



Universiteit Utrecht

## **The role of anxious relationship beliefs in relationship satisfaction and relational maintenance behavior**

A comparison of anxious beliefs among couples and singles

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Iris Faber  
University Utrecht

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## **Abstract**

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The present study investigated the role of anxious relationship beliefs in relational maintenance behavior and relationship satisfaction. It was hypothesized that stronger endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs is associated with stronger inhibition of relational maintenance behavior and therefore with lower relationship satisfaction. Also, anxious relationship beliefs among singles were compared with satisfied and dissatisfied couples. Age, gender and divorce were included as covariables. A sample of single, satisfied and dissatisfied participants (n = 1285) completed online questionnaire measures of relationship satisfaction, relational maintenance behaviour and anxious relationship beliefs. Results indicate that greater endorsement of the anxious relationship beliefs is associated with less use of relational maintenance strategies and lower relationship satisfaction. Especially Fear of Merger is suggested to play an important role. Significant differences were found in the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs between singles and satisfied couples, but not in comparison with dissatisfied couples. These results suggest that the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs do not predict relationship status, but rather one's intimate behaviour and (future) satisfaction with the relationship. Suggestions for further research are offered.

## **Samenvatting**

Het doel van de huidige studie was het onderzoeken van de rol van angstige relatie opvattingen in relatieonderhoudend gedrag en relatietevredenheid. Het was verwacht dat het hebben van meer angstige opvattingen over intieme relaties gerelateerd zou zijn aan minder relatieonderhoudend gedrag en lagere relatietevredenheid. Ook zijn de angstige opvattingen van vrijgezellen vergeleken met personen in een relatie. Leeftijd, sekse en scheiding zijn als covariabelen opgenomen in de analyses. Een steekproef van vrijgezellen, tevreden en ontevreden participanten (n = 1285) heeft online vragenlijsten ingevuld over relatietevredenheid, relatieonderhoudend gedrag en angstige opvattingen over intieme relaties. De resultaten wijzen uit dat het hebben van angstige relatie opvattingen gerelateerd is aan minder relatieonderhoudend gedrag en lagere tevredenheid. Vooral 'angst voor samensmelting' wordt verondersteld een belangrijke rol te spelen. Ook blijken vrijgezellen in hun angstige opvattingen over intieme relaties significant te verschillen van personen in een gelukkige relatie, maar niet van personen in een ongelukkige relatie. De resultaten suggereren dat het hebben van angstige opvattingen niet zozeer voorspellen of mensen een relatie aangaan, maar dat deze wel gerelateerd zijn aan gedrag in en tevredenheid met de relatie. Suggesties voor verder onderzoek worden aangeboden.

## Introduction

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Within the last three decades, the number of divorces in the Netherlands has tripled. The most recent estimate is that one in four marriages will end in divorce. Partly due to this trend the amount of singles has risen with a factor of 3.5 since the 70's, making it a total of 2.5 million (Harmsen, 2007; Dykstra et al., 2006; CBS, 2006). Many studies have focused on the predictive value of dysfunctional interactions, such as destructive arguments and ineffective communication, for relationship dissatisfaction (Bradbury & Karney, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). However, while many unhappy marriages are characterized by high levels of conflict (Patrick et al., 2007; Moss & Schwebel, 1993; Mackey, Diemer & O'Brien, 2000), researchers have emphasized that conflict can also be functional longitudinally, because it often leads to resolution of disagreements. Rather, it is avoidance of or withdrawal from conflict that are thought to be dysfunctional in the long run, because it leads to disengagement. Indeed, the most frequent reason given for divorce is a lack of intimacy (Patrick et al., 2007; Moss & Schwebel, 1993; Mackey, Diemer & O'Brien, 2000). Furthermore, it seems that relational motives, such as growing apart, not getting enough attention, and not being able to talk to each other, have become more determining in relationship functioning than they were in the 50's (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). The way in which people view and achieve a satisfactory level of intimacy is assumed to be based on previous, as well as current experiences. Attachment literature indicates that early experiences with closeness in childhood are important for the development of secure internal representations of the availability of others when needed, which have shown to influence the way in which people think and feel about intimacy in adult romantic relationships as well (Collins & Read, 1990; Jones & Cunningham, 1996; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Insecurely attached people often indicate feeling uncomfortable or anxious about being intimate, are less satisfied with their relationship and are more prone to break-up than securely attached people (Dewitte et al., 2008; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Simpson, 1990). Especially attachment anxiety has been shown to predict the endorsement of dysfunctional attributions and destructive behavior in intimate relationships (Sumer & Cozzarelli, 2004; Campbelle et al., 2005; Stackert & Bursik, 2003). In a cognitive-behavioral view, attachment representations are transcribed into cognitive schema's that influence the individual's behavior (Popovic, 2005). Attachment patterns are subjective to change over time, related to changes in mental models, and it seems that people may report different attachment orientations in different relationships (Baldwin et al., 1996). In current study, the view is adopted that cognitive appraisals of intimate experiences influence intimate behavior in current relationships. When intimate behavior has been associated with hurt, such as rejection, in the past, being intimate can feel vulnerable and frightening. Given the central role of intimacy in the maintenance of a satisfactory relationship, it seems important to investigate the association between anxious beliefs about intimacy and intimate behavior more specifically.

