive Conflict	108	34.04 (5)	<.001	.28	1_a -3_b	2.0 (1.27)	4.14 (1.07)	11-7	-2.99	< .05	.71
					1_a -4_b	2.0 (1.27)	4.22 (1.13)	11-54	-4.78	< .001	.59
					1_a -2_b	2.0 (1.27)	4.65 (.49)	11-17	-4.91	< .001	.93
					5_a -2_b	3.0 (1.31)	4.65 (.49)	8-17	3.21	< .05	.64
Attacking Conflict	106	28.67 (5)	<.001	.24	4_a -1_b	.40 (.79)	1.73 (1.27)	53-11	3.61	< .01	.45
					4_a -6_b	.40 (.79)	1.91 (1.14)	53-11	-4.04	.001	.51
Escalation to physical violence	108	29.80 (5)	<.001	.24	2_a -1_b	0.0 (.00)	1.36 (1.43)	17-11	4.62	< .001	.87
					4_a -1_b	.07 (.54)	1.36 (1.43)	54-11	5.20	< .001	.65
					5_a -1_b	.38 (1.06)	1.36 (1.43)	8-11	2.94	. 05	.67
Relationship Instability	107	32.05 (5)	<.001	.27	4_a -1_b	1.09 (.56)	2.55 (1.44)	53-11	5.52	< .001	.69
					6_a -1_b	1.18 (.60)	2.55 (1.44)	11-11	4.00	.001	.85
					3_a -1_b	1.14 (.38)	2.55 (1.44)	7-11	3.29	< .05	.78
					2_a -1_b	1.35 (.70)	2.55 (1.44)	17-11	3.45	< .01	.65
Relationship Quality	94	30.79 (5)	< .001	.29	1_a -6_b	-2.05 (1.38)	.25 (.40)	10-10	-3.58	< .01	.80
					1_a -4_b	-2.06 (1.43)	.33 (.35)	10-45	-4.98	< .001	.67
					1_a -2_b	-2.06 (1.43)	.31 (.47)	10-16	-4.77	< .001	.94

Note. *Clusters: (1) disorganized-disorganized, (2) secure mom – avoidant dad, (3) avoidant-avoidant, (4) secure-secure, (5) anxious mom-secure dad, (6) secure mom-anxious dad. Effect sizes are reported as epsilon-squared (ε^2) for Kruskal–Wallis tests and r ($Z/\sqrt{N}$) for pairwise comparisons.

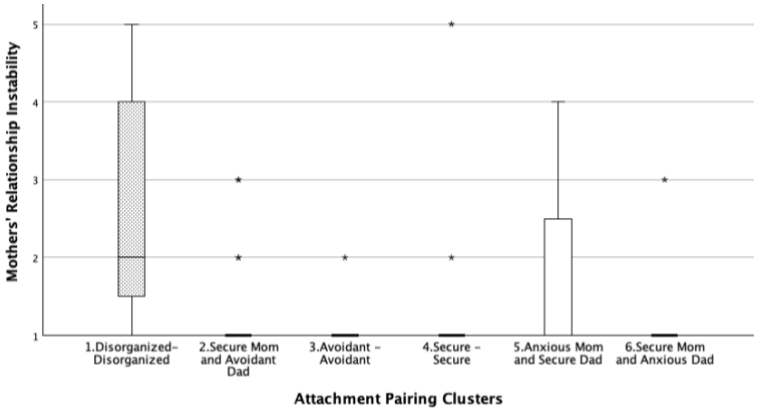
The four boxplots visualize the distribution of scores across attachment pairings. The plots display group medians, the interquartile range (the middle 50%/ of the data), and individual outliers (extreme outliers are depicted as stars and mild outliers as circles) and are consistent with the Kruskal-Wallis tests reported in Table 13.



Note. Cluster 1 scored significantly lower on Relationship Quality than Clusters 2, 4, and 6.

Figure 9

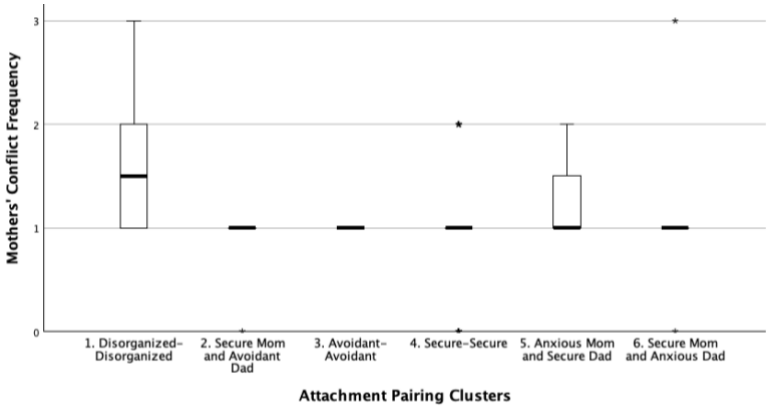
Mothers' Overall Relationship Quality Across Different Attachment Pairings



Note. Cluster 1 had significantly higher levels of relationship instability than Clusters 2,3, 4, and 6.

Figure 10

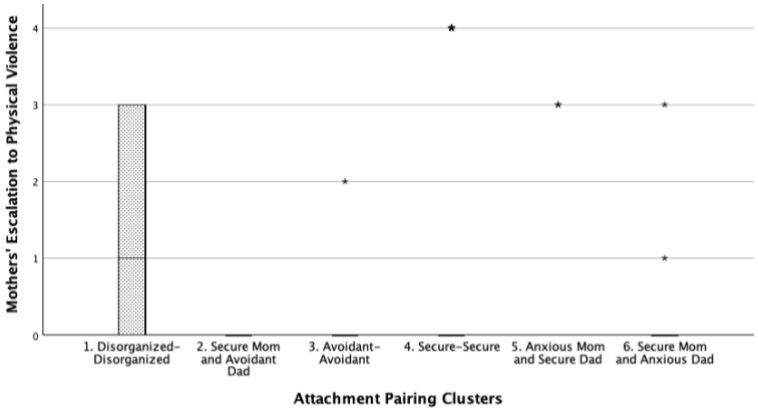
Mothers' Relationship Instability Across Attachment Pairings



Note. There were no significant differences in the frequency of conflict across groups. Where there are no rectangles, the IQR has collapsed to zero.

Figure 11

Mothers' Similarity in Frequency of Conflict Across Attachment Pairings



Note. Cluster 1 exhibited significantly higher scores than Clusters 2, 4, and 5. In clusters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 the median was 0 and the IQR collapsed to zero.

Figure 12

Mothers' Escalation to Physical Violence Across Attachment Pairings

4.3.6. Fathers' Relational Functioning Based on Attachment Pairing Cluster Membership

Kruskal–Wallis tests revealed medium to large effects across variables (ε^2 = .11–.37). Post hoc comparisons indicated predominantly medium to large effect sizes (r = .36–.78), suggesting meaningful differences in relational functioning and conflict behavior across attachment pairings. The strongest effects were consistently observed in comparisons involving the disorganized-disorganized constellation.

Relationship Functioning. Fathers in the secure-secure attachment pairing (Cl 4) demonstrated the best outcomes across all measures of relationship functioning, while fathers in the disorganized-disorganized pairing reported the lowest outcomes (see Figures 13-14, and Table 14). Not only did fathers in the secure-secure pairing consistently report significantly higher scores than fathers in the disorganized-disorganized (1 Cl) pairing, but on certain measures (relationship satisfaction, coparenting) they reported significantly higher scores than anxious fathers paired with secure mothers (Cl 6). When secure fathers were paired with anxious mothers (Cl 5), their satisfaction with the distribution of workload was significantly lower than that of fathers in the secure-secure pairing. Significant differences among fathers are presented in Table 14.

Conflict Behavior. Conflict behavior yielded several noteworthy non-significant results. The frequency of conflict and levels of avoidant conflict resolution did not vary significantly across attachment pairings. Non-significant results for conflict frequency are

presented in Figure 15. Anxious fathers paired with secure mothers (Cl 6) and fathers in the disorganized-disorganized (Cl 1) attachment pairing reported significantly higher levels of attacking conflict resolution. In escalation to physical violence, only fathers in the disorganized-disorganized (Cl 1) attachment pairing reported significantly higher levels compared with the fathers in the secure-secure cluster (see Figure 16).

