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GENDER GAP IN EMOTION WORK, AND RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE: APPLYING THE LENS OF ATTACHMENT

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GENDER GAP IN EMOTION WORK, AND RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE: APPLYING
THE LENS OF ATTACHMENT

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ABSTRACT

Emotion work and relationship maintenance behaviors are known to improve relationship quality. Previous studies have revealed gender differences in both emotion work and relationship maintenance behaviors. This quantitative study aims to explore the gender gap seen in emotion work through measuring relationship maintenance behavior and additionally explore if the role of attachment moderates gender differences. It was hypothesized that relationship maintenance strategies will be gendered, additionally insecure attachment will be gendered, and there will be an interaction between gender and attachment in predicting relationship maintenance scores. Results indicate women predict higher relationship maintenance scores. Insecure attachment was not found to be gendered, however there was a small interaction between attachment and gender indicating women high in anxious attachment score higher in relationship maintenance compared to men high in anxious attachment. Research efforts have focused on understanding predictors of relationship quality relationships because fostering healthy relationships are known to improve life outcomes.

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Gender, Relationship Maintenance, and Attachment

Research has set out to better understand how emotion work and relationship maintenance contribute to the quality of a romantic relationship. Emotion work is known as any action that uplifts the well-being of another (Curran, 2015). Relationship maintenance, a more specific concept within the broad definition of emotion work, are the actions and efforts to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition. Communication approaches such as offering assurances or self-disclosure, or direct action such as shared tasks, are a few examples of relationship maintenance behaviors that are intended to keep a romantic relationship in satisfactory condition or repair (Ogolsky, 2023). Studies have revealed several gendered results in both emotion work and relationship maintenance (Legkauskas & Pazionite, 2018; Curran, 2015). However, research exploring the facet of gender alone have been mixed. This leaves ample room for further understanding and examination.

Gender is a powerful social construct that can influence social functioning. Gender role, or the socially expected behavior based on gender, can impact important social variables such as communication and perception (Kirtley & Weaver, 1999). Gender is influential in how an individual functions within social contexts, and within romantic relationships. It can impact relationship communication, perceptions, and interactions. The influence gender has on relational functioning can also be seen in relationship maintenance strategies, as relationship maintenance behaviors are composed of communication, and interactions made to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition. For example, one study found relationship satisfaction was predicted in women by receiving numerous relationship maintenance behaviors from their partners such as perceived assurances, understanding, positivity, self-disclosure (Legkauskas & Pazionite, 2018). In total these dimensions accounted for 40% of variance. By contrast, men's relationship

satisfaction was predicted by one sole relationship maintenance behavior from their partner: their partner's perceived positivity, which accounted for 51.6% of variance. These findings exemplify how gender differences influence different relational maintenance strategies. Another study further illustrated that structural differences in marital quality have been observed to be gendered, these differences exist in the structure of relationship maintenance behaviors and also in genetic-environmental influences (Beam et al, 2018). Findings indicate structural differences in relationship maintenance behaviors are such that overall marital satisfaction in women correlated with decision making, whereas decision making correlated with the relational adjustment process, not satisfaction, in men. This may suggest women's perception of marital quality may depend more strongly on the quality of marital interactions, interactions like decision making, more than men's perceptions of marital quality. It may further suggest women evaluate relationship maintenance behaviors differently than men. Gendered communication patterns also emerged, findings indicate collaborative problem-solving correlated with women's satisfaction but not men's satisfaction (Beam et al, 2018). This finding aligns with the suggestion women may depend more heavily on marital interactions to evaluate marital quality or satisfaction than men do. These conclusions collectively demonstrate how gender can influence differences in perception and communication within relationship maintenance behaviors.