### **Anxious relationship beliefs and intimate behavior**

Cordova and Scott (2001) propose that intimacy is a process generated by events in which one person's interpersonally vulnerable behaviour, such as expressions of love and hurt, is reinforced by the response of the other. Behaviour is considered interpersonally vulnerable to the extent that it has been associated with punishment by others in the past (either directly or indirectly). When vulnerable behaviour in a romantic relationship continues to be punished, it will occur infrequently, because it does not feel safe to do so. Therefore, the relationship will be less intimate and satisfactory (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Alternatively, they argue that when intimate behaviour is not punished, this initial vulnerable behaviour becomes less vulnerable over time in relation to the person reinforcing that behaviour. Previous research has shown that when partners feel safe and secure in their relationships they are more satisfied and behave in ways that enhance the relationship (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Indeed, satisfied couples are more responsive - the verbal and or nonverbal behavior that conveys empathy, support and affection – towards each other than dissatisfied couples (Marshall, 2008; Manne et al., 2004; Cordova, Gee & Warren, 2005) and show more expressions of affection through touching and hugging (Mackey, Diemer & O'Brian, 2000). Also, satisfied couples are more likely to use active relational maintenance strategies, which function to achieve and sustain satisfactory levels of relational intimacy (Canary & Stafford, 2002; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). In this way, intimate behavior and satisfaction with the relationship seem to reinforce each other.

Although Cordova and Scott, being more behaviorally oriented, make no references to cognitive processes, it is likely that when intimacy has been associated with hurt in the past, people make appraisals regarding intimacy accordingly. Prior research indicates that particular relationship cognitions are related to relationship functioning. Maladaptive attributions about relationship events and the partner (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989), unrealistic expectancies about close relationships (such as the belief that partners should be able to sense what the other is feeling) (Sanderson & Cantor, 2001; Popovic, 2005) and overly high standards (beliefs about characteristics that partners and intimate relationships 'should' have) (Chatav & Whisman, 2009) have shown to be related to relationship dysfunctioning and dissatisfaction. In a similar way anxious relationship beliefs can be related to lower relationship satisfaction. When people expect intimacy to be threatening, this could inhibit them to behave intimately to avoid hurt, which can be associated with relationship dissatisfaction or discomfort with entering into intimate relationships. For example, women who hold anxious expectations about rejection have shown to behave more negatively in interactions with their partner and are more likely to break-up than women without these expectations (Downey et al., 1998). Also, individuals who perceive high risk in intimacy report fewer close relationships, reduced trust in others and lower levels of intimacy and less desire for intimacy in their current dating relationships (Thelen et al., 2000). However, non of

these studies address anxious beliefs about intimacy and their influence on intimate behavior and relationship satisfaction specifically. Therefore, the first goal of this study will be to investigate the association between anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. To the extent that anxious relationship beliefs may be compared to the Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment framework as an indication of insecure and/or avoidant attachment, it is expected that the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs is related to the inhibition of intimate behavior and lower relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, one could speculate that the level of current intimacy behavior is partly responsible for the relationship between anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. Bradbury & Fincham (1990) have argued that dysfunctional attributions can be linked indirectly to dissatisfaction because of their impact on one's behavior toward the partner. In a similar way, anxious relationship beliefs could affect satisfaction by inhibiting intimate behavior. Therefore, in current study mediational analyses are performed to investigate whether intimate behavior has an explanatory role in the relationship between anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction.

### **Singles and intimacy**

Partly due to the increasing divorce rates, the group of single people is significantly expanding (Harmsen, 2007; Dykstra et al., 2006; CBS, 2006). Surprisingly, almost no research has been done about the presence of pre-existing relationship beliefs among single people. In search of finding a suitable partner, many singles have experienced disappointments with failed romantic relationships. Ruvola, Fabian and Ruvolo (2001) showed that people experiencing a break-up became less willing to trust others, less comfortable being close to others, and less secure about initiating future relationships. Therefore, it is possible that many singles are more apprehensive about engaging oneself in a new intimate relationship. Also, in comparison to married women, never-married women were found to have stronger motivation for autonomy, a lesser basic trust in romantic relationships and to be more insecure in interactions with men (Walsh, 1995). Although Schachner and colleagues (2008) have found that single people have just as many attachment figures as coupled people do, they did not measure the quality of those relationships nor the presence of anxious relationship beliefs specifically. Given the lack of research about relationship beliefs among singles, the third goal of this study is to compare the level of endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs between singles and couples.