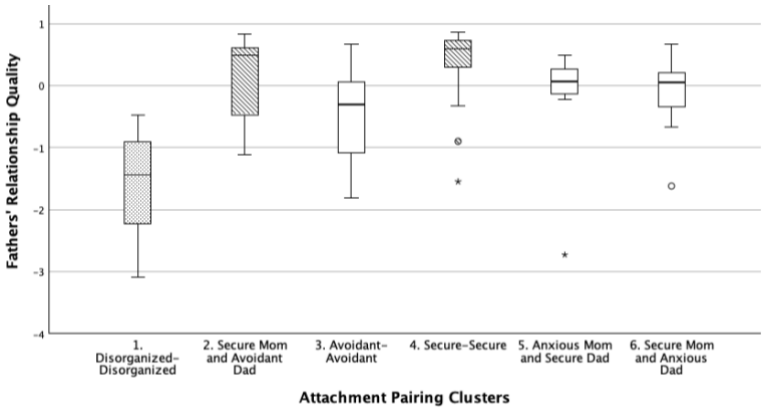
Table 14

Significant Differences in Fathers' Relational Functioning and Conflict Behavior Across Attachment Pairings

		Kruskal-Wallis test							Pairwise comparison		
	N	χ^2 *(df)*	*p*	ε^2	Clusters* (a-b)	Cluster$_a$ *M* (SD)	Cluster$_b$ *M* (SD)	*N* (clusters a-b)	*Z*	*p*	*r*
Perceived Emotional Support	103	15.29 (5)	< .01	.11	1_a<4_b	4.64 (.51)	4.98 (.14)	11-54	-3.6	< .01	.45
Felt Partnership Safety	103	15.65 (5)	< .01	.11	1_a <4_b	8.55 (1.57)	9.81 (.52)	11-54	-3.48	< .01	.43
Relationship Satisfaction	106	36.37 (5)	<.001	.31	1_a <2_b	7.20 (1.32)	9.53 (.80)	10-17	-4.03	.001	.78
					1_a <4_b	7.20 (1.32)	9.74 (.62)	10-54	-5.35	<.001	.67
					6_a <4_b	8.91 (1.04)	9.74 (.62)	11-54	2.98	< .05	.37
Satisfaction with Workload Distribution	104	32.09 (5)	<.001	.28	1_a <4_b	6.90 (1.85)	9.45 (1.50)	10-53	-4.64	<.001	.58
					5_a <4_b	8.00 (1.31)	9.45 (1.50)	8-53	3.29	< .05	.42
Daily Coparenting	100	25.94 (5)	<.001	.22	1_a <4_b	4.91 (1.03)	6.33 (.60)	11-47	-4.16	<.001	.55
					6_a <4_b	5.43 (.95)	6.33 (.60)	11-47	3.07	< .05	.40
Constructive Conflict	106	16.27 (5)	< .01	.11	1_a<4_b	3.09 (1.58)	4.30 (.99)	11-53	-2.93	.05	.37
Attacking Conflict	106	23.81 (5)	<.001	.19	4_a<6_b	.43 (.79)	1.64 (1.50)	54-11	-2.95	< .05	.37
					4_a <1_b	.43 (.79)	1.60 (.97)	54-10	3.65	< .01	.45
Escalation to Physical Violence	107	19.46 (5)	< .01	.14	4_a <1_b	.02 (.14)	1.36 (1.80)	54-11	3.86	< .01	.48
Relationship instability	106	25.33 (5)	<.001	.20	4_a<1_b	1.13 (.44)	2.50 (1.08)	53-10	4.66	<.001	.59
Relationship Quality	91	38.23 (5)	<.001	.39	1_a -2_b	-1.57 (.84)	.09 (.70)	10-11	-3.20	< .05	.70
					1_a -4_b	-1.57 (.84)	.44 (.48)	10-46	-5.50	< .001	.73

Note. Clusters: (1) disorganized-disorganized, (2) secure mom-avoidant dad, (3) avoidant-avoidant, (4) secure-secure, (5) anxious mom-secure dad, (6) secure mom-anxious dad. Effect sizes are reported as epsilon-squared (ε^2) for Kruskal–Wallis tests and r ($Z/\sqrt{N}$) for pairwise comparisons.

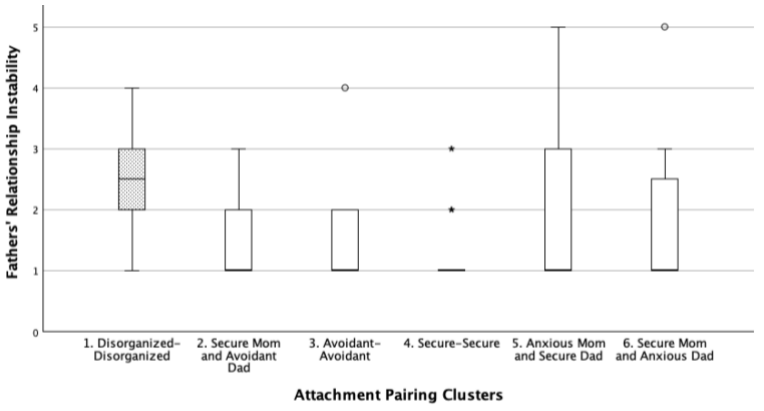
The four boxplots below visualize the distribution of scores across attachment pairings. The plots display group medians, the interquartile range (IRQ; the middle 50% of the data), and individual outliers (extreme outliers are depicted as stars and mild outliers as circles) and are consistent with the Kruskal-Wallis tests reported in Table 14.



Note. Cluster 1 had significantly lower RQ scores than Clusters 2 and 4.

Figure 13

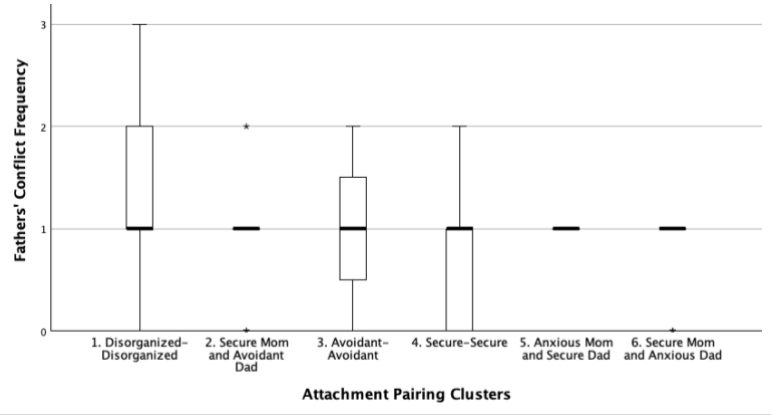
Fathers' Overall Relationship Quality Across Different Attachment Pairings



Note. Cluster 1 had significantly higher levels of relationship instability than Cluster 4.

Figure 14

Fathers' Relationship Instability Across Different Attachment Pairings



Note. Group medians were similar across clusters and in Clusters 2, 5, and 6, the IQR collapsed to zero.

Figure 15

Fathers' Similarity in Frequency of Conflict Across Attachment Pairings

Note. Cluster 1 reported significantly higher levels of Escalation than Cluster 4.

Figure 16

Fathers' Escalation to Physical Violence Across Attachment Pairings

4.3.7. Do You See What I See? Parental Differences Within Attachment Pairings

Mothers and fathers were compared with one another within each attachment pairing cluster. In general, results demonstrate that they perceive their relationship functioning in very similar ways. There were no significant differences at all between mothers and fathers in clusters 2 (secure mother–avoidant father), 3 (avoidant-avoidant), 4 (secure-secure), and 5 (anxious mother and secure father). However, a few differences did emerge in the other two clusters (disorganized-disorganized, secure mother-anxious father). Fathers reported significantly lower levels of coparenting and relationship quality than their partners when anxious fathers were paired with secure mothers. Mothers reported significantly lower levels of constructive conflict resolution and felt safety in the

disorganized-disorganized pairing (Cl 1). These significant differences were accompanied by large to very large effect sizes are presented (see Table 15), indicating substantial differences between mothers and fathers within specific attachment pairings.

