THESIS

MEANING MAKING IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT:

A SCALE CREATION AND THEORY APPLICATION CONSIDERING ADULT

ATTACHMENT

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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ATTACHMENT STYLE

While existing literature on conflict and attribution theory reveal valuable information about the relationship between cause of conflict and blame, a new theory of meaning making of relationship conflict may offer a focused lens to examine the ways couples make sense of an argument and provide a more complete assessment of conflict. The goals of the first study presented here were to establish the meaning making of relationship conflict theory (MORC) as a framework for understanding relationship-specific meaning making tendencies and introduce a new MORC scale. The MORC scale was hypothesized to identify three theoretically distinct categories of meaning making following relationship conflict: self-focused, partner-focused, and couple-focused. Results confirmed that people make meaning of relationship conflict by focusing on themselves, their partner, or their relationship more broadly. The second study aimed to establish MORC scale validity and explore adult attachment as a potential predictor of meaning making tendencies. Individuals (N = 214) were assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR-SF), Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale (CAMS-R), Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ), and the Meaning Making of Relationship Conflict Scale (MORC). Results found a significant, strong, positive correlation between rumination and the MORC scale and a significant, strong, negative correlation between mindfulness and the MORC scale. Next, results revealed support of attachment as a potential mechanism that

influences meaning making. Individuals with greater insecure attachment styles (dismissive and anxious/preoccupied) reported higher scores for meaning making of conflict. Individuals with higher avoidant or anxious scores were found to be more likely partner-focused in their meaning making. Secure attachment was not found to be a predictor for meaning making of conflict.

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In this paper, the authors unpack the newly developed meaning making of relationship conflict (MORC) theoretical framework as a means of examining the ways couples make sense of an argument, and then introduce a new scale for measuring meaning making of conflict. Finally, the authors theorize and test the associations between attachment styles and components of meaning making of relationship conflict. To accomplish these aims, existing research on conflict and attribution theory are first explored as they inform the MORC theory development. Then the researchers introduce the scale development and explore associations with attachment styles.

Literature Review

Healthy romantic relationships are often a cornerstone for individual wellbeing (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; McGill et al., 2016). Romantic relationship dissatisfaction is associated with negative consequences for physical health, mental health, and poor individual functioning (Proulx et al., 2007; Hadden et al., 2014; Gunlicks-Stoessel & Powers, 2009). Researchers have also found that attributions of blame for marital conflict were associated with relationship dissatisfaction, but the mechanisms underlying this association are largely unknown (Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981; Newton & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1995; Durtschi et al., 2011). One possible mechanism to understand the association between attributions for relationship conflict and relationship dissatisfaction may be meaning making about blame or cause of conflict. In other words, attributions are affiliated with blame and partners' meaning making about conflict might be linked to who they believe is to blame for the conflict.

Conflict

Research on conflict in close relationships (friends, colleagues, family, or romantic partners) has revealed the importance of conflict in understanding relationship dynamics (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Grych et al., 2000; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Conflict can be conceptualized as a kind of disagreement or argument that disrupts behavior or communication (Gunlicks-Stoessel & Powers, 2009), and specifically in the following studies it is defined as a verbal dyadic exchange wherein romantic partners are not in agreement. Conflict in romantic relationships predicts poor physical health such as immune dysregulation and poor mental health such as increased depressive symptoms (Gouin et al., 2008; Boals, 2014). Furthermore, using the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS), researchers found destructive strategies implemented to deal with relationship conflict (i.e., domination, submission, and interactional reactivity) were negatively related to communication, satisfaction, respect, love, and sexual attitudes (Zacchilli et al. 2009).

Conflict is inherent in most relationships and research suggests it can impact the functioning, quality, and maintenance of romantic relationships (Salvatore et al., 2011). Not all conflict is unhealthy, however, and conflict can vary greatly by mediating factors. For example, a longitudinal study found participants who were more securely attached in infancy were better able to recover from conflict in their adult romantic relationships (Salvatore et al., 2011). Communication quality and emotion regulation may also play a role in the impact of conflict on a relationship. For instance, negative conflict styles, such as engaging withdrawal or avoidance during a fight, have been shown to be significantly associated with poorer relationship satisfaction even after controlling for whether the conflict was satisfactorily resolved (Cramer, 2000). Further, the degree to which one or both partners can regulate their emotional expressions and reactions in a conflict likely strongly influences the overall impact of the conflict.