In summary, the main goal of this study is to investigate the association between specific anxious beliefs about intimacy, intimate behaviour and relationship satisfaction among couples. It is expected that higher endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and with less use of relational maintenance strategies. Also, the use of relational maintenance strategies is expected to partially mediate the relationship between

anxious relationship beliefs and satisfaction. Furthermore, the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs among singles will be compared with couples. Singles are expected to endorse more anxious relationship beliefs than couples, irrespectively of their level of relationship satisfaction, although this hypothesis is largely exploratory in nature.

## Methods

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### Participants

To examine the extent to which anxious relationship beliefs are held more strongly by single and dissatisfied coupled people compared to satisfied couples, data was collected from these three different groups. From 1893 participants, 540 did not complete the measures. The overall sample consisted of 1285 participants, with 433 being male (33,7%) and 852 being female (66,3%). Due to significant observed differences in relational beliefs and behaviour, 68 participants with an age of 60 years or older were excluded. The satisfied coupled sample encompassed 615 adults (mean age 34 yrs; SD 10,7), which entailed 415 females (67,5%) and 200 males (32,5%). The moderately satisfied coupled sample consisted of 132 participants (mean age 36; SD 10,6), with 88 women (66,7%) and 44 men (33,3%). The dissatisfied coupled sample consisted of 44 respondents (mean age 43 yrs; SD 9,5), with 29 being female (65,9%) and 15 being male (34,1%). The singles sample consisted of 494 adults (mean age 34 yrs; SD 10,7). This group entailed 320 females (64,8%) and 174 males (35,2%). Within the overall sample, the mean age was 34 yrs (SD 10,8), ranging from 15 to 60 yrs. Among the different groups, 22,7% of the singles had been divorced at least once, 10,2% among satisfied couples and 34,1% among dissatisfied couples.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited by the use of websites like Hyves and forums of popular magazines, as well as by email. Besides this, over 500 flyers were distributed in different public places like the university, railway stations, as well as several counselling practices. In order to increase participation, optional feedback about relational maintenance strategies and irrational relationship beliefs was offered with the completion of the questionnaire. Moreover, two gift coupons were raffled among those who fulfilled the complete questionnaire.

By visiting the website [www.intimiteitenrelaties.nl](http://www.intimiteitenrelaties.nl), subjects were linked to the questionnaire. At the start of the questionnaire, subjects were introduced with the goals of the study and informed about the confidentiality of their data and personal information, together with the possibility of winning a gift coupon.

Also, subjects were given a questionnaire-instruction. After respondents confirmed their relationship status (single or coupled), the questionnaire was adjusted to that status. For example, where coupled people were proposed to the statement 'I'm worried that *my* partner will leave me', singles were given the statement 'I'm worried that a partner would leave me'. At the end of the questionnaire, the feedback option was offered, as well as the option to leave an email address for participation in the raffle of the gift coupons.

Acquired data was automatically transferred from NetQuestionnaires to SPSS 16.01 for analysis.

### **Instruments**

The following measuring instruments were used in the study: (1) Investment Model Scale (IMS); (2) Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ); (3) Relationship Maintenance Strategy Measure (RMSM).

*Relationship satisfaction.* The five-item counting satisfaction subscale of the Investment Model Scale (IMS: Rusbult, 1998) was used to determine relationship satisfaction among the coupled sample. The participants rated the items on 5-point scales (e.g. 1 = do not agree at all, 5 = agree completely). Reliability analyses revealed good internal consistency among items designed to measure satisfaction (Alphas ranging from .92 to .95; Rusbult, 1998). In the present study Chronbach's alpha was .905 for relationship satisfaction.

*Anxious relationship beliefs.* The Fear of Close and Personal Relationships Questionnaire (FCPRQ; Sheehan, 1989) was used to measure anxious thoughts when facing a relationship. The questionnaire consists of five subscales each containing six items. The subscales are labeled: 'Fear of Merger'; 'Fear of Abandonment'; 'Fear of Exposure'; 'Fear of Attack' and 'Fear of Own Destructiveness'. Participants indicate the strength of their endorsement of the item using a 5-point Likert (1 = do not agree at all, 5 = do agree completely). Sheehan (1989) reported Chronbach's alpha's ranging from .57 till .78 for the subscales. A study by Haagsma en Glimmerveen (2006) also found a high Cronbach's alpha of .87. The questionnaire used in present study is a Dutch translation of the original questionnaire and is validated among psychology students. The present study shows Chronbach's alpha's for the entire scale of .875 with ranges of .610 till .722 for the subscales. To check for multicollinearity between the subscales, a correlation matrix was conducted. Non of the scales were intercorrelated higher than .581, indicating sufficient convergence for analyses.