Table 15

Differences Between Mothers and Fathers Within Attachment Pairings

		Mothers			Fathers			Wilcoxon Signed ranks test			
		M	**SD**	**Range**	***M***	**SD**	**Range**	***N***	***Z***	***p***	***r***
1.Disorganized-Disorganized	Felt Partnership Safety	6.45	2.94	1-10	8.56	1.57	6-10	11	-2.28[b]	< .05	.69
	Constructive Conflict	2.00	1.27	0-3	3.09	1.58	0-5	11	-2.23[b]	< .05	.67
6.Secure Mother & Anxious Father	Coparenting	6.12	.84	4.3-7	5.43	0.95	4-6.4	11	-2.38[a]	< .05	.72
	Relationship Quality	0.26	.46	-0.67-.71	-0.1	.66	-1.62-.67	9	-2.67[a]	< .01	.89

Note. Effect sizes are reported as r (Z/√N). [a] Based on positive ranks. [b] Based on negative ranks

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. PRELIMINARY STUDIES (STUDIES 1A-2A)

5.1.1. Validation and Short Form Development

The preliminary studies of this dissertation aimed at presenting the validation of the Hungarian version of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R-HU; Dupont et al., 2022)—a reliable instrument for assessing romantic attachment—in a nationally representative adult sample (Studies 1a-1b; N = 958), as well as the development of its short form, the ECR-R-HU-SF (Dupont et al., 2024).

The original two-factor structure of the ECR-R was identified by reverse-item method factors and residual correlations (confirming Hypothesis 1a). The use of method factors contributes to the field by highlighting the problem of reverse-coded items that have caused misfits in other validation studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Lubiewska et al., 2016; Rotaru & Rusu, 2013). Both subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) demonstrated high reliability and adequate temporal stability. The only significant demographic association with the ECR-R-HU subscales was by partnership status. *Being in a relationship was associated with lower scores on both subscales (15% lower for Avoidance and 19% lower for Anxiety), indicating more secure attachment (confirming Hypothesis 1b).* This finding is consistent with previous literature using the ECR-R (e.g., Busonera et al., 2014; Chopik et al., 2013; Favez et al., 2016). However, it remains unclear whether this association reflects pre-existing characteristics of individuals who enter committed romantic relationships or whether attachment security develops in conjunction with relational commitment. *The subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety) also showed adequate convergent validity: both subscales were positively correlated with family functioning problems, depressed mood and perceived stress and negatively with well-being (confirming Hypothesis 1c)*. Based on the above, the ECR-R-HU demonstrates good psychometric properties and is a valid and reliable tool for assessing adult romantic attachment. It is recommended for use by Hungarian researchers and clinicians and can be regarded as a part of the growing body of international adaptations that have similarly demonstrated the instrument's reliability and validity.

The short-form (ECR-R-HU-SF) was developed to establish a valid and reliable time-efficient tool to assess adult romantic attachment in research (e.g., large multivariate

studies) and in the applied field (e.g., screening and measuring therapeutic outcomes). The development, data reduction and item selection were performed in the same Hungarian nationally representative sample (N = 958) that was used for validating the long version. Subsequent testing and validation were conducted in an independent, sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers raising young children (N = 953).

The item selection process was guided by both statistical and theoretical considerations (factor loadings, avoidance of redundancy and coverage of content dimensions). The resulting eight-item short form—comprising four Avoidance and four Anxiety items—confirmed the original two-factor structure of the ECR-R, with the underlying dimensions of attachment-related Avoidance and Anxiety. It is worth noting that cross-cultural comparability remains a challenge, as existing short forms vary in both length and item content.

Psychometric analyses of the ECR-R-HU-SF conducted in both Studies 1b and 2a—the nationally representative adult sample and the sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers—confirmed the high validity and reliability of the instrument (confirming Hypotheses 2a–2d). Specifically: (1) Studies 1b and 2a supported the theoretically expected two-factor structure of the 8-item ECR-R-HU-SF. (2) Both subscales displayed high internal consistencies (Cronbach's alphas above .81 in both studies). (3) The subscales of the 8-item version correlated strongly with those of the full 36-item version, indicating that despite its brevity, the short form could capture the core constructs (approximately 80% shared variance). (4) Study 1b further demonstrated high temporal stability.

Additional statistical parameters were consistent with theoretical expectations. In both studies, the subscales followed non-normal distributions, with skewness toward more secure attachment scores, as anticipated. A moderate correlation between the two subscales was observed in both studies, supporting the notion that they represent related but distinct constructs (Cameron, Finnegan, & Morry, 2012).

Taken together, these findings indicate that the ECR-R-HU-SF is a highly valid and reliable measure, joining the growing body of international ECR-R short form adaptations. It is recommended for use by Hungarian researchers in multivariate studies and by practitioners as a brief screening or intervention efficacy assessment tool.

5.1.2. Descriptives and Risk Thresholds

Descriptives. Both ECR-R-HU-SF subscales in both samples—the representative adult sample and the sample of mothers raising young children—exhibited a strong positive skew consistent with expectations indicating a higher prevalence of secure attachment across samples, presented in Table 4 (Magai et al., 2026).

The mean scores of the ECR-R-HU and the ECR-R-HU-SF both fall in mid-range—showing that Hungarian respondents show comparable attachment patterns to other populations—when compared with results of prior studies using the full 36-item version of the ECR-R and its short versions (e.g., Brenk-Franz et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2011; Lubiewska et al., 2016; Rotaru & Rusu, 2013; Wongpakaran & Wongpakaran, 2012).

An interesting trend emerged regarding the mean scores of Avoidance and Anxiety in the sample of mothers raising young children (Study 2a). Mean scores of both attachment subscales were *lower*—9% lower for Avoidance and 21% lower for Anxiety—than those observed in the representative adult sample of Study 1b. These lower scores may reflect shifts in attachment representations that occur during major life transitions (Bowlby, 1969/82; Simpson et al., 2003) or may be related to individual characteristics specific to mothers raising young children (e.g., desire to have children; Rholes et al., 1997). Although these two samples cannot be directly compared statistically, the observed tendency toward greater attachment security among mothers raising young children is noteworthy and warrants further investigation.

Risk Thresholds. It is a uniqueness of the present work to report risk thresholds of Avoidance and Anxiety—the two dimensions of adult attachment. These attachment-based thresholds may have potential utility in clinical contexts, as they could identify individuals who are more vulnerable to difficulties in relational functioning and well-being. To my knowledge, no published studies have yet provided empirically derived cutoff scores for attachment measures based on continuous scales of attachment representations. Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2022) refer to an unpublished work and suggest that the ECR could be useful in assisting clinicians in case assessment.

Using the nationally representative adult sample, risk thresholds were identified for both the full 36-item ECR-R-HU and the short form (ECR-R-HU-SF). Thresholds for both subscales of the short form were comparable to or higher than those obtained with

the full version, indicating that the short form is a reliable tool for screening (Dupont et al., 2025). *Respondents in both risk groups (based on 75th and 90th percentile cut-offs) reported significantly lower levels of well-being, and significantly higher levels of family functioning problems, depressive mood and perceived stress (confirming Hypothesis 3).*

5.2. MOTHERS RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN (STUDY 2B)

5.2.1. Descriptives and Associations with Sociodemographic Background Data

Descriptives. Both ECR-R-HU-SF subscales followed a strong positive skew reflecting the evolutionary trend toward greater security (Magai et al., 2016). As expected, mean scores of ECR-R-HU-SF subscales of mothers in a relationship with the father of their child (Study 2b) were even lower than in the more heterogenous maternal sample.