Ultimately, there seem to be a wide range of variables that may influence the processes and outcomes of conflict.

An understudied variable that likely influences conflict is the meaning one makes about a conflict. Attribution theory offers a starting ground to understanding cause and blame around conflict and MORC theory seeks to focus that lens on meaning making tendencies specifically related to relationship conflict.

Attribution Theory

The way people make sense of the world is often filtered through attributions (Brun et al., 2021). Attribution theory suggests that people assign causes to behaviors or outcomes, driven by a desire to understand themselves and their environment (Brun et al., 2021). Attribution theories attempt to explain perceived causation for one's own behavior or the behavior of others (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Brun et al., 2021). For example, when a partner in a romantic relationship arrives late to a date, the waiting partner may assume the partner is disinterested in the relationship. Attribution theories are often dichotomized into *internal* processes that correspond to internal motives and beliefs that guide behaviors, as well as *external* influences, such as situational or environmental explanations for behavior (McLeod, 2012). If a person assumes their romantic partner is disinterested in the relationship because they are late to the date, it may cause the waiting partner to emotionally withdraw in a self-protective strategy. In this way, attributions often stem from desires for safety and predictability, however, this does not mean attributions are unbiased or rooted in reality.

Attributions are influenced by identities, preferences, and experiences, which can lead individuals to make attributions in consistent and somewhat inaccurate ways. This is referred to as attribution bias (Jouini et al., 2018; Harvey & Weary, 1984). Attribution bias can occur

because people have systematic biases which can lead them to assign attributions incorrectly. For example, players, coaches, and sports writers were found to attribute game success to internal reasons and make external attributions for failure (Harvey & Weary, 1984). Another fundamental attribution error is the tendency to assign internal attributions to other people's behaviors and external attributions to their own behavior (Ross, 2018; Harvey & Weary, 1984). Other variables, such as gender, can also influence attribution trends. Research shows that women are more likely to blame themselves if they fail, while men are more likely to attribute their failures to bad luck or chance (Jouini et al., 2018). This tendency has been shown to reveal itself early in development. A study of secondary school children found that girls attributed academic success to hard work and teachers' favor, whereas boys attributed their success to cleverness, talent, and luck (Lightbody et al., 1996). In other words, internal and external attributions are impacted by experience and bias, and partners' meaning making about conflict is likely influenced by whether or how much a partner turns to internal or external motives to explain behavior.

In addition to individual influences in attributions, like identity and biases, attributions are also influenced by relationship contexts (Thurman, 1988). For example, one study focused on rules within friendship and found that dissolution of friendship was often attributed to the violation of rules which were mainly centered around exchange of rewards and intimacy (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). In other words, when a friendship ends, individuals often attribute the dissolution of the relationship to not enough rewards or intimacy between the friends.

In romantic relationships, attributions are made about behaviors, relationship functioning, conflict, and dissolution (Manusov, 2009; Stephanou, 2021; Harvey et al., 2013). Individuals who report more positive relationship functioning tend to attribute the success of their relationship to internal and controllable factors (love, passion, communication, honesty)

(Stephanou, 2021). Conversely, individuals who report more negative relationship functioning often attribute the lack of relationship success to uncontrollable, external, and unstable factors (untrustworthiness, lack of passion, ineffective communication) (Stephanou, 2021). Furthermore, Harvey et al. (2013) showed systematic attributional bias with respect to relationship dissolution, such that there is a general tendency for individuals to report themselves as the one who wanted to break up, regardless of the initiator. In other words, attribution bias can shape an individual's experience of relationship conflict and dissolution.

In romantic relationships, conflict is one of the most prime areas for attributions as it is often unsettling, confusing, or scary, and can threaten the viability of the relationship (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). Given these high stakes emotions and outcomes tied to conflict, it makes sense that partners often seek to understand the source of the conflict, likely to try to better ensure that type or topic of conflict does not happen again. Just like all other areas where attributions are made, blame about conflict is still likely shaped by experience, bias, and internal and external motives (Sinclair & Monk, 2004; Jory et al., 2018).