*Relational maintenance behaviour.* The Relational Maintenance Strategy Measure (RMSM; Canary & Stafford, 1992) measures five behavioural strategies that are used to increase and



maintain intimacy in a relationship: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks and sharing tasks.

The questionnaire contains a total of 29 items, which are presented as statements about one's own behaviour. Participants rated the items on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g. 1 = do not agree at all, 5 = agree completely). Reliability analysis indicates a Cronbach's alpha between .81 and .86 for all five scales (Canary, Stafford & Semic, 2002). The present study shows Chronbach's alpha's for the entire scale of .876 with ranges of .778 till .860 for the subscales. To check for multicollinearity between the subscales, a correlation matrix was conducted. Non of the scales were intercorrelated higher than .584, indicating sufficient convergence for analyses.

### **Analysis**

The first goal of this study was to investigate the relationship between the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. The presence of more anxious relationship beliefs was expected to be related to lower relationship satisfaction. To examine this relationship, a regression analysis was conducted with the five subscales of the FCPRQ as predictors of relationship satisfaction. Age, gender and divorce were included as covariables.

To test the second hypothesis that the presence of more anxious romantic beliefs is related to less use of relational maintenance strategies, a correlation matrix was conducted. To investigate whether the use of relational maintenance strategies is a partial mediator between the relationship of anxious beliefs and relational satisfaction, a regression analysis was conducted to measure the strength of the association between the use of relational maintenance strategies and relationship satisfaction. Subsequently, the subscales of the RMSS were included as predictors in the regression analysis to see whether this changed the association between the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. If this association would become smaller or non-significant, the use of relational maintenance strategies would respectively be a partial or complete mediator. Age, gender and divorce were again included as covariables.

Also, to compare the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs among singles, and satisfied and dissatisfied couples, three t-tests were conducted. The group of satisfied couples consisted of participants rating their relationship satisfaction 4 or higher (on a 5-point Likert scale), whereas the group of dissatisfied couples included participants rating their relationship satisfaction 2 or lower.

## Results

### Descriptives

As can be observed in table 1 below, the mean scores of all subscales of the FCPRQ are fairly low for all groups, while scores for the RMSS are moderate to high. This indicates that both singles as well as satisfied and dissatisfied couples report low endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs and that participants in a relationship generally use all relationship maintenance strategies.

*Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations on the subscales of the FCPRQ and RMSS among singles, satisfied couples and dissatisfied couples.*

	Singles		Satisfied couples		Dissatisfied couples	
	M	Sd	M	Sd	M	Sd
<i>Anxious relationship beliefs</i>						
Fear of merger	2.62	.69	2.02	.56	2.62	.70
Fear of abandonment	2.59	.64	2.15	.55	2.55	.60
Fear of exposure	2.18	.52	1.86	.45	2.42	.72
Fear of attack	2.24	.60	1.83	.45	2.36	.62
Fear of own destructive impulses	2.30	.59	2.02	.52	2.26	.58
<i>Relational maintenance strategies</i>						
Positivity	-	-	3.49	.51	3.17	.61
Openness	-	-	3.87	.55	3.51	.80
Social networks	-	-	3.54	.57	3.22	.75
Assurances	-	-	4.01	.50	3.32	.72
Sharing tasks	-	-	3.99	.57	3.84	.73

### The influence of gender, age and divorce

In contrast to previous findings on fear towards intimacy (Frazier & Esterly, 1990), no gender differences were found in the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs (see table 2). Consistent with existing evidence of higher self-disclosure among women (Fischer & Good, 1997; Gaia, 2002), women made more use of openness as a relational maintenance strategy ( $F(1,172) = 6.07, p=.01$ ). Also, they were slightly less satisfied with their relationship than men ( $F(1,172) = 4.26, p=.04$ ). Furthermore, age was an important predictor of relationship satisfaction, the use of relational maintenance strategies, as well as of fear of abandonment and fear of exposure. Results indicate that older individuals in a relationship are less satisfied with their relationship, express less positivity, openness and assurances, but share more social networks and daily tasks. These differences remained when length of the relationship was included. Also, whether people previously have been divorced did not seem to predict whether they are currently in a relationship, nor their current level of satisfaction with their relationship or their use of relational

maintenance strategies. According to our findings, divorcees did however had higher levels of fear of merger ( $F(1,790)= 9.77, p<.001$ ) and fear of attack ( $F(1,790)= 6.96, p<.01$ ). This is congruent with previous findings that people who have experienced a painful break-up show less trust towards intimate partners and less willingness to commit themselves in a new relationship (Thelen et al., 2000). It also supports the notion that painful experiences with intimate relationships can contribute to the development of dysfunctional beliefs about relationships, although the direction of this relationship can not be inferred from current data. Therefore, alternatively, higher levels of fear of merger and attack could have contributed to dissolution of the relationship.