Likewise, the measures of relationship functioning (assessed among mothers raising young children were also strongly skewed toward more favorable outcomes (depending on the direction of the scale). Theoretically, the tendency to report favorable outcomes may reflect a motivation for social desirability (Morsbach & Prinz, 2006), yet clinical intuition suggests that it may reflect a form of psychological buffering, serving to sustain emotional stability during the transition to parenthood and among mothers raising young children. By maintaining a positively biased perception of their relationship—an emotional cocoon—mothers preserve a sense of security that protects the parental bond, which in turn, supports the infant's well-being. In this sense, this process is a postnatal analogue to emotional cushioning in pregnancy (Côté-Arsénault & Donato, 2011). In the present conceptualization it serves to protect against the potential deterioration of the fragile emotional equilibrium within the family system—instead of defending against the possible loss of the child. This concept is a hypothetical interpretation and warrants further investigation.

Associations with Sociodemographic Background Data. Associations between sociodemographic background variables and attachment dimensions were consistent with expectations. A composite demographic risk index was created by aggregating relevant risk factors: maternal age (below 20 or above 40), education level (maximum vocational school), type of residence (living in a village), number of children in the household (more than four), financial situation (living with financial difficulties). *Both attachment*

dimensions were weakly and significantly correlated with the demographic risk index (Avoidance: ρ = .24; p < .001 and Anxiety: ρ = .14; p < .001), suggesting that higher demographic risk is associated with higher levels of attachment insecurity (conforming Hypothesis 4). It is plausible that if high-risk mothers were more represented in the sample, the strength of these associations would be higher. These results contribute to the understanding of associations between attachment representations and sociodemographic variables, an understudied area of attachment research, and align with prior research indicating that economic instability is associated with poorer well-being (Perry-Jenkins & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2019).

Findings with specific sociodemographic variables were generally consistent with those obtained with the demographic risk index. A few noteworthy findings are highlighted below. Regarding maternal age, younger mothers (in their 20s) reported significantly higher levels of Anxiety than mothers in their 30s, consistent with Chopik et al. (2013), who observed that levels of anxiety tended to be highest among younger adults, while age-related differences for avoidance were less pronounced..

Primiparous mothers had significantly higher scores on both attachment dimensions than mothers with two or three children, but not compared with mothers of four or more children. When investigating the associations between the number of children on a continuous variable and attachment dimensions, Avoidance was unrelated and Anxiety showed a weak negative correlation. The more children mothers had, the less attachment related anxiety they reported. To my knowledge, little research has examined the relationship between attachment dimensions and the number of children in the household. The present finding aligns with theoretical expectations regarding attachment anxiety: mothers with lower levels of attachment anxiety are more likely to trust that their partners will provide support in times of need—which may encourage their decision to have additional children—a topic that warrants further investigation.

The present research found no significant differences in attachment between married and cohabiting mothers. These results are not consistent with a previous finding indicating lower levels of attachment related Avoidance and Anxiety in married mothers than cohabiting mothers (Jurič, 2011); however, findings in the literature have been mixed regarding cohabitation (Blekesaune, 2018; Mortensen et al., 2012; Stafford et al., 2004). Cross-cultural findings have shown that larger drops in relationship satisfaction across

the TtP for cohabitors is restricted to countries in which there is a strong social norm that proscribes childbearing in cohabiting unions (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). The present research supports that in Hungary there are no underlying differences in attachment dimensions between cohabiting and married mothers.

The number of years that mothers spent in a relationship with the child's father was also negligible to weakly correlated with both attachment dimensions. It appears that in a more homogenous sample of mothers that are raising children and cohabiting with the father of their child—which reflects a certain commitment in the romantic bond— the duration of the relationship is not associated with attachment dimensions.

The observed sociodemographic associations with attachment dimensions underscore that mothers raising young children constitute a distinct population at a specific life state meriting focused investigation.

5.2.2. Attachment Profiles Based on Risk Thresholds

It appeared meaningful to identify separate risk thresholds for the special sample of mothers (Study 2a) raising young children, as our data in a large, sociodemographically diverse sample of mothers raising young children, showed a tendency toward more secure attachment as described above (Table 8 in the *Results* section summarizes risk thresholds).

Based on the 75th percentile risk thresholds for both subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety), mothers were divided into four high- and low-risk attachment profile groups (secure, avoidant, anxious, disorganized), to examine differences in their relational correlates. These labels should be interpreted with caution, as they do not represent categorical attachment classifications such as the SSP, AAI or RQ (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 199; Main et al., 1985).

The use of cutoffs scores for conceptualizing attachment profiles is novel since Brennan et al. (1998) proposed that categorization is unnecessary when dimensional measures are available. The present conceptualization does not "classify" individuals, yet enables clinically relevant comparisons between high- and low-risk attachment groups derived from continuous attachment scales. It also aligns with previous research (Brennan et al., 1998; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2022), which, using different statistical methods, demonstrated that continuous ECR subscale scores fit into a four-profile solution—secure, preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful.

The distributions of different attachment styles in the present study are presented in Table 16 and align with prior research regarding secure attachment (confirming Hypothesis 5). 60% of mothers were classified as securely attached, which falls within the range of 55-65% typically reported in general adult samples (Magai et al., 2016). Notably, applying the 75th percentile threshold to the two continuous ECR-R-HU-SF subscale scores, yielded a proportion of securely attached individuals comparable to that obtained using categorical measures. This convergence suggests that the selected threshold creates clinically relevant distributions consistent with previous categorical classifications.

In the present data, the distribution of avoidant and anxious attachment were identical (12%), which only slightly diverges from earlier findings that indicate a somewhat larger proportion of adults with avoidant or dismissing attachment (22-30%) compared to anxious or preoccupied attachment (15-20%) (see Table 16). One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that the present study relied on an all-female sample, whereas meta-analytic evidence suggests that men tend to report higher levels of attachment-related avoidance and lower levels of attachment-related anxiety than women (Del Giudice, 2011). Although the observed sex differences were small and the representative community sample in Hungary (Studies 1a and 1b) found no gender differences in attachment (Dupont et al., 2022; 2024), a slight shift in proportions may reflect the specific characteristics of this sample. The proportion of disorganized attachment observed in the present research (16%) is also comparable to the prevalence of disorganization reported across various samples using different assessment methods (15-21%), presented in Table 16. Notably, the distribution of attachment profiles in the present research shows closer alignment with typically reported patterns than those reported by Vaillancourt et al. (2022) using the ECR.

Table 16

Distribution of attachment categories in various samples

SSP adaptations	Deneault et al., 2023	meta-analysis (children)	Secure	Avoidant	Ambivalent	Disorganized
			62%	15%	9%	15%
AAI	Van Ijzendoorn/ Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996	meta-analysis	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Unresolved
			56%	16%	10%	18%
RQ	Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991	university sample	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Fearful
			47%	18%	14%	21%

Adult attachment styles (before continuous dimensions)	Magai et al., 2016	Review of multiple adult samples	Secure	Avoidant[1]	Anxious[2]	-
			55-65%	22-30%	15-20%	-
ECR-12	Vaillancourt et al., 2022	community sample	Secure 34.5%	Dismissive 7.6%	Preoccupied 41.8%	Fearful 16.2%
ECR-R-HU-SF	Dupont, 2025 (the current dissertation)	mothers raising young children	Secure	Avoidant	Anxious	Disorganized
			65%	12%	12%	16%

Note. [1]Refers to either avoidant or dismissing attachment styles. [2]Refers to either anxious, ambivalent or preoccupied attachment styles.

5.2.3. Comparing Mothers Based on Attachment Risk Thresholds

The following sections examine how mothers' attachment representations shape their relational functioning. Although the focus is on individuals' attachment orientations, it is important to recognize that the individual represents only one component of a broader, dynamic systemic context. Accordingly, references to "outcomes" reflect the methodological constraints of cross-sectional research designs and should also be interpreted within a systemic framework, in which such outcomes are understood as emergent expressions of ongoing relational processes, open to change.

Attachment Security. *Comparisons of the four different attachment-based maternal risk groups (secure, avoidant, anxious, disorganized) consistently showed that attachment security was closely related to the best relational outcomes (relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution, coparenting, and relationship quality) and the most constructive and least destructive conflict resolution patterns (confirming Hypothesis 6).* Notably, they engaged in significantly less attacking conflict resolution and escalation to physical violence than *all* three other groups, consistent with existing findings on the protective factor of secure attachment (Conradi et al., 2021; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a). However, certain indicators of conflict—conflict frequency and avoidant conflict resolution—did not differentiate them significantly from avoidant and anxious mothers (discussed below in *Conflict Behavior*).