Romantic partners might exhibit a consistent tendency to attribute blame for relationship conflict to either themselves, their partner, or to the relationship more broadly (Sinclair & Monk, 2004). For example, after a fight about jealousy, a romantic partner might think their own insecurities were the root of the jealousy, which means they are responsible for the conflict. Sprecher (1994) found that people who thought they were responsible for conflict that led to a break-up experienced fewer negative emotion, such as depression and anger. Conversely, a person might think their partner's actions caused the feelings of jealousy, which means their partner is to blame for the conflict. Research suggests people who attribute blame for conflict to their partners experience more negative emotions, like sadness (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), and

lower relationship satisfaction (Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981). Finally, some romantic

partners might think that a fight about jealousy means that they are a bad match together and

attribute the conflict to the relationship. Research has shown that individuals who attribute blame

for conflict to the relationship broadly instead of to either individual partner tend to be happier,

more socially active, and more confident (Newman & Langer, 1981). These associations

between attribution tendencies and relational processes and outcomes reveal the importance of

identifying consistent patterns of meaning making. Just like attribution biases are tendencies, the

way partners assign meaning to conflict throughout their relationship likely exhibits a consistent

tendency.

The most common measure of romantic relationship attribution is the Relationship

Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincher & Bradbury, 1992), which is a questionnaire that asks

respondents to imagine their spouse performing certain behaviors and indicate how much they

agree or disagree with attribution statements. For example, one item in the RAM asks, "*Your*

husband begins to spend less time with you" and then asks the respondent how much they agree

or disagree with statements like *"My husband's behavior was due to something about him (e.g.,*

the type of person they are; the mood they were in)" and *"My husband's behavior was motivated*

by selfish rather than unselfish concerns" (Fincher & Bradbury, 1992). By strongly agreeing, the

respondent would be endorsing internal attributions for their spouse's behavior; conversely

strong disagreement with the statements would endorse external attributions. Jory et al., (2018)

found that these measures can restrict attribution of blame in that it assumes that internal and

external attributions are mutually exclusive. In other words, by conceptualizing internal and

external attribution on a continuum, current measures of attribution are limited to singular causes

of behavior, internal or external. Furthermore, the RAM is centered around interpretation of a

partner's behavior, not conflict between partners. While attributions of blame can be explored

through behavior and demeanor, this may not be sufficient in exploring meaning making

regarding a fight or conflict. A measure of meaning making that is not centered solely on internal

or external thinking might allow for more complete assessments of conflict.

Meaning Making of Relationship Conflict Theory

The new meaning making of relationship conflict (MORC) theory offers a framework to

understanding the ways couples make sense of an argument. MORC is defined as a cognitive and

emotional internal process wherein a partner seeks to make sense of how and why a conflict

occurred with their romantic partner and attempts to identify the source of the conflict. MORC

theory is conceptually different than attribution theory in that attributions have been

conceptualized as a cognitive process that assess evidence and assign blame, whereas MORC

theory recognizes emotional processes, such as attachment, influence the way conflict is

understood. MORC theory suggests that relationship conflict can be understood across three

dimensions: self-focused, partner-focused, and couple-focused. These dimensions are not limited

to internal or external attributions, instead encouraging individuals to consider if a conflict means

something about themselves, their partner, or the relationship in general.

The first of these dimensions, self-focused meaning making, reflects an individual who

tends toward self-blame in meaning making about the conflict. For example, following a conflict

an individual might think they did not express themselves clearly or believe they could do better

at communicating next time. A tendency towards self-focused meaning making indicates one's

sense of responsibility, and possibly guilt, about contributing to the relationship conflict.

The second of these dimensions, partner-focused meaning making, recognizes the

tendency of an individual to believe their partner was to blame for the conflict. Individuals who

endorse this dimension are more likely to believe their partner intentionally provoked the fight. For example, an individual might think their partner likes to "push their buttons" or doesn't listen to them when they are arguing. In this way, for individuals who score higher on this factor, responsibility is placed primarily on the partner.

Finally, the third dimension is couple-focused meaning making, in which the individual believes that the conflict reflects the negative state of the relationship, overall. Individuals who endorse this dimension believe that the couple interacts in ways that tend to promote conflict. Unlike the other factors, this way of meaning making about relationship conflict does not assume one person is to blame. To score low on self-, partner-, and couple-focused meaning making would indicate less engagement of meaning-making overall.

However, currently no tool exists to assess meaning making in conflict in romantic relationships, which may help us better understand the mechanisms at play in the association between conflict and romantic relationship satisfaction. As such, the authors sought to create and test a scale of conflict meaning making in romantic relationships. While this study aims to identify three different subscales within meaning making, our following study will use the overall score as it relates to attachment and rumination. Grounded in attribution theory and new MORC theory, the two proposed studies that follow develop and test a scale of meaning making in romantic conflict (MORC) and explore the meaning of relationship conflict through adult attachment styles.