Emotion work, known as the actions that lift up or enhance the well-being of another (Umberson, 2020), is comprised of social behaviors that can be influenced by gender. Emotion work research has revealed gender differences, running parallel to gendered results seen in relationship maintenance behavior. A recent study concluded emotion work appears to adversely affect emotion worker's own psychological well-being if their spouse has elevated depressive symptoms and when one's spouse is a man, whether in a same-gender or different-gender

relationship (Umberson, 2020). Authors suggest these results point to possible gendered relationship dynamics. Another study in emotion work revealed that gender differences were most substantial and significant in volatility. Volatility describes daily fluctuations in relationship quality across a week, according to self report by actor (Curran, 2015). For example, high volatility would reflect increased fluctuations in daily reports across a week, and low volatility would reflect less variability in daily reports across a week. The results concluded having a partner who scored higher than average in emotion work, predicted lower fluctuations in perceived relationship quality in women. Conversely, higher than average emotion work from a partner predicted greater fluctuations in love and commitment for men. Meaning, in women increased emotion work from their partner predicted more stable relational quality across a week, and in men increased emotion work from their partner predicted greater fluctuations in relational quality, particularly in the dimensions of love and commitment. The results in men are particularly surprising because receiving increased emotion work, which describes actions that are meant to uplift a partner, leads to less stable relationship investment and perceived quality in the relationship. Although relationship behaviors can be influenced by gender, there are other social and psychological constructs that influence relationship behaviors and emotion work. A psychological construct that has an impact on relationship functioning is attachment (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1962). Attachment describes the way individuals experience, approach, and behave in relationships. The way in which the results reflect in the later study aligns with distinguishing features and traits that exist within insecure attachment, specifically dismissive avoidant attachment. Insecure dismissive avoidant attachment is marked by a fear of emotional intimacy, or a distinguished discomfort with emotional intimacy or relationship interdependence. Individuals high in dismissive avoidant traits seek to avoid intimacy (Rodriquez et al, 2020).

When considering the later study's results in men, which revealed a decrease in stability of investment and perceived relationship quality while receiving increased emotion work from a partner, these results may parallel with the trait of intimacy avoidance seen in dismissive avoidant attachment. This example invites to question if attachment could be a moderating variable in the relationship between emotion work and gender.

Attachment style is an important framework for understanding patterns of behavior within romantic relationships. Attachment is first established in infancy with primary caregiver and may give an emotional framework for adult romantic relationships later in life. Secure attachment suggests a healthy relationship with self and partner, in dimensions of interdependence, trust, and commitment (Simpson, 1990). The two main facets of insecure attachment include anxious preoccupied attachment which is distinguished by fear of the ability to maintain consistent, reliable love or care from partner, and as mentioned earlier, dismissive avoidant is distinguished by distrust of intimacy and desire to maintain independence. One study found 57% of participants were categorized as securely attached, 22% having anxious attachment, and 20% have avoidant attachment, and found that these percentages were comparable to previous studies (Sheinbaum et al., 2015). Meaning insecure attachment, mainly anxious or avoidant, may comprise a considerable proportion of a population. Attachment style has been shown to be linked with relationship quality, with secure attachment having high levels of satisfaction and insecure attachment having lower levels of satisfaction (Weber et al., 2022).

Current data has shown gendered results in attachment style. A meta-analysis examined attachment and the demographic of gender, finding men are higher in attachment avoidance and women are higher in attachment anxiety (Del Giudice, 2011). This study also noted that gender and attachment patterns varied among different geographic region, and anxiety peaked during

young adulthood while avoidant tendencies tend to increase through life course. In addition, a more recent study further expanded on gendered results in attachment, however this study aimed to examine the construct of gender opposed to the demographic of gender. Paralleling with the earlier study that explored the demographic of gender, findings exploring the construct of gender concluded masculinity is linked to insecure/dismissive avoidant attachment, while insecure/preoccupied anxious attachment showed a reverse relationship to masculinity (Ciocca, 2020). Data also supported that both masculinity and femininity are correlated with secure attachment, and gendered results in attachment only appeared in reverse aspects, in insecure attachment (Ciocca, 2020). This may indicate that both masculinity and femininity can demonstrate secure attachment equally, however insecure attachment is where the gender divide is seen, namely masculinity linked with avoidant and femininity link to anxious.