High Levels of Avoidance and Anxiety. *Disorganized mothers* occupied the other end of the continuum, with significantly lower relational outcomes—lower perceived emotional support, felt partnership security, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with workload distribution, coparenting and overall relationship quality—as well as greater relationship instability and higher rates of escalation to physical violence than the other three attachment groups. These results align with prior research linking

disorganized attachment in adulthood to significant impairments in interpersonal functioning (Beeney et al., 2017) and to a higher likelihood of abusive relationship behavior (Rholes et al., 2016). Notably, Conradi et al. (2021) reported that simultaneous attachment avoidance and anxiety do not exert multiplicative effects on relationship satisfaction and instability beyond their individual contributions. In contrast, the present findings suggest that mothers with concurrent high attachment anxiety and avoidance form a distinct high-risk group in terms of interpersonal functioning.

Attachment Related Avoidance. *Avoidant mothers* constituted a medium-risk group as they consistently reported significantly worse relational outcomes than secure mothers, but significantly better outcomes than the disorganized group of mothers. At the same time, it is noteworthy, that their relationships were almost as stable as of secure mothers. In other words, the present work suggests that avoidant mothers experience seemingly stable but less satisfying relationships. Consistent with the present findings, prior literature has also shown that avoidance has the strongest negative impact on relationship satisfaction (Conradi et al., 2021) with a progressive erosion of connectedness due to deactivating attachment strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a).

Attachment Related Anxiety. *Anxious mothers* also constituted a medium-risk group: their relational outcomes were generally worse than those of secure mothers and better than those of the disorganized group. On some indicators—specifically perceived partner support and felt partnership security—differences from secure mothers did not reach statistical significance. A plausible explanation is the strong positive skew of these measures—potentially reflecting a form of emotional cushioning (see above)—which reduced variability and the power to detect between-group differences. One factor that heightens vulnerability among anxious mothers is maternal gatekeeping: highly anxious mothers tend to close the gate and restrict fathers' involvement, thereby reinforcing their negative expectations of attachment figures (Aytac & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2023). This aligns with their lower perceptions of partner support and declines in marital satisfaction across the TtP (Simpson, 2002). In the present research, anxious mothers reported greater relationship instability than secure *and* avoidant mothers, suggesting that although their overall relationship quality may be similar to that of avoidant mothers, they experience and report more volatility in their relationships.

Conflict behavior. Certain indicators of conflict did not differentiate between all four attachment profiles. *Conflict frequency* was one of these and only distinguished secure mothers from disorganized mothers. Correlation analyses supported these results, with perceived levels of conflict frequency showing no association with Anxiety and only a very weak positive association with Avoidance.

It is widely recognized that relationship conflict occurs in most couple relationships, but it appears that the frequency of conflict is not necessarily associated with higher levels of insecure attachment—in the present study, only mothers with high levels of *both* avoidance and anxiety (disorganized) reported significantly more frequent conflict than secure mothers. Prior research has essentially focused on conflict resolution styles rather than conflict frequency (e.g., Castellano et al., Houts et al., 2008; 2014; Rholes et al., 2014). One study that associates "perceived levels of conflict" and attachment insecurities actually measures the level of disagreement in various domains and not the frequency of conflict, causing some confusion in the literature when not read carefully (Brassard et al., 2009). Previous studies suggest that elevated levels of relationship conflict during pregnancy are associated with greater declines in relationship functioning after childbirth (Doss & Rhoades, 2016; Trillingsgaard et al., 2014), but it has not been systematically linked to higher levels of Avoidance or Anxiety. It appears that the *manner* in which individuals resolve conflicts is more closely linked to attachment styles and relationship satisfaction than the occurrence of conflict in itself.

Avoidant conflict resolution was another indicator that deserves attention. Although one might expect avoidant individuals to rely more heavily on avoidant strategies in their conflict resolution than anxious individuals (Rholes et al., 2014), the present data indicated the opposite pattern: avoidant mothers reported significantly *less avoidant* conflict behavior than anxious and disorganized mothers and did *not* differ significantly from secure mothers. In fact, anxious mothers reported the *highest levels of avoidant* conflict resolution—supported by correlation analyses which showed that avoidant conflict resolution was more related to attachment-related anxiety ($\rho = .33$, $p < .01$) than to avoidance ($\rho = .11$, $p < .01$). One interpretation is that, because anxious individuals fear abandonment or the unavailability of their partners, they are more likely to interpret conflict situations as a threat to their relationship and escalate affect (Campbell et al., 2005); however, when the tension becomes unbearable, they are more

likely to capitulate to end the threatening confrontation. Prior research suggests that avoidant individuals tend to express more hostile and defensive responses to their partners' negative emotions (Overall et al., 2015) and may show inflammatory responses to marital conflict (Gouin et al., 2009); nevertheless, in self-reports they appear more able to tolerate the tension of conflict situations than anxious and disorganized mothers without resorting to withdrawal.

5.2.4. Attachment Dimensions as Predictors of Relationship Instability

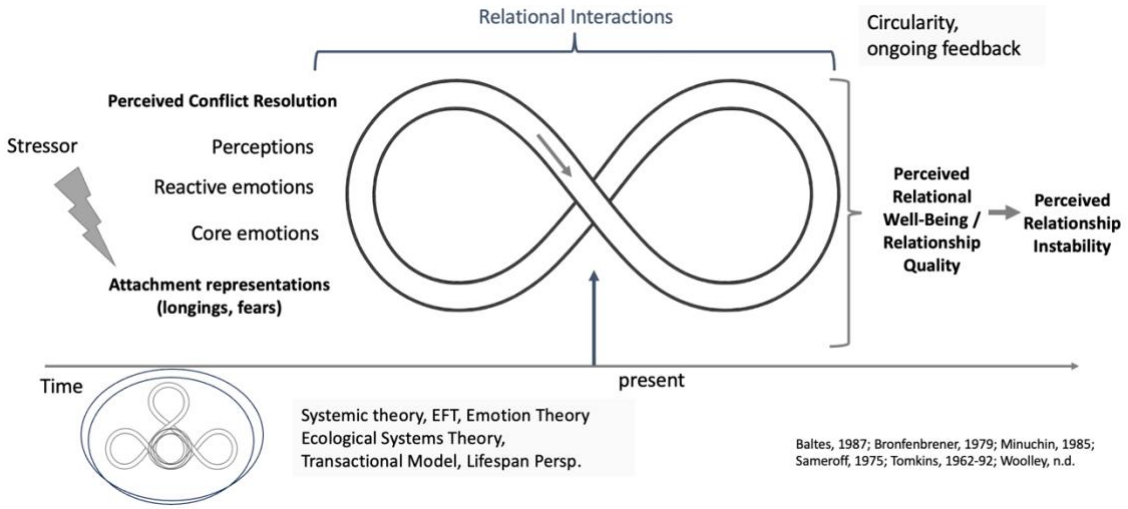
A comprehensive structural equation model of relational functioning for mothers of young children was developed, titled *Attachment Dimensions as Predictors of Relationship Instability: The Mediating Roles of Conflict Resolution and Relationship Quality*. In this theoretically driven model, *individuals' attachment representations significantly predicted relationship instability via conflict resolution and relationship quality* (*confirming Hypothesis 7*). Attachment dimensions were also directly correlated with relationship instability; however, the model laid out how the indirect pathway via conflict resolution and relationship quality was even stronger. The weak negative significant link between avoidance and relationship instability highlights how avoidant individuals may maintain relationships that are unsatisfying but relatively stable.

The model aligns with prior findings suggesting that conflict behaviors mediate the associations between attachment dimensions and relationship quality (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Mikulincer, 2016). Frequency of conflict was excluded from the model based on high modification indices, further supported by correlation analyses showing very weak to no associations with attachment dimensions.

The proposed SEM (Figure 6 in *Results*) aims to not only extend the relational well-being aspect of the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process model, as shown in Table 1 (Simpson & Rholes, 2012), but has been placed within a more integrative complex systemic framework.