Where attribution of blame may identify perceived individual responsibility, meaning of conflict is likely a different construct than attributions that can consider complex perceptions of blame and thus requires its own measure. Considering the vast nuance of attributional tendencies in response to conflict and the foundational research of attribution theory in relationship

dissolution, it makes sense to turn our focus to attributional trends in romantic relationship conflict, which is why we created the Meaning of Relationship Conflict (MORC) Scale.

Hypotheses

Given the literature outlined thus far, the authors expected: [H1] the newly created MORC scale exhibited a 3-factor structure representing meaning assigned to "self-focused", "partner-focused", and "couple-focused." Next, [H2] we hypothesize that the scale will be highly correlated with, but different from, a scale of attributions.

Methods

Participants

The final sample consisted of 119 individuals (see Table 1.1). The average age of participants was 21.3 (range = 18 – 26, SD = 1.9). The sample was predominantly female (73.95%), primarily heterosexual (68.06%) and predominantly Caucasian (47.89%).

Measures

Meaning of Relationship Conflict Scale (MORC)

The 16-item Meaning of Relationship Conflict (MORC) scale identified three theoretically distinct categories of meaning making following conflict: self-focused, partner-focused, and couple-focused. Respondents were asked to think about the kinds of thoughts they have after a fight with their partner, and to indicate how much they have the kinds of thoughts described in the items. Answers range on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (I never have this type of thought after a fight) to 5 (I think this a lot after a fight). The following are example items: "*After a fight with my partner, I often find myself thinking I am bad at relationships*" (self-focused) and "*After a fight with my partner, I often find myself thinking they don't understand my point of*

view" (partner-focused). Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .73 for the overall scale, .88 for the self-focused scale, .73 for the partner focused scale, and .70 for the couple focused scale.

Attribution Scale (RAM)

The Relationship Attribution Measure (*RAM*; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) is a 10-item measure that assesses attributions for partner behavior of married couples. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with six attribution statements made about negative partner behaviors (e.g., *"Your spouse criticizes something you say"*) on a 6-point scale ranging from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*. Rated statements assess causal attributions and responsibility attributions.

Procedure

Items for the MORC scale were generated within a graduate research lab focused on empirical examination of romantic relationship processes. Based on the above theorized background, graduate students generated items that could reflect the thinking of individuals more likely to engage in meaning making that is self-focused, partner-focused, or couple-focused. Items were then analyzed by the group and the research team leader and adjusted or removed based on group consensus.

To test the resulting set of items, participants were recruited through both a university data collection platform and community-based collection methods. Individuals who had been in a committed romantic relationship of one month or longer were eligible for participation. Individuals were given access to an electronic link to a survey containing the items, which they completed following informed consent procedures.

To examine the factor structure of the developed scale, we first conducted an exploratory factor analysis, allowing for all items to load freely. We examined item level loadings, removing

any items that fall below .40. Next, we examined the correlation between the MORC scale and the RAM attribution scale, which revealed a strong but not overwhelming association (.71).

Results

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with oblique rotation was performed on the 16 items. Results revealed three factors (see Table 1.2). This analysis showed support for three distinct factors, with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Together, these factors accounted for 67% of the variance. Three items exhibited cross loadings greater than .40 and were therefore removed from further analysis. Further, one item failed to load on any factors above .40 and was therefore dropped. Therefore, the remaining 12 items were retained for further examination (see Table 1.3 for item loadings).

Four items loaded strongly (.40 or above) on Factor 1 which appeared to be capturing the hypothesized subscale of "self-focused" meaning making. Three items loaded satisfactorily on Factor 2, which seemed to be capturing "partner-focused" meaning making. Finally, 5 items loaded satisfactorily onto Factor 3, seemingly capturing "couple focused" meaning making. The 3 factor scale, comprised of the final set of 12 items, was used in the next study.