Gendered results in attachment are solely on the insecure facet, which may suggest gender role expectations could interact with insecure attachment coping mechanisms. A previous study looking at individuals in heterosexual romantic relationships revealed that psychological stress and behavior during relationship conflict were gendered according to attachment style, namely women higher in avoidance and men higher in anxiety experienced greater psychological distress when in conflict with romantic partner (Powers et al., 2006). Additionally, conclusions also indicate men with insecurely attached partners predicted greater distress, but not in women. These results may indicate gender reversals in insecure attachment may cause greater psychological distress during interpersonal conflict. Authors hypothesized that women typically guide discussions during relationship conflict, which may be a difficult position for avoidant women who prefer to disengage. The increased distress during relationship conflict seen in anxious men, authors suspect, may be due to gender role as men are typically expected to have a

less active role during relationship conflict. The social expectation of a less active role may produce greater tension in anxiously attached men, as a hallmark of anxious attachment is hypervigilance. These results illustrate how gender role expectations may interact with the coping mechanisms seen in insecure attachment.

Attachment can influence relationship maintenance behavior. Studies exploring the relationship between attachment and relationship maintenance found that relationship maintenance behaviors, specifically positivity, assurances, and shared tasks were found to be negatively correlated with attachment insecurity in both husbands and wives (Adams & Baptist, 2012). The significant negative relationship indicates that partners who use these specific behaviors reported lower levels of attachment insecurity and also have partners that reported lower levels of attachment insecurity. Partner effects revealed individuals reported secure attachment when they have partners that reported using more assurances, shared tasks, and positivity to maintain the relationship. Another study found that insecure avoidant used significantly less assurances, positivity, and openness in relational maintenance strategies (Edenfield et al, 2012). Avoidance is a characteristic in dismissive avoidant attachment, possibly indicating the importance of emotion expressivity in relationship maintenance strategies. These studies illustrate how attachment may influence relationship maintenance behavior.

Secure attachment experiences higher relationship quality and satisfaction (Hammond, 1991). Numerous studies have indicated insecure attachment is negatively associated with relationship quality. A study found negative effects of avoidance and anxiety on relationship satisfaction, however higher levels of avoidance, but not anxiety, were associated with less gratitude toward partner and even lower relationship satisfaction than seen in anxiously attached individuals (Vollmann et al, 2019). This may suggest both anxiety and avoidance negatively

effects relationship satisfaction and quality, but gratitude invention may be specifically beneficial for those with avoidance in therapy. In addition, another study found dismissive avoidant attachment participants were negatively associated with maintenance behaviors, and preoccupied anxious attachment were positively associated with use of assurances, but negatively associated with integrative conflict management and positivity (Dainton, 2007). These studies together illustrate the delicate interplay between attachment and relationship maintenance behavior. Although attachment theory has been shown to have a relationship with gender and with relationship maintenance behaviors, it has yet to be applied to the boarder topic of emotion work or be applied to the gender gap existing in both emotion work and relationship maintenance behavior. While data is currently limited in this area, it sets fertile ground for further research.

Purpose of Present Study

The current study aims to examine the gender gap in emotion work and relationship maintenance while considering another possible moderating variable, attachment. The study will examine if gendered results in emotion work and relationship maintenance are influenced by aspects of attachment. Consistent with prior literature I hypothesize relationship maintenance behavior will be gendered, main effects of gender will be women having higher scores in relationship maintenance and men having lower relationship maintenance scores (Hypothesis 1).

Furthermore, I hypothesize the main effect of insecure attachment will be gendered, namely dismissive avoidant to be related to men and preoccupied anxious to be associated with women (Hypothesis 2). Additionally, I hypothesize the interaction effect between gender and attachment will be men who have high avoidance will have lower relationship maintenance scores and

women higher in anxious attachment will have higher relationship maintenance scores (Hypothesis 3).