To achieve this, I developed a theoretical model in line with the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model integrating additionally several fundamental systemic approaches presented in the introduction. This newly developed *Systemic Dynamic Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model* (see Figure 17) is grounded in the negative interactional cycle, which captures ongoing circular feedback processes between romantic partners in Emotionally Focused Therapy and was developed by Scott Woolley

(Furrow et al., 2022). The model further integrates key elements from systemic theory (Minuchin, 1985), emotion theory (Tomkins, 1962-92), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the transactional model (Sameroff, 1975), and the lifespan perspective (Baltes, 1987). It depicts how stress activates attachment representations, setting a whole dynamic system into motion, with its circularity and ongoing feedback loops. It shows that the measured constructs are a part of a much larger, more comprehensive framework, involving more elements (e.g., the partner, core and reactive emotions, perceptions) and are influenced by other environmental systems, which are all evolving and open to change in time.



Note. Bold elements are measured constructs of the final SEM model.

Figure 17

Systemic Dynamic Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model: Attachment Dimensions and Drivers od Relationship Instability

Statistical models show "dependent" and "outcome" variables, but it is important to see the full picture. This model provides researchers and clinicians with a comprehensive map of key elements of relational functioning among mothers raising young children and shows how attachment representations are drivers of relational functioning within a complex dynamic system. It offers insight into how mothers in attachment-based risk groups (avoidant, anxious, disorganized) report lower outcomes on relational functioning and more instable relationships.

5.3. PATTERNS OF ADULT ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT IN PARENTAL DYADS (STUDY 2C): A PILOT STUDY

Given the relatively small subsample sizes, findings from the dyadic sample should be interpreted with caution. Accordingly, these results are best regarded as preliminary, serving as a pilot study that illustrates emerging trends and a methodological approach that may be useful for clinicians working with couples. Replication with larger samples is necessary to confirm the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

5.3.1. Attachment Pairings among Parents Raising Young Children

One of the aims was to examine attachment pairings in enduring relationships among parents raising young children—a topic that has been scarcely investigated in long-term parental relationships. Research on attachment constellations is indeed rare even in general samples as literature has shifted toward dimensional conceptualizations of attachment styles to capture full variability (Booth-LaForce & Roisman, 2014). Recent dyadic research typically employs the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (e.g., Conradi et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2021) to investigate actor and partner effects, or polynomial regression to assess the effects of congruence and discrepancy in attachment (Wang et al., 2023). In contrast, the present study focuses on creating distinct attachment pairing clusters based on the continuous ECR-R-HU-SF scales, incorporating risk thresholds to examine whether certain dyadic constellations represent risk factors for relational functioning and conflict behavior. The Systemic Dynamic Attachment Diathesis Stress Process Model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding systemic nature of relational functioning.

Cluster analyses yielded six different attachment pairings in the dyadic sample: (1) disorganized-disorganized; (2) secure mother and avoidant father; (3) avoidant-avoidant; (4) secure-secure; (5) anxious mother and secure father; (6) secure mother and anxious father (consistent with Hypothesis 8, but with certain missing constellations). Clusters 1 and 3 were consistent with the similarity hypotheses and Clusters 2, 5, and 6 were in line with the security hypotheses. The secure-secure pairing (4) was concordant with both hypotheses. No a priori hypotheses were formulated for pairings involving disorganization due to gaps in the literature. *Notably, avoidant-anxious and anxious-*

anxious pairings were absent in this sample of enduring parental relationships (contradicting Hypothesis 8).

Why might anxious-anxious and avoidant-anxious constellations be missing, while there is a relatively large proportion of disorganized-disorganized couples (10%)? Theory and evidence suggest that partners in anxious-anxious pairings both use hyperactivation as a means of regulating distress, resulting in quickly escalating conflict situations, blaming, and controlling behavior (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Feeney, 2003). It appears that this emotion-focused coping tends not to resolve problems making adjustment throughout the TtP and in early childrearing years more difficult. Certain authors suggest that when anxious individuals do not fully adjust to new roles, parenthood may be a critical point in which marriages start to deteriorate (Rholes et al., 2014). Conversely, certain studies argue that couples with both partners high in anxiety could actually maintain relatively satisfying relationships—their samples however comprised dating or married university samples, rather than enduring parental unions, limiting generalizability (Rodriguez et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

The absence of the avoidant-anxious pairing may be even more surprising, as the demand-withdraw pattern is common among couples seeking therapy (Conradi et al., 2021) and has been associated with avoidant and anxious attachment representations. There is evidence that this attachment combination is relatively stable over time but especially dissatisfying for both individuals (Johnson, 2019; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 2021). The absence of this specific attachment pairing does not imply the absence of this communication pattern in the sample. Research has actually suggested that it is enough for the presence of one insecurely attached partner to provoke the demand-withdraw communication pattern (Millwood & Waltz, 2008). Mismatched attachment styles represent mismatched preferences for emotional intimacy and act as risk factors for the dysfunctional demand-withdraw communication pattern to evolve (Millwood & Waltz, 2008). Based on these findings, this common form of communication could very likely emerge among anxious mothers and secure fathers (5), secure mothers and avoidant fathers (2), or secure mothers and anxious fathers (6), or even among similar attachment style pairings, as there is often a difference in the level of security/insecurity between partners. Nonetheless, in the present study, among long-lasting relationships in parents raising young children, the anxious-avoidant attachment

pairing was absent, suggesting the unlikelihood of this constellation to endure in long-term relationships in which partners forge their relationships even further by deciding to have children together.

Given, this is only a pilot investigation, it is possible that in a larger sample of parents raising young children, the proportions of constellations would differ and that currently missing constellations may emerge. Research on attachment pairings remains limited, and to my knowledge, no prior studies have reported information concerning the distribution of specific attachment constellations. The present study of parents raising young children indicate that *half* (50%) of the couples were secure-secure, a pattern consistent with evolutionary expectations and cross-cultural findings (Magai et al., 2016). This present research suggests that most securely attached individuals choose accordingly secure partners. Approximately one-third (33%) of the parents represented secure-insecure constellations – among which the secure mother-avoidant father constellation was the most frequent – while insecure-insecure pairings were the least common (17%). Overall, these distributions align with evolutionary perspectives proposing that individuals are inclined to form close relationships with partners who can provide relatively stable and satisfying relationships.

5.3.2. Attachment Pairings: Differences in Parental Functioning

Despite extensive research, the effects of attachment similarity and dissimilarity on relationship functioning remain unclear due to inconsistent findings (Wang et al., 2023). Although more than a decade has passed since Simpson and Howland (2012) emphasized the importance of incorporating both partners into attachment research, key questions remain unresolved—such as whether certain attachment pairings are more or less conducive to relationship stability and quality. A uniqueness of the present research is the comparison of different high- and low-risk attachment pairings and their associations with relationship functioning and conflict behavior, assessed using the continuous ECR-R-HU-SF scales. Analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers to examine potential differences across attachment pairings within each parent group.

Before discussing the specific characteristics of different attachment pairings, several noteworthy non-significant findings should be highlighted. First, conflict frequency did not differ across the attachment constellations for either mothers or

fathers—aligning with findings in the maternal sample (Study 2b). This pattern suggests that the occurrence of relationship conflict is a normative feature of close relationships—especially in a period of normative crises—and is not in itself an index of better or worse functioning. Prior work shows general increases in relationship conflict after childbirth compared with pre-pregnancy levels and nonparents (eg., Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), likely reflecting the added strain of the TtP and early childrearing. The same study also found that higher prenatal relationship satisfaction was associated with greater increases in conflict frequency postnatally (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), consistent with the idea that well-functioning couples may have more capacity for conflict, and perceive less danger in it. The present cross-sectional study supports this idea by showing that mothers and fathers in high- and low-risk attachment pairings may report very similar levels of conflict—the main difference is in the kind of conflict resolution that they adopt, in particular attacking behaviors and escalation to physical violence.

Second, levels of avoidant conflict resolution did not differ across constellations, for either mother or fathers. This result contradicts Rholes et al. (2014), who reported that highly avoidant mothers and fathers use more avoidance-capitulation across the TtP. In the present study, this tendency was not observed. Correlation analyses actually showed that avoidant conflict resolution was associated with attachment-related anxiety and unrelated to avoidance.