*Table 2. Regression analyses of the influence of age, gender and divorce on research variables.*

	Age		Gender		Divorce	
	F (790)	p	F (790)	p	F (790)	p
<i>Anxious relationship beliefs</i>						
Fear of merger	1.32	.08	.24	.63	9.77	.00
Fear of abandonment	1.82	.00	1.74	.19	1.06	.30
Fear of exposure	2.11	.00	.45	.50	2.82	.09
Fear of attack	1.19	.19	.22	.64	6.96	.01
Fear of own destructive impulses	1.35	.07	1.34	.25	.23	.63
<i>Relational maintenance strategies</i>						
Positivity	2.47	.00	1.93	.17	2.75	.10
Openness	1.60	.01	6.07	.01	.08	.78
Social networks	1.74	.00	.22	.64	1.69	.19
Assurances	2.58	.00	.77	.38	.46	.50
Sharing tasks	2.42	.00	.01	.95	1.52	.22
<i>Relationship satisfaction</i>	2.18	.00	4.26	.04	.98	.32

### **Anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction**

The first hypothesis predicts a negative association between the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. As depicted in table 3, the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs is significantly associated with lower relationship satisfaction ( $F(8,681) = 33,61, p<.000, R^2=.283$ ), although this holds only for three of the subscales. The subscales Fear of Abandonment ( $t=-.600, p=.549$ ) and Fear of one's own Destructive Impulses ( $t=1.48, p=.138$ ) were not significantly related to relationship satisfaction when Fear of Merger was included in the regression analysis. Significant predictors of relationship satisfaction were the subscales Fear of Merger ( $t=-5.855, p<.000$ ), Fear of Exposure ( $t=-6.530, p<.000$ ) and Fear of Attack ( $t=-2.979, p=.003$ ), each with large effect-sizes.

Table 3. Regression analyses with the subscales of the FCPRQ as predictors of relationship satisfaction.

Anxious relationship beliefs	Beta ( $\beta$ )	Sign.	Effect-size ( $r^2$ )
Fear of merger	-.252	.000	.179
Fear of abandonment	-.026	.549	.053
Fear of exposure	-.255	.000	.178
Fear of attack	-.134	.003	.144
Fear of own destructive impulses	.061	.138	.055

Total variance explained ( $R^2$ ) = .283,  $p < .000$

### Anxious relationship beliefs and relational maintenance behavior

With regard to the hypothesized negative association between anxious relationship beliefs and relational maintenance behavior, analysis confirm a negative relationship between all of the subscales of both the FCPRQ and the RMSS (see table 4 below). Most of the significant correlations are small to medium in effect-size, ranging from .01 to .10. Remarkably, the subscale Positivity was only significantly associated with Fear of Merger ( $r = -.082$ ,  $p = .034$ ) and Fear of Exposure ( $r = -.138$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Also, Fear of Abandonment only showed significant correlations with Social Networks ( $r = -.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Sharing Tasks ( $r = -.23$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The largest associations were found between Fear of Exposure with Openness ( $r = -.52$ ,  $p < .000$ ) and Assurances ( $r = -.39$ ,  $p < .000$ ).

Table 4. Bivariate correlations between the subscales of the FCPRQ and RMSS.

Anxious relationship beliefs	Relational maintenance strategies									
	Positivity		Openness		Social networks		Assurances		Sharing tasks	
	r	r <sup>2</sup>	r	r <sup>2</sup>	r	r <sup>2</sup>	r	r <sup>2</sup>	r	r <sup>2</sup>
Fear of merger	-.08*	.01	-.21**	.04	-.18**	.03	-.22**	.05	-.21**	.05
Fear of abandonment	-.01	.00	-.03	.00	-.12**	.01	-.01	.00	-.23**	.05
Fear of exposure	-.14**	.02	-.52**	.27	-.28**	.08	-.39**	.15	-.32**	.10
Fear of attack	-.05	.00	-.16**	.02	-.18**	.03	-.16**	.03	-.21**	.05
Fear of own destructive impulses	-.03	.00	-.16**	.03	-.13**	.02	-.07	.00	-.20**	.04

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .001$

### Relationship maintenance behavior and relationship satisfaction

In contrary to previous literature and hypotheses, most of the relational maintenance strategies did not significantly predict relationship satisfaction. Only Assurances ( $t = 10.02$ ,  $p < .000$ ) and Positivity ( $t = -2.68$ ,  $p = .007$ ) were significantly related to relationship satisfaction, though the latter was so in a negative direction. Although all of the subscales of the RMSS were significantly

associated with the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs, their lack of association with relationship satisfaction meant that a mediational analysis would be unjustified.