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited to participate by OBSERVE Lab at University of California Riverside. The data used in the present study was collected as part of a larger study that examined sexual minority social life and well-being (Robbins et al, 2021; Robbins et al, 2024). There were 154 participants were included in the sample, all of the participants were in a romantic relationship. Participants were recruited in Southern California and eligible participants were over 18 years old, married or in a marriage-like relationship, lived together for at least one year, and had no symptoms of mental or physical health conditions that would hinder daily functioning. The sample included 72 (46.8%) men and 82 (53.2%) women. Thirty-eight (24.7%) participants were men in a same- sex relationship, 38 (31.2%) participants were women in a same-sex relationship, and 68 (44.2%) were in different- sex relationships. The average age of participants was age 33 but ranged from ages 18 to 80.

Measures

Gender

Gender was measured by participant self- report in the demographic section. Participants were asked to report their sex as either “male,” “female,” or “other (please specify).” Participants who reported male are referred to as “men” and those who reported female referred to as “women.”

Attachment

The second predictor variable of attachment is measured by three separate attachment scales to measure three types of attachment: secure, avoidant, and anxious. These scales are self-report and are designed to assess adult attachment styles within romantic relationships. Three separate scales measured for secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment and consisted of one item. Each separate item was measured by a Likert type scale, “1” meaning “Disagree strongly,” and “7” meaning “Agree strongly”. The prompt for anxious attachment scale item was “In a conflict it is extremely hard for me to let go and give my partner space,” and for avoidant attachment item prompt was “Whenever I’m upset with my partner I stonewall and shutdown.” Due to scales being separate and being tested with one item each no alpha can be calculated.

Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

The outcome variable is relationship maintenance behavior, measured by the Relationship Maintenance Questionnaire (MQ). The MQ consisted of 24 items ($\alpha = .95$) and is derived from the Relationship Maintenance Behavior Measure (RMBM) developed by Stafford (2011). The MQ measures six factors: positivity, understanding, assurances, self-disclosure, relationship talk, and sharing tasks. Additionally, positivity items are split into two factors: positivity and conflict management. The MQ consists of Likert type items ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Each item on the MQ is independently rated and used to reflect the degree of relationship maintenance behavior their partner uses in the relationship. Scores for each item indicate the level of relationship maintenance from their partner they perceive.

Procedure

Participants responded to questionnaires and scales at OBSERVE Lab at UCR. All participants received verbal information about the study and were provided a written informed consent form where each participant indicated their agreement to participate. Once informed

consent was obtained participants met with experimenter to complete the surveys on two separate Fridays, each meeting or survey completion separated by one month. Each partner completed the surveys independently. Survey responses were collected and analyzed on SPSS.

Data Analytic Plan

The Relationship Maintenance Questionnaire (MQ), attachment items, and demographic information such as gender was analyzed on SPSS. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were analyzed by conducting independent t-tests. Hypothesis 1 compared men and women to MQ scores, and hypothesis 2 compared anxious and avoidant attachment to men and women. Hypothesis 3 was analyzed by conducting a regression analysis, which tested for an interaction between gender and attachment on MQ scores.

Results

In a sample of 154 adults in a romantic relationship 119 (77.3%) of participants had secure attachment, 23 (14.9%) of participants had anxious attachment, and 10 (6.5%) participants had avoidant attachment. Out of a total of 82 women of that total 60 (73.2%) women were securely attached, 12 (14.8%) women were anxious attached, and 9 (11%) women were avoidant attached. Additionally, out of a total 72 men 59 (81.9%) men were securely attached, 11 (15.3%) men were anxious attached, and 1 (1.4%) man were avoidant attached. Women reported higher MQ ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 0.91$) and men reported lower MQ ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.05$).