STUDY TWO

Literature Review

Convergent and Divergent Validity

The establishment of a new measure calls for additional testing to examine variables that should, and should not, be associated (Borsboom et al., 2004). Meaning making employs various cognitive and attributional processes (Harvey et al., 2013), thus the authors consider rumination and mindfulness to be the most related and not related, respectively, to the MORC scale. Rumination has been conceptualized as a cognitive process that involves repetitively focusing on distress and possible causes and consequences of these symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Rumination and the MORC theory are similar in that they involve past events, with individuals wondering why something happened, and possible thinking about the meanings of these events (Watkins & Roberts, 2020). However, rumination and meaning of conflict are arguably distinctly different. Rumination is associated with sustained processing of problems and negative emotions in a way that promotes inactivity and hopelessness (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The MORC theory examines a person's tendency in how they think about the meaning of a problem/conflict but does not focus on mistakes or justification for the conflict in the way that ruminative processes do. For these reasons, rumination is an ideal construct for testing convergent validity. In this way it is expected that rumination will be associated with scores on meaning of relationship conflict, but not a total overlap, which would indicate the constructs are highly related but distinct.

In addition to examining the MORC scale alongside similar constructs, it's important to test it against constructs with which it should be strongly oppositely associated. Mindfulness is

expected to be negatively associated with the MORC scale to show divergent validity. Mindfulness has been described as focusing attention to the present moment and has been adopted as a psychological approach for increasing awareness of mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behavior (Bishop et al., 2004). Research has found that when an individual is more mindful, they report less avoidant behavior and negative reactivity during conflict as well as greater relationship satisfaction (McGill et al., 2016). For example, when a partner in a romantic relationship consistently forgets to clean the dishes after saying they would, a highly mindful partner might notice their hands clench with frustration and catch themselves about to make a passive-aggressive comment. Instead, they focus on breathing, non-judgement, and simply calmly ask their partner to do the dishes. Conversely, in response to dirty dishes, someone who harbors resentments, passive-aggressively avoids confrontation, or becomes dysregulated would be expected to have lower levels of mindfulness. When considering conflict related cognitive processes, lower mindfulness scores may reflect a tendency to reflect on the past and focus on the source of conflict. Present-centered awareness, or mindfulness, should be inversely related to high levels of meaning making of conflict. In this way, a person could be a little mindful, but we would still expect a weak association with the MORC scale.

In summary, it is hypothesized that [H2] MORC will be highly correlated with, but different from, a scale of rumination. Additionally, [H3] higher scores on mindfulness will be negatively correlated to MORC scores.

MORC and Attachment

An individual's attachment style can provide insight into personal schemas about the world and can influence how attributions are made (Davis et al., 2003). Attachment style can be seen as one possible framework for how an individual seeks contact and relationships with

others. This can impact how an individual perceives closeness and emotional intimacy, how they communicate and responds to emotional needs, and resolves conflict (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; Davis et al., 2003).

When a person's romantic partner is available and responsive in times of need, they can develop *secure attachment* in which they trust and rely on the comfort of their partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Adults who are low in both anxious and avoidant proximity-seeking strategies are considered to have a secure attachment style (Paetzold et al., 2015). An individual with secure attachment will more likely feel worthy of love, feel more satisfied in a relationship, and have a partner who reports high levels of gratification (Civilotti et al., 2021). Secure individuals are also more likely to report higher marital satisfaction, less relational conflicts, and higher self-esteem (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Securely attached individuals utilize strategies to seek the support of others and likely sustain a sense of trust in others and seek out others as a way to cope from a stressful event (Graci & Fivush, 2017). This tendency may impact conflict-related meaning making processes in that securely attached individuals report greater confidence that others can aid in distressing times (Graci & Fivush, 2017). In other words, a securely attached individual might trust that their partner is trying to help and wants to be understood during a fight and as such they might be less likely to be self or partner focused when reflecting on relationship conflict.

When a person's attachment figure is not reliable or supportive, a sense of security may not develop, and a person may form an insecure attachment style and turn to other proximity seeking strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Insecure attachment can present as *dismissive* or *anxious/preoccupied* styles. Additionally, when a person's attachment figure is abusive, frightening, and/or unpredictable, *disorganized attachment* may develop in which a person does

not demonstrate an organized secure, anxious, or avoidant strategy for dealing with distress. Instead, these individuals engage with an incoherent schema that may present with fearful, conflicted, disorganized, apprehensive, disoriented, or other odd proximity-seeking behaviors (Paetzold et al., 2015).