The literature suggests that differences between avoidant and anxious individuals are relatively rare in terms of conflict behavior and are overshadowed by the secure-insecure contrast (Mikulincer, 2016). The present study suggests that avoidant conflict is not a unique particularity of insecure individuals—even secure mothers and fathers in secure-secure pairings engage in avoidant conflict resolution. In certain highly stressful situations when individuals may need time to think through issues, between attacking behavior and withdrawing, the latter appears to be more functional, used also by securely attached partners.

Mothers and Fathers in Secure-Secure Attachment Pairings

Mothers and fathers in secure-secure couples were hypothesized to represent the lowest-risk constellation (Hypothesis 9a). Consistent with this hypothesis and with prior research indicating that secure individuals tend to respond more constructively to conflict (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017) and show greater resilience in stressful situations

(Mikulincer, 2016), the present findings confirmed that *secure mothers and fathers paired with secure partners, indeed demonstrated the most favorable outcomes in relational functioning and conflict behavior.*

Mothers and Fathers in Disorganized-Disorganized Attachment Pairings

A striking finding of the present study was that the previously unexamined disorganized-disorganized constellation—10% of the dyadic sample—with mothers and fathers scoring high on both attachment related anxiety and avoidance emerged as the highest-risk constellation with the poorest relational outcomes (confirming Hypothesis 9a). This aligns with evidence that disorganization in adulthood is associated with substantial impairments in interpersonal functioning (Beeney et al., 2017). For example, both mothers and fathers in disorganized-disorganized constellations reported the *highest levels of escalation to physical violence*, consistent with prior work linking disorganization to greater anger and more aggressive behavior toward one's partner in both men and women (Simpson & Rholes, 2019). Literature has also associated one's own avoidance and a partner's avoidance and anxiety in perpetrations of physical assault (Sommer et al., 2017).

Conceptually, disorganization in adulthood has been framed as a mixed strategy characterized by elevated scores on both dimensions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pollard et al., 2023; Simpson & Rholes, 2002). Its effects, however, have not been examined to my knowledge using continuous scales such as the ECR-R. The present pilot study illustrates a trend how interpersonal difficulties appear amplified at the dyadic level when both partners report high scores on both attachment dimensions.

Mothers and Fathers in Avoidant-Avoidant Attachment Pairings

As it was expected that all insecure-insecure pairings would have significantly worse relational functioning outcomes than secure-secure pairings (Hypothesis 9b), avoidant-avoidant couples should have reported significantly worse outcomes as well. *Findings regarding mothers and fathers in avoidant-avoidant pairings do not confirm the expectation of Hypothesis 9b, although they align with it tendentially: these mothers and fathers had worse scores on all of the measured relational functioning constructs but these differences were statistically not significant.* Their outcomes were also better but without any statistical significance than for mothers and fathers in the disorganized-disorganized pairings. The absence of statistical power is due to the positive skew,

relatively low distribution of the measures, and the sample size. Nonetheless, this finding is consistent with literature indicating that there is little evidence suggesting that avoidant-avoidant couples may function poorly (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a). Their matching internal models do not push them into unwanted intimacy, which could be satisfying in the short term (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Their conflict behavior supports certain resilience, as they reported more constructive conflict than the disorganized-disorganized attachment pairing, and higher scores than anxious-secure pairings, aligning with prior results indicating that highly avoidant individuals' vulnerability to emotional flooding appears to be reduced, creating space for proactive coping mechanisms during conflict (Morgan & Woodin, 2025). However, unlike securely attached individuals, mothers and fathers in avoidant-avoidant pairings do not know how to provide a safe haven for their partners to turn to and neither do they know how to turn to or rely on their partners for a safe haven in stressful situations (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bowlby, 1988). Consistent with findings that attachment similarity may predict relationship stability (Conradi et al., 2021), mothers in avoidant-avoidant pairings reported relatively stable relationships—with the second-best outcomes after the secure-secure constellation—and they differed significantly from the disorganized-disorganized pairing on this dimension.

Mothers and Fathers in Secure-Insecure Attachment Pairings

Although findings were mixed in the literature, there was an expectation in attachment pairings with at least one secure partner to show buffering effects of security reflected in relatively better outcomes in relational functioning and conflict behavior (Hypothesis 9c). *The present findings are partly consistent with this hypothesis and highlight the protective factor of security on the individual, consistent with prior research indicating the resilience of secure individuals (Mikulincer, 2016) regardless of partner attachment (Rodriguez et al., 2021). When secure mothers were paired with either anxious or avoidant fathers, they generally reported significantly better relational outcomes and more stable relationships than mothers in the disorganized-disorganized constellation.*

Findings were mixed, but consistent with prior findings (Wang et al., 2023) regarding the buffering effect of security on the *partner*: the secure-anxious constellation proved to be more vulnerable than the secure-avoidant combination. Security could buffer the avoidant partner's relationship satisfaction and overall relationship quality (secure

mother-avoidant father combination), but it had no buffering effect on the anxious partner's relational functioning (secure father-anxious mother, secure mother-anxious father).

Differences Between Mothers and Fathers Within and Across Attachment Pairings

There were no noteworthy significant differences between mothers' and fathers' responses in the full dyadic sample regarding attachment dimensions. Although mothers' mean Anxiety was higher and their Avoidance lower than fathers', these differences were non-significant, consistent with previous studies reporting no gender differences (Ehrenthal et al., 2009; Kooiman et al., 2013; Wongpakaran et al., 2011). At the same time, the differences pointed in the expected direction of other findings indicating small sex differences (Del Giudice, 2011; Gray & Dunlop, 2019).

In the full dyadic sample—and within attachment pairings—mothers and fathers generally reported similar experiences concerning relationship functioning, conflict behavior and perceived stability, as supported by preliminary correlation analyses. The only significant between-parent difference in the full dyadic sample concerned felt partnership security, with fathers reporting higher levels. This pattern was mirrored within the disorganized-disorganized pairing, where fathers also reported more constructive conflict. A further within-pairing difference emerged in the secure mother-anxious father constellation: anxious fathers rated both relationship quality and coparenting lower than their secure partners.

Overall, this convergence suggests that self-reports from either partner provide a reasonably reliable picture of couple functioning in most constellations. Even so, collecting data from both partners remains important—especially in high-risk constellations, where hyperactivating or deactivating attachment strategies may result in biased perceptions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

One of the main strengths of this dissertation is its multi-study translational measurement approach. The preliminary studies validate the ECR-R-HU and present the short form development of the ECR-R-HU-SF on a nationally representative adult sample. The *21st Century Infancy in Hungary* project provided a large, maternal sample that was nationally representative for *children's* age, gender, and type of residence—ensuring a high level of sociodemographic diversity on the maternal sample as well. It also provided a dyadic subsample, enabling the application of the newly established short form in the context of new mothers and parents. By deriving risk thresholds for both the general adult population and the maternal sample, high- and low-risk maternal attachment groups could be compared across relational functioning, conflict behavior and relationship instability. To my knowledge, this is also the first study to use the ECR-R continuous subscales as a basis for conceptualizing adult disorganized attachment in romantic relationships—individuals scoring above the risk thresholds on both Avoidance and Anxiety. A theory-driven SEM linked attachment dimensions with relationship instability via conflict resolution styles and relationship quality, extending the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model. Finally, the dyadic work of the pilot study is novel: attachment pairing clusters derived from continuous ECR-R-HU-SF subscale scores allowed estimation of the prevalence and distribution of distinct attachment pairings among parents raising young children and comparison of their relational functioning and conflict resolution styles.