An independent t-test was conducted to compare relationship maintenance scores between women and men. There was a significant difference in relationship maintenance scores between men ($M = 5.45$, $SD = .85$) and women ($M = 5.75$, $SD = .89$), $t(150) = 2.12$, $p = .040$. These results suggest that women report higher scores in relationship maintenance behavior, and men report lower scores in relationship maintenance behavior. The difference of .30 scale points

between groups had a large effect size, as measured by Cohen's d , $d = 0.88$. The confidence interval indicated the measurement was precise, 95% CI [0.02,0.58]. Hence, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Independent t-tests were conducted to compare if insecure attachment is gendered, specifically if men reported more avoidant attachment and women reported more anxious attachment. There was no significant difference in insecure attachment style between men ($n=72$, $M= 3.08$, $SD= 1.96$) $t(152) = 0.27$, $p = 0.78$ and women ($n= 82$, $M= 2.34$, $SD= 1.75$), $t(152) = 0.46$, $p = 0.64$. These results suggest that there is no difference between men and women in insecure attachment style. Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

A regression was conducted to assess the interaction between predictor variables gender and attachment on outcome variable relationship maintenance scores, it was hypothesized women high in anxious attachment will report high relationship maintenance scores and men high in avoidance will have low relationship maintenance scores. The model was found to be significant, $F(6,145) = 6.23$, $p < .001$. The model explains 20% of variance in relationship maintenance scores, with an adjusted r^2 of .21. The main effect of anxious attachment predicted lower relationship maintenance scores, $\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$ [-.36, -.16]. However, we found an interaction effect where anxious attachment negatively predicted relationship maintenance scores, but women higher in anxious attachment had a less negative relationship with MQ scores than men high in anxious attachment, $\beta = .126$, $p = .34$ [-.13, .38].

Figure 1

Interaction between Anxious Attachment and MQ scores

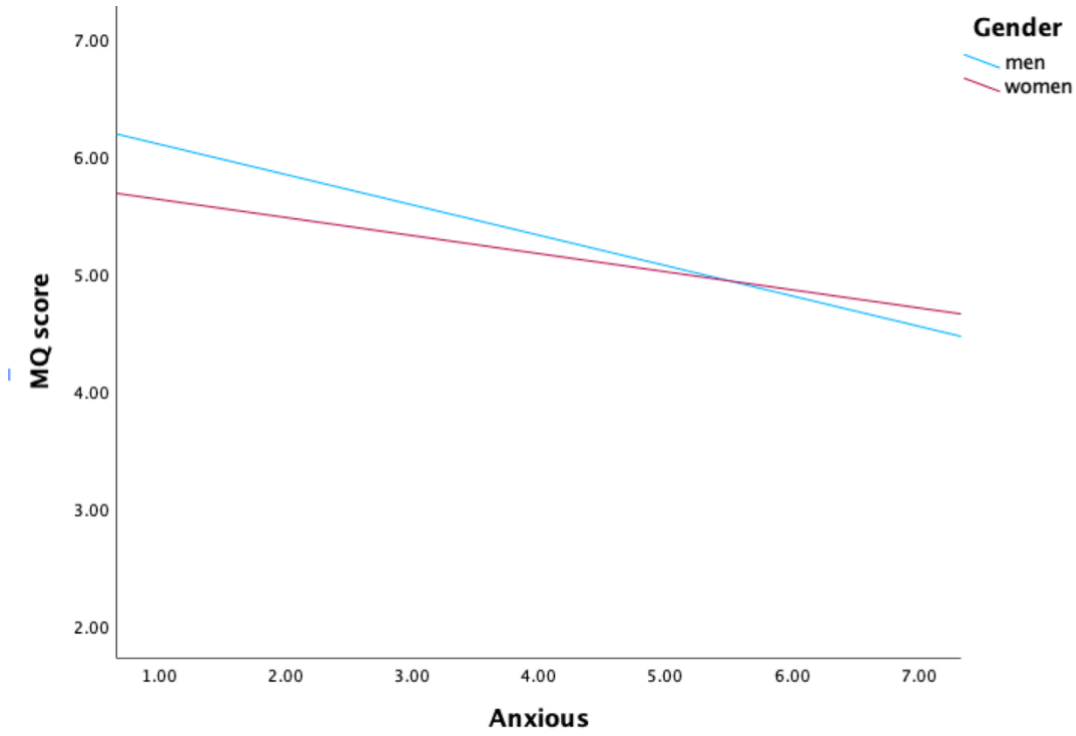
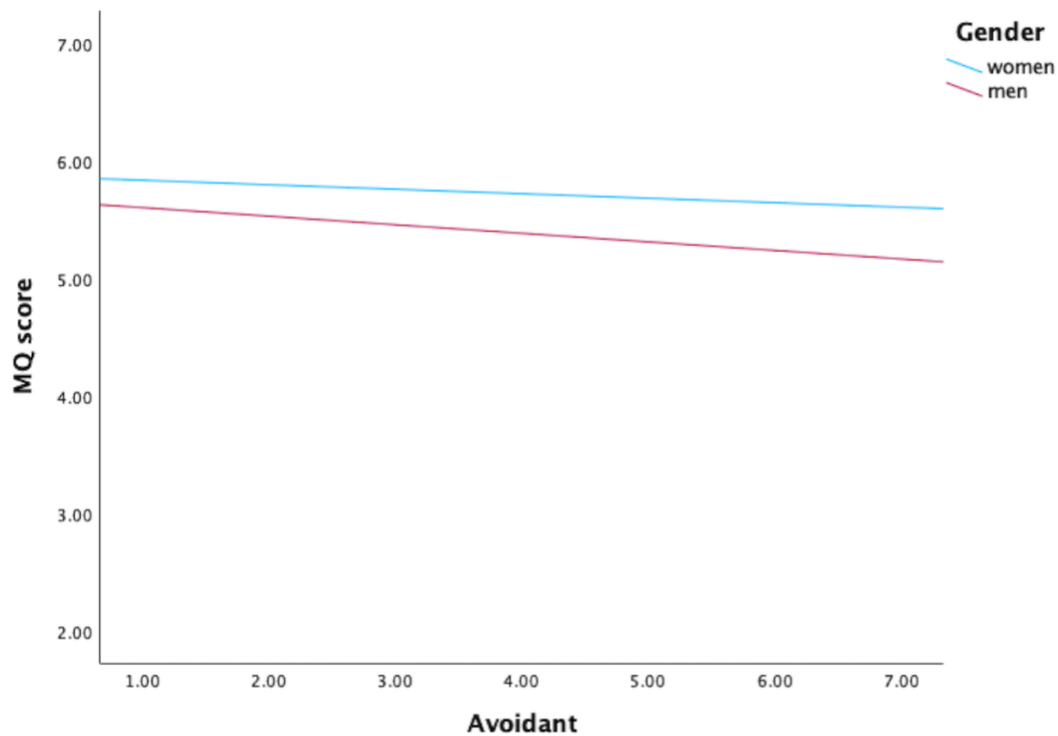