*Table 5. Regression with the subscales of the RMSS as predictors of relationship satisfaction.*

<b>RMS subscales</b>	<b>Beta (<math>\beta</math>)</b>	<b>Sign.</b>	<b>Effect size (<math>r^2</math>)*</b>
Positivity	-.110	.007	.010
Openness	.011	.808	.000
Sharing networks	.005	.895	.000
Assurances	.499	.000	.125
Sharing tasks	.006	.871	.000

Total variance explained ( $R^2$ ) = .228,  $p < .000$

$F(8,704) = 26.01$ ,  $p < .000$

\* effect-size based on partial correlations

### **A comparison in the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs between singles and couples**

With regard to differences between singles and coupled people, t-tests showed significant group differences in the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs between singles and satisfied couples. These effects hold for all the subscales of the FCPRQ, although the effect-sizes are small to medium. This is congruent with observations from the descriptives (table 1) that indicate a fairly low endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs among all groups.

*Table 6. T-test results for the subscales of the FCPRQ for singles and satisfied and dissatisfied couples.*

<b>Anxious relationship beliefs</b>	<b>Singles- satisfied couples</b>			<b>Singles-dissatisfied couples</b>			<b>Satisfies – dissatisfied couples</b>		
	T(1115)	Sign.	$r^2$	T(477)	Sign.	$r^2$	T(636)	Sign.	$r^2$
Fear of merger	-11.36	.000	.104	.04	.966	.000	6.27	.000	.058
Fear of abandonment	-10.20	.000	.085	-.47	.641	.000	4.44	.000	.030
Fear of exposure	-7.10	.000	.043	2.53	.012	.018	6.72	.000	.066
Fear of attack	-9.32	.000	.072	1.03	.306	.002	6.72	.000	.066
Fear of own destructive impulses	-6.36	.000	.035	-.48	.631	.000	2.73	.006	.011

## Conclusions and discussion

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### **Anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction**

The first goal of this study was to investigate whether the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs is associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Results show that people who endorse more anxious relationship beliefs are indeed less satisfied with their relationship. These findings suggest that anxious cognitions towards intimacy are associated with lower relationship stability and could therefore predict relationship dissolution. This is consistent with existing evidence on the negative effect of dysfunctional relationship beliefs (Sanderson & Cantor, 2001; Popovic, 2005; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989), insecure attachment (Sumer & Cozzarelli, 2004; Campbelle et al., 2005; Stackert & Bursik, 2003) and fear of intimacy (Thelen et al., 2000) on relationship satisfaction. Remarkable however is the finding that the association with fear of abandonment and fear of own destructive impulses became non-significant when fear of merger was included in the analyses. Especially fear of abandonment is assumed to influence intimate relationships, as it is even considered being an underlying dimension of attachment patterns (Jones & Cunningham, 1996). The lack of association of fear of abandonment with relationship satisfaction in current study could be due to methodological limitations of current study. For example, the mean endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs is fairly low with a moderate amount of variance among all participants. Discrimination of this small variance between the different anxious relationship beliefs is hard because of collinearity among the subscales. Besides methodological explanations, one could also explore theoretical assumptions about the question why the relationship between fear of abandonment and relationship satisfaction became non-significant when fear of merger was included. In content, fear of merger is similar to the attachment dimension (dis)comfort with closeness, indicating a feeling of uneasiness about being intimate. In contrast, people who are afraid of abandonment are anxious about losing the other and the closeness they have achieved. When people are intimate, a certain amount of merger of identity is unavoidable, because one's sense of identity is formed in relationship to others. Perhaps people who are afraid of merger and who are afraid of abandonment both are anxious about changes in their constituted and known sense of self. When people break-up, they often describe a feeling of emptiness and a sense of loss. Fear of abandonment therefore also seems to entail anxiety about losing their mutual identity as a couple and the safety one derives from it. In contrast, when people engage in a relationship, they also have to adapt to each other. Some aspects or perceptions of themselves will change to a certain extent, which can also be frightening. This interpretation is similar to the object-relations theory, which suggests that it is ultimately the individual human personality that determines one's ability to be intimate with another (Alperin, 2001). For this ability, a successful separation-individuation is presumed to be

needed. Fear of merger entails a fear of loss of a sense of separate subjective being, while fear of abandonment constitutes a fear of object loss. For those who have not developed a secure individual identity, both could be experienced as a loss of self. Therefore, it is argued that the capacity to be intimate depends on the extent to which the person has developed a secure sense of own individuality, in absence as well as presence of another.