When an attachment figure consistently rejects bids for comfort and closeness, an individual may seek to cope with distress on their own and develop a dismissive attachment style. (Paetzold et al., 2015). An individual with dismissive attachment style will engage more in avoidant attachment strategies and behaviors, may turn to autonomy rather than contact-seeking strategies, is often uncomfortable with closeness, and values independence (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). More avoidant individuals may experience a fear of intimacy that leads to less constructive resolution tactics and less self-disclosure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This tendency may impact conflict-related meaning-making processes in that individuals with a dismissive attachment style may turn more outward (partner-focused meaning making) in their reflections following relationship conflict. In other words, someone with a dismissive attachment style might think their partner is being clingy and demanding during a fight by not recognizing their desire for independence and space to self-regulate.

An attachment figure who inconsistently attends to an individual's needs, sometimes being responsive and sometimes unresponsive, can produce anxious/preoccupied attachment. An anxious/preoccupied attachment style is one where an individual may crave closeness, have high insecurity and anxiety about the relationship, and is sensitive to rejection (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Highly anxious individuals may have learned that reliable support is not always available and as such lack trust in their partners' availability despite desiring proximity in times of distress (Paetzold et al., 2015). Fear of abandonment leads a more anxious person to cope with stress

ineffectively, fear their bids for attention will be ignored, and use more hyperactive strategies to seek proximity and support (Graci & Fivush, 2017). These tendencies may shape conflict-related meaning making processes for anxious/preoccupied individuals in that they can be hypervigilant in identifying threats and conflict, feel unable to self-soothe or self-regulate, and thus may turn inward (self-focused meaning making) in their reflections following relationship conflict. In other words, someone with an anxious/preoccupied attachment style may think the reason a fight escalates is because they overreact to their partner or are too needy.

Disorganized attachment can develop when an individual fears their attachment figure because this figure displays frightening or threatening behaviors in their daily interactions (Paetzold et al., 2015). In childhood, this fear response is paradoxically opposed by the biological drive that compels infants to seek proximity to their attachment figure when experiencing distress. As a result, a disorganized attachment style forms, which in adulthood, can present as a fear of romantic attachment figures in general (Paetzold et al., 2015). Adults with disorganized attachment may seek their partner in times of distress, but their approach may appear chaotic or incoherent because proximity causes simultaneous apprehension and desire towards their partner (Paetzold et al., 2015). Adults who are higher in disorganization may display a lack of coherence in their mental representation of themselves, others, and relationships, which impacts potential meaning making processes in that they may have trouble understanding motives, behaviors, or attitudes related to relationship conflict. Disorganized adults may demonstrate uncertain or contradictory intentions regarding their own role in close relationships (Paetzold et al., 2015).

Attachment beliefs relate to meaning making processes in that individuals utilize distinct attachment-related narratives in a consistent, scripted manner (Graci & Fivush, 2017; Ein-Dor et

al., 2011). In other words, more anxious/preoccupied attached people create more anxious narratives, and more dismissive attached people create more avoidant narratives, than secure individuals (Ein-Dor et al., 2011). Research examining the link between working models of attachment and attribution processes in romantic relationships has found individuals high in attachment related anxiety endorsed relationship-threatening attributions for their partner's negative behaviors whereas avoidant individuals endorsed pessimistic attributions for their partner's positive behaviors (Collins et al., 2006).

Research also shows attachment style can influence conflict communication. Domingue and Mollen (2009) found that securely attached couples reported the most constructive conflict communication, whereas insecurely attached couples reported the most demand-withdraw behaviors, mutual avoidance, and withholding conflict communication. Attachment style is also associated with impact of conflict. For anxiously attached individuals, relationship-based conflicts negatively impact perceived satisfaction and closeness. Additionally, highly anxious individuals reported feeling more distressed and escalated the severity of the conflicts (Campbell et al., 2005). Ultimately, one's attachment style is likely a predictor of the ways in which they make meaning about conflict, perhaps turning more inward (self-focused meaning making) or more outward (partner-focused meaning making).

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are proposed: [H4a] individuals with higher self-reported dismissive attachment styles will be more likely to engage in greater partner-focused meaning making of conflict and [H4b] individuals reporting higher ratings of anxious/preoccupied attachment styles will be more likely to report greater self-focused meaning making of conflict.

Furthermore, [H4c] individuals with higher secure attachment will be more likely to report greater couple-focused meaning making of conflict.

Methods

Participants

Participants (different sample than Study 1) were recruited through a university data collection platform (different than Study 1) and through community-based collection methods. Individuals who have ever been in a committed romantic relationship of one month or longer were eligible for participation. Individuals were given access to an electronic link to a survey containing the items, which they completed following informed consent procedures.