Figure 2

No interaction or effect between gender and Avoidant Attachment on MQ scores



Discussion

The present study examined if attachment moderates the gender differences seen in emotion work and relationship maintenance and the role of attachment in the context of emotion work. Previous studies have supported gender differences in emotion work and relationship maintenance and have additionally supported insecure attachment to be gendered. However, previous research has been limited in exploring the role or relationship between gender and attachment in emotion work and relationship maintenance.

Previous studies have indicated numerous gender differences in emotion work and relationship maintenance strategies, and have additionally supported gendered insecure attachment. Studies have indicated men and women evaluate (Legkauskas & Pazonite, 2018)

and perceive (Beam et al, 2018) relationship maintenance behaviors differently. Emotion work research has also indicated gender differences such as women experiencing the act of providing emotion work differently than men (Umberson, 2020), and gendered results in actor responses to received emotion work (Curran, 2015). Another influential construct in romantic relationships is attachment, research found avoidant attachment predictive of masculinity or men, and anxious attachment predictive of femininity or woman (Giacomo, 2020). In the present study it was hypothesized that relationship maintenance strategies would be gendered, main effect would be women having higher relationship maintenance scores and men having lower relationship maintenance scores (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, it was hypothesized insecure attachment would be gendered, main effect being avoidant attachment related to men and anxious attachment related to women (Hypothesis 2). Lastly it was hypothesized an interaction effect between gender and attachment, specifically women who report high anxious attachment will have high relationship maintenance scores and men who report high avoidant attachment will have low relationship maintenance scores (Hypothesis 3). Hypothesis 1, which predicted gendered relationship maintenance scores, indicated women reported higher relationship maintenance scores than men. Hypothesis 2, which predicted insecure attachment style to be gendered, was not supported finding no difference between men and women in insecure attachment. Hypothesis 3, predicting an interaction effect between gender and attachment, indicated women higher in anxious attachment had a less negative relationship with MQ scores than men high in anxious attachment. This finding suggested a small interaction effect.