### **Anxious relationship beliefs and relational maintenance behavior**

Secondly, current results show that all measured anxious relationship beliefs were associated with less use of relational maintenance strategies, behaviors which are thought to increase and maintain intimacy in a relationship (Canary & Stafford, 2002). This suggests that anxious expectations about intimacy inhibits intimate behavior, possibly as a strategy to avoid hurt. The largest associations were observed between fear of exposure and openness, as well as assurances. This suggests that anxiety towards disclosing personal information is actually related to lower self-disclosure and less expressions of one's feelings about the relationship and intentions to maintain the relationship. This is consistent with the large number of studies about the highly intimate nature of self-disclosure and it's importance for relationship functioning (e.g. Hatfield, 1984; Lippert & Prager, 2001; Mackey, Diemer & O'Brian, 2000). Remarkably, sharing one's social networks and tasks were the only two relational maintenance strategies that were negatively associated with all anxious relationship beliefs. In contrast, positivity was only negatively related to fear of exposure. One would expect that an cognitive-emotional subject as anxiety towards intimacy would affect the other intimate, more affective strategies – openness, positivity and assurances – more than more pragmatic behaviors like sharing tasks and social networks. The observed differences in the way anxious relationship beliefs relate to the use of relational maintenance strategies can possibly be explained by the nature of current study's sample. Current sample consists for a great part of university students who typically have a rather independent life style, in which they are self-sufficient in their life support and social networks. Sharing their social networks and daily tasks with a partner could indicate a higher level of involvement in the relationship and can be seen as a bigger step in intimacy, so anxiety towards intimacy could especially affect these relational behaviors. In contrast, being positive, open and assuring could be perceived as appropriate, perhaps even conditional, in an earlier stage of a romantic relationship as well. This seems to be supported by the previously described influence of age on the use of relational maintenance strategies. Another explanation could be that sharing social networks and daily tasks are more generic intimate strategies that are more generally affected by the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs. The small effect-sizes of the associations could support this explanation. In contrast, the more affective relational strategies show more specific associations (e.g. openness with fear of exposure), but with larger effect-sizes.

### **Relational maintenance behavior as a mediator**

The third goal of this study was to investigate whether the use of relational maintenance strategies could (partially) explain the association between the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs and relationship satisfaction. Since the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs are associated with inhibition of intimate behavior, it was expected that the relationship would be less intimate and therefore less satisfying. However, in contrast to previous findings (Canary, Stafford & Semic, 2002), current study could not replicate a significant association between the use of relational maintenance strategies and relationship satisfaction. Only assurances, the expression of one's love and intentions to maintain the relationship, was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. Here must be noted that the direction of this correlation can not be inferred from current data. This finding indicates that the way in which relationship satisfaction is influenced by anxious relationship beliefs can not (solely) be explained by one's intimacy behavior. Cordova and Scott (2001) have argued that for intimacy to develop, a requirement is that vulnerable behavior is not punished by the partner's behavior. Intimate behavior of the partner is therefore more likely to influence satisfaction with the relationship than one's own behavior. Since the partner's behavior was not included in this study, this hypothesis could not be investigated. Other studies however have indicated the importance of (one's perception of) the partners responsiveness and support for relationship satisfaction (Manne et al., 2004; Cordova, Gee & Warren, 2005). Also, studies have indicated that relationship beliefs influence individual's perception and evaluation of the partner's behavior and of the quality of the relationship. For example, Downey and Feldman (1996) showed that people who are afraid of rejection overly perceive and respond to rejection (Fincham & Harold, 2000). Also, more anxiously attached individuals have shown to perceive more and expanded relationship conflicts than securely attached individuals, and they are less likely to evaluate both the current and the future state of their relationship in a positive way when they have perceived conflict (Campbell et al., 2005). Anxious individuals often show increased hypervigilance towards (ambiguous) signs of a feared outcome (e.g. rejection, abandonment) and are therefore less able to perceive positive aspects of the relationship (Downey et al., 1995). In a similar way, anxious relationship beliefs could affect relationship satisfaction by negative evaluations and interpretations of the relationship quality and the partner's behavior. Future research should therefore include partner behavior and perceptions of partner behavior to assess whether this could provide an explanation for the association between anxious relationship beliefs and satisfaction.