The final sample consisted of 214 individuals (see Table 2.1) who identified as women (47.66%), men (45.79%) and those who identified as nonbinary or gender queer (6.54%). Participants in this sample largely identified as heterosexual (79.43%) and Caucasian (45.79%).

Measures

Attachment (ECR)

The 12-item Experiences in Close Relationship Scale- Short Form (*ECR-SF*; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) was used to measure two dimensions of adult attachment: anxiety and avoidance. The ECR-SF is designed to measure the extent to which the questions describe their feelings about close romantic relationships. Responses range on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). Example items measure dismissive attachment (e.g., "*I try to avoid getting too close to my partner*" and anxious/preoccupied attachment (e.g., "*I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner*").

Mindfulness (CAMS-R)

Mindfulness was measured using the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised (*CAMS-R*; Feldman et al., 2007), a 12-item scale that measures mindfulness and focuses on the degree to which respondents are aware of their thoughts and feelings. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (rarely/not at all) to 4 (almost always) with higher scores reflecting greater mindfulness. Example items include *"I am able to accept the thoughts and feelings I have"* and "*I can tolerate emotional pain"*.

Rumination (PTQ)

The 15-item Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (*PTQ*; Ehring et al., 2011) measures repetitive negative thinking on a scale of 0 (never) to 4 (almost always). Example items include assessment of repetitive-focused thoughts (e.g., *"The same thoughts keep going through my mind again and again"*), as well as intrusive thoughts (e.g., *"Thoughts come to my mind without me wanting them to"*).

Meaning Making (MORC)

The 12-item Meaning of Relationship Conflict (MORC) scale identifies three theoretically distinct categories of meaning making following conflict: self-focused, partner-focused, and couple-focused. Respondents were asked to think about the kinds of thoughts they have after a fight with their partner, and to indicate how much they have the kinds of thoughts described in the items. Answers range on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (I never have this type of thought after a fight) to 5 (I think this a lot after a fight). Example of items ask: "*After a fight with my partner, I often find myself thinking I am bad at relationships"* (self-focused) and "*After a fight with my partner, I often find myself thinking they don't understand my point of view"* (partner-focused).

Results

To examine the associations between the MORC and the variables of attachment, rumination, and mindfulness, a multiple regression was performed (see Table 2.3). Specifically, predictor variables of rumination, mindfulness, and attachment were entered, and the dependent variable of MORC scale was entered (see Table 2.2). Control variables of gender, number of relationships ever experienced, and time since last relationship were entered.

Results revealed support for hypotheses 2 and 3 wherein the correlation between rumination and the MORC scale was $r = .70$, and the correlation between mindfulness and the MORC scale was $r = -.63$. Next, results revealed support for hypothesis 4a, wherein individuals with greater avoidant attachment scores exhibited higher scores on the partner-focused subscale of the MORC scale. Next, we examined hypothesis 4b, which revealed significant results for higher ratings of anxious attachment association with higher ratings on the partner-focused MORC subscale, counter to our hypothesis. Lastly, we examined hypothesis 4c which revealed non-significant results for the association between secure attachment ratings and ratings of couple-focused meaning making.

Discussion

Conflict exists in all relationships and is not inherently good or bad. Research shows that romantic partners might attribute blame to relationship conflict to either themselves, their partner, or the relationship more broadly (Sinclair & Monk, 2004). Conceptualizing blame for conflict to one of these sources is associated with negative emotions (e.g., depression, anger, and sadness) as well as romantic relationship satisfaction (Sprecher, 1994; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981; Grych et al., 2000). The mechanisms underlying the association between romantic relationship dissatisfaction and conflict attribution are unknown,

although Meaning of Relationship Conflict theory suggests one possible variable may be the meaning one makes about conflict (Durtchi et al., 2011).

The Meaning of Relationship Conflict theory recognizes three distinct dimensions of meaning making: self-focused, partner-focused, and couple-focused. A measure was developed and tested in Study 1 of this paper, which assesses these different dimensions of meaning partners assign to their romantic relationship conflict. Our hypothesis was supported and three distinct factors representing these dimensions (self-focused, partner-focused, and couple-focused) were identified in our study.

Although three distinct factors were identified, a high likelihood exists that individuals engage in each type of meaning making at different times and with different people. For example, an individual might typically engage in self-focused meaning making, but after a long, stressful day they may snap at their partner with a partner-focused meaning making response, uncharacteristically. The items were developed with the intent of reflecting an individual's strongest tendency in meaning making of most conflicts.