A limitation of the present work is its cross-sectional study design precluding causal conclusions. Findings rely on self-reports, without observational, behavioral or physiological indices (e.g., conflict behavior could be measured in intimacy specific conflict situations), so results may be affected by the common-method variance. Several variables showed a strong skew toward better functioning, likely reducing variability and statistical power for some comparisons. It is also a limitation that some constructs were measured using single items—more commonly applied in sociology—while scales are generally preferred in psychology. Although this research used some aggregated indices and tested a network of associations, it would be advisable in the future to measure these

constructs with more comprehensive instruments. The use of 75th percentile risk thresholds was considered appropriate for differentiating attachment-based risk profiles. However, in studies with larger samples, applying a 90th percentile cutoff could allow for a clearer differentiation of high-risk mothers, potentially revealing more pronounced differences in relational functioning. In the dyadic subsample, the modest sample size (n = 122) and a low base rate of higher demographic risk possibly constrained the detection of less frequent insecure-insecure constellations. It is also important to note that the labels—secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized—used throughout the dissertation are threshold-based groupings based on continuous ECR-R-HU-S scores, not coded classifications (such as the SSP or the AAI). The present conceptualization of disorganization—simultaneous high scores on Avoidance and Anxiety—via thresholds on both attachment dimensions is also only a certain approach; cross-method validation (e.g., with AAI "unresolved") and convergent validation with other self-reports used to assess disorganization (e.g., Adult Disorganized Attachment Scale) is needed in the future. Finally, as the validation of the ECR-R-HU was conducted in Hungary, Central Europe, and its short form applied on a sample of mothers and parents raising young children, the international generalizability of results may be limited.

6.2. Practical Implications for Clinicians

The 75th percentile and 90th percentile risk thresholds on the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales provide practical reference points for clinical assessment and screening. Separate, lower thresholds for mothers of young children are especially useful for clinicians and therapists in perinatal and early parenthood settings. Mothers scoring high on both dimensions (Avoidance, Anxiety) constituted the highest-risk group, indicating a need for early, targeted intervention to prevent escalation during a highly sensitive life phase. Likewise, couples in disorganized-disorganized attachment pairings appeared the most maladaptive, forming the highest parental-risk constellation.

Routine assessment of romantic attachment—both individually and dyadically—is recommended for clinicians, especially for those working with a population of mothers or parents of young children. The comprehensive SEM indicates that attachment dimensions predict relationship instability indirectly via conflict resolution style and relationship quality. Accordingly, interventions that specifically target romantic attachment (e.g., Emotionally Focused Therapy), drivers of relationship functioning, can

foster more constructive and less destructive conflict processes, enhance relationship quality, and ultimately stabilize the relationship (Johnson, 2018).

Demand-withdraw communication patterns are often rooted in partners' differing needs for emotional closeness and autonomy and have been associated with anxious-avoidant attachment constellations, in which anxious partners seek greater intimacy, while avoidant partners prioritize independence (Conradi et al., 2021; Millwood & Waltz, 2008). Notably, the present findings suggest that avoidant conflict behavior is more strongly related to Anxiety than to Avoidance. Clinically, this finding supports how anxious partners may withdraw during couple conflict—not from a deactivation stance, but from escalating threat appraisal and affective overload (Campbell et al., 2005). When the tension becomes unbearable, they may capitulate to end the threatening confrontation—this is different from intimacy-related demand-withdraw struggles. It is important for clinicians and therapists to assess context, the function of the behavior and not to equate withdrawal in conflict with attachment avoidance.

The relatively high prevalence (10%) of disorganized-disorganized pairings (both partners score high on Avoidance and Anxiety) in the present sample of parents raising young children warrants particular attention in EFT practice. First, findings suggest the higher likelihood of escalation to physical violence, highlighting the importance of screening for intimate partner violence. Second, EFT typically maps a negative interactional cycle organized around a pursuer (anxiously attached, uses hyperactivation of the attachment system, protests against abandonment) and a withdrawer (avoidantly attached, uses deactivation of the attachment system to shut down, often fearing rejection). When both partners are high on both attachment dimensions, these cycles can become more complex, with roles switching rapidly (pursuer- withdrawer). Tracking the cycle in these cases becomes more difficult. Normalizing the relative likelihood of complex cycles in disorganized-disorganized dyads can help therapists stay oriented when tracking feels difficult. Slowing down the process, and naming moment-to-moment shifts explicitly can enhance felt security before deeper enactments (Johnson, 2019).

Assessment across the transition to parenthood (pre- and postnatally) and into the early childrearing years would create opportunities to orient couples toward either therapy or attachment-focused prevention, such as Hold Me Tight®, an emotionally focused prevention program grounded in EFT. A version tailored for expectant/new parents, such

as Hold Me Tight/Taking Root, could be especially beneficial for couples in medium- to high- risk attachment pairings. In line with the present findings, therapists are encouraged to normalize conflict frequency, center intervention on core attachment needs, and cultivate a safe haven in which partners can reach out to one another. From an attachment lens, clinicians can foster constructive conflict resolution (e.g., de-escalation, attention to internal/interpersonal experience, reaching out, responsiveness), thereby enhancing relationship quality and promoting relationship stability during this rite of passage into parenthood.

6.3. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future work should broaden the scope of outcomes by examining how attachment dimensions and relational functioning relate to personal well-being indices—such as depressive mood, perceived stress, subjective well-being, sexual well-being—to extend the present findings into the domain of personal adjustment.

In the future, researchers should rely on more comprehensive instruments with scales instead of single-item questions, and mixed-methods, such as combining self-reports with clinical interviews, or observational methods. Researchers are also encouraged to use larger samples of parents raising young children to investigate dyadic attachment constellations with sufficient power to eventually detect pairings that were absent in the present research (e.g., anxious-anxious, avoidant-anxious), as well as conducting research on samples in different life phases for comparability. Replicating the continuous, ECR-R based pairing approach in broader contexts and across cultures would refine and further clarify distributional patterns.

A further priority is to test the convergent validity of the present, continuous risk-threshold-based disorganized conceptualization of adult attachment (simultaneously high Anxiety and Avoidance) against other self-report measures of adult disorganized attachment (e.g., the Adult Disorganized Attachment Scale, (Paetzold et al., 2015), and against interview-based indices (AAI, “unresolved”).

Clinicians are recommended to test the predictive value of screening with the ECR-R-HU-SF and to conduct therapeutic outcome studies based on ECR-R-HU-SF scores.

Finally, the present structural equation model in which attachment dimensions are predictors of relationship instability via conflict resolution and relationship quality could

be extended to dyadic modelling (e.g., APIM – SEM) to estimate actor and partner effects and test whether indirect pathways to relationship instability are invariant across attachment pairings.

7. SUMMARY

The ECR-R-HU was validated on a representative community sample and demonstrated solid psychometric properties. Its brief version, the ECR-R-HU-SF, was developed on the same representative sample and tested in an independent, large sample of mothers raising young children; the short form showed comparably strong reliability and validity.

Based on the 75th percentile risk thresholds of the ECR-R-HU-SF subscales (Avoidance and Anxiety), mothers were grouped into four attachment risk groups (Secure, Avoidant, Anxious, Disorganized). Secure mothers exhibited the best outcomes in relational functioning: e.g., the highest overall relationship quality, and constructive conflict, and the lowest levels of relational instability, attacking conflict behavior and escalation to physical violence. Disorganized mothers (high scores on both subscales) distinctly formed the highest risk constellation with the poorest outcomes across all indices. Mothers in Avoidant and Anxious groups showed intermediate-risk.

A theory-driven SEM linked mothers' attachment dimensions to relationship instability primarily indirectly via conflict resolution styles and relationship quality. This novel comprehensive model of relational functioning is consistent with, and extends the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model.

In the parental dyadic subsample, attachment pairing clusters were derived from continuous ECR-R-HU-SF subscale scores. Secure-secure pairings were most prevalent (50%), consistent with the adaptiveness of security and certain partner preference hypotheses (similarity, security hypothesis). Attachment pairings were differentiated by relational functioning, conflict resolution styles, relationship stability, but not by conflict frequency and avoidant conflict resolution. Consistent with expectations, mothers and fathers in secure-secure pairings showed the best relational functioning, the lowest levels of relationship instability, high levels of constructive conflict and the lowest levels of destructive conflict resolution. Mothers and fathers in disorganized-disorganized attachment pairings (10%) constituted the highest risk constellation, while mothers and fathers in avoidant-avoidant pairings were relatively stable. Security showed selective buffering effects in secure-insecure constellations for both mothers and fathers. Finally, mother-father reports largely converged, with very few discrepancies suggesting that self-reports from either partner provide a reasonably reliable picture of couple functioning.

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