While inhibition of intimate behavior in current study does not seem to influence one's own relationship satisfaction directly, it does however contribute to a lower level of intimacy in the relationship. While this could feel safer for the anxious individual, it also deprives the individual of potential positive experiences with intimacy. This could sustain one's anxious beliefs towards



intimacy, because they are not disconfirmed by positive experiences. Some studies have indicated that while attachment styles are assumed to be fairly stable, insecure attachments can change over time, especially when they are coupled with a partner with a secure attachment style (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995; Zhang & Labouvie-Vief, 2004; Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). Also, avoidance of intimacy could make the relationship more vulnerable to negative experiences, because there are less positive experiences to compensate. As Gottman and colleagues (1998) have indicated, undesirable events in close relationships are more noticeable and influential for relationship satisfaction than positive aspects of the relationship, which seem to be taken more for granted. They showed that couples that fail to maintain a ratio of 5:1 of positive to negative behaviors are more likely to divorce. Therefore, maintaining a desired level of intimacy is very important relationship stability.

### **Anxious relationship beliefs and singles**

With regard to pre-existing relationship beliefs and avoidance of intimacy, singles are an especially interesting, but understudied group. In search of finding a suitable partner, many singles have experienced disappointments with failed romantic relationships. Therefore, the fourth goal of this study was to investigate whether singles endorse more anxious relationships than couples. Singles as a group did however endorse more anxious relationship beliefs than satisfied couples. These differences were greatest for fear of merger and fear of abandonment. Individuals who have never been in a relationship were more afraid of their own destructive impulses than people who have (had) a relationship.

No differences were observed in the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs between singles and dissatisfied couples, indicating that anxiety towards intimacy does not predict relationship status, but rather one's satisfaction with (future) relationships. In this regard, fear towards losing one's identity and autonomy (fear of merger) seems an especially important factor. This supports the notion that in today's society, more emphasis is exerted on independence and autonomy (Popovic, 2005). Relationships seem to be based more on equal parties entering into based on their need for closeness, self-disclosure and emotional support. As results indicate, fear of merger is associated with lower openness about one's thoughts and feelings. If singles are especially afraid of merger and are therefore less open, this could prohibit them to engage in a new relationship. It seems that stories about fear of commitment and abandonment among singles are not unfounded.

It was suggested that anxious relationship beliefs are developed as a result of one's experiences with intimacy. With regard to singles, those would only regard past experiences and are therefore an interesting group for study. In current study, singles did not differ from couples in their amount of past relationships and have been divorced less than individuals in a relationship. Divorcees in both groups did not differ in their endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs. However, divorce

was related to higher fear of merger and higher fear of attack. Among singles, negative experiences with previous relationships and divorce could prohibit them to commit themselves in a future relationship through development of fear towards intimacy. Among couples, it could contribute to lower intimate involvement and less satisfaction with and commitment to the relationship.

Summarizing, the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs, and particularly fear of merger, are significantly associated with lower current relationship satisfaction and less intimate behavior, and are found more among singles than among satisfied couples. Painful life experiences, such as divorce or past dysfunctional relationships, seem to contribute to the endorsement of these fears.

### **Limitations and indications for future research**

Because of the correlational nature of current data, no causal conclusions can be inferred. To investigate whether the endorsement of anxious relationship beliefs actually leads to less use of relational maintenance behavior and lower relationship satisfaction, a longitudinal design is needed. This could also be beneficial for investigating whether hurtful experiences like divorce leads to the development of anxious beliefs about intimacy and inhibition of intimate behavior. Also, one could study changes in cognitions regarding intimacy when people engage in a new relationship.

Another important limitation is that for the participants in a relationship, the behavior and thoughts of their partner were not included. When partner behavior and perceptions are included, it is possible to investigate whether anxious relationship beliefs influence relationship satisfaction through dysfunctional perceptions and interpretations of their partner's behavior.

Furthermore, in current study only a small sample of participants was dissatisfied with their relationship. Also, the extent to which participants endorsed anxious relationship beliefs was fairly low, while the use of relational maintenance strategies was fairly high. This could possibly be due to a social desirability bias or the rather young nature of current sample with a mean age of 34,2 years. As discussed earlier, age has a significant influence on research variables. Current sample consists mostly of university students, which also influences the generalizability of the results. With regard to this, future studies could use a more heterogeneous sample, also to investigate possible cohort effects. Because of the increasing individualization of our society, achieving a satisfactory level of intimacy could be more difficult for younger generations, because other demands are placed on romantic relationships. Therefore, it is possible that more anxious relationship beliefs, especially fear of merger, exist among younger cohorts.

Lastly, future studies could investigate the hypothesis that a secure sense of identity is needed for the ability to be intimate and could underlie fear of merger and abandonment. Anxious individuals then could focus on building self-confidence in relation to others, which can contribute to higher relationship satisfaction and lower levels of divorce.

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