This study's results indicate gender is predictive of relationship maintenance scores, finding women score higher than men in relationship maintenance scores. This finding supports gender differences seen in previous relationship maintenance literature. Our findings also

indicate that attachment may have a tenuous moderating effect on gender and relationship maintenance scores. Anxious attachment had a negative relationship with relationship maintenance scores. However, in women higher anxious attachment had a less negative relationship with MQ scores, indicating an interaction. This finding may suggest that attachment interacts with gender in relationship maintenance behavior and strategies. Literature in relationship maintenance supports that women tend to implement, evaluate, and score higher in relationship maintenance behaviors, which may contribute to the interaction effect we see in the present study. Another potential factor for the current study's results draws upon attachment research in which findings indicated gender-attachment reversals, such as anxious men, experienced more distress during relationship conflict (Powers et al., 2006). When examining the results of the current study it leaves to question if gender- attachment reversals, such as anxious attachment in men, may explain the stronger negative relationship between anxious attachment and relationship maintenance scores.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite this study's valuable findings there were limitations. This study focused on exploring gender as a demographic, however research can expand by implementing gender diversity and examining gender constructs that may impact relationship maintenance and emotion work. Examining the full gender spectrum such as transgender, or gender expansive individuals may help to better understand how gender influences relationship maintenance or emotion work. Exploring gender constructs, like masculinity or femininity may also shed more light on the influence of gender in relationship maintenance. Our study assessed attachment by a single item with a Likert type response. Future research can expand on the role or influence of attachment by assessing attachment with a full attachment scale. Previous research has indicated

that insecure attachment has a tendency to be gendered, avoidant linked to masculinity or men, and anxious attachment linked to femininity or women (Giacomo, 2020). Our study did not support gendered insecure attachment, however future research can expand on if these links exist solely within a particular cultural context, or if these links can be generalized cross-culturally. Future research may also want to replicate studies that examine the interaction effect of attachment and gender on relationship maintenance and emotion work.

Conclusion

Previous research has indicated gender differences in emotion work and relationship maintenance, and has supported insecure attachment to be gendered. The current study is the first to question if attachment moderates the gender differences seen in emotion work and relationship maintenance. Additionally, it was the first to question the gender gaps in emotion work and relationship maintenance with the gender gaps in insecure attachment. The current study's hypotheses included relationship maintenance strategies will be gendered such that women will score higher than men in relationship maintenance scores (Hypothesis 1), for insecure attachment to be gendered such that anxious attachment is linked to women and avoidant with men (Hypothesis 2), and for an interaction between attachment and gender such that women who report high in anxious attachment will predict higher relationship maintenance scores, and men reporting higher avoidant attachment will report lower relationship maintenance scores. In the current sample we found main effect of gender to predict MQ scores, supporting Hypothesis 1. No difference between men and women was found in insecure attachment, thus Hypothesis 2 was not supported. A weak interaction was indicated between the variables of attachment and gender, finding high anxious attachment had a negative relationship with MQ scores however women who reported high anxious had a less negative relationship with MQ scores. These

findings may indicate attachment and gender could interact in ways that influence relationship maintenance behaviors. Although previous research suggests a link between gender and insecure attachment the current study did not find an association. More holistic assessment of attachment and gender may be needed to detect these effects. Understanding relationship maintenance and emotion work is valuable because both are known to increase relationship quality. Relationship quality has been shown to impact a variety of facets in an individual's life including mental health, physical health, and important life outcomes such as longevity (Vila, 2023). For this reason, research in relationship maintenance and emotion work are valuable in public wellbeing and health.

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