With our scale created and evidenced of reliability, we moved to test the validity. Until now, no studies have evaluated the meaning making that partners engage in about their conflict, and there have been no validated measures of meaning making of conflict. In the first part of Study 2, we tested for convergent and divergent validity of the Meaning of Relationship Conflict Scale. As predicted, there was a significant, strong, positive correlation between rumination scores and MORC scores. Specifically, individuals who reported greater rumination also scored higher for meaning of conflict on each of the three factors. This means that individuals who tend to repetitively focus on distress and possible causes and consequences of these symptoms may also engage in greater meaning making following romantic relationship conflict (Nolen-

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Hoeksema et al., 2008). Similar mechanisms maybe at play as rumination and meaning making reflect a focus on a distressing event. Although MORC theory examines how one thinks about the meaning of a conflict, these constructs are distinct as rumination focuses on maladaptive processes or mistakes, the affective experience, or the outcome of the conflict. On the other hand, meaning making of conflict specifically focuses on the reasons associated with the conflict and blame. Although rumination and meaning making of conflict were highly related in this study, the theoretical conceptualization and wording of the items suggest these two constructs are notably different.

Additionally, as hypothesized, there was a significant, strong, negative correlation between mindfulness scores and MORC score. This makes sense as individuals who are more mindful reflect a tendency to focus on the present and not reflect on past conflict (Bishop et al., 2004). Being present is likely to be inversely related to higher MORC scores given that meaning making of conflict requires one to think about the past. Therefore, individuals who tend to focus their awareness on the present moment (e.g., more mindfulness) would be less likely to engage in meaning making of relationship conflict.

Finally, the authors found support for the idea of attachment as a potential mechanism that influences meaning making processes. Specifically, individuals with greater insecure attachment styles (dismissive and anxious/preoccupied) report higher scores for partner-focused meaning making of conflict, while individuals with secure attachment were less likely to engage in any meaning making. This makes sense as adult attachment styles are considered a potential framework for how an individual perceives closeness, communicates needs, and resolves conflict (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; Davis et al., 2003). As hypothesized [H4a], individuals with higher avoidant scores were found to be more likely to engage in partner-focused meaning making.

Individuals with a dismissive attachment style may experience a fear of closeness that leads to less self-disclosure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and thus may turn more outward and focus on their partner when attempting to understand conflict in their relationship.

Individuals with an anxious/preoccupied attachment style had higher scores for meaning of conflict as compared to individuals with secure attachment styles. We also expected that individuals with higher anxious scores would be more likely to engage in self-focused meaning making [H4b], but this finding was not significant. Instead, we found that individuals with higher anxious scores were found to be more likely to engage in partner-focused meaning making. This may be because an anxious/preoccupied attachment style can result in hyperactive attachment strategies that reinforce a lack of trust in a partner's availability or responsiveness in times of distress (Paetzold et al., 2015; Graci & Fivush, 2017). Self-focused meaning making might provide a sense of control following a conflict, but individuals with high anxious scores might also focus on their partner as a way protect themselves and make sense of conflict. Further research is needed to explore if there are other variables at play, such as recurrence of the conflict or duration of the relationship that might influence the tendency to engage in self-, or partner focused meaning making.

Notably, secure attachment was not a predictor for couple-focused meaning making. In fact, individuals with secure attachment reported less meaning making of conflict overall. Individuals with low anxious and avoidant scores are said to be securely attached (Paetzold et al., 2015) and are thought to be comfortable with closeness and separation (Davis et al., 2003). This confidence in their relationship may make them less disposed to focus on conflict. Individuals with secure attachment may be more variable in how they think about conflict. They may not engage in meaning making following relationship conflict because they are not as focused on

determining why the conflict occurred, if it will happen again, or who is responsible for it. Securely attached individuals who do engage in meaning making of conflict might require a more neutral dimensions to accurately represent their meaning making processes.

Limitations

The findings in these studies are limited by several important factors. First, the design relies on self-report which can be susceptible to various biases or exaggerated answers. Additionally, respondents reflected on conflict that occurred at different times in the past. It could be that how one makes meaning of conflict is different immediately following the conflict as compared to when one thinks about it months later.

Another limitation in our design is the inability to pair partner responses. Comparing partner meaning making of conflict might reveal additional information about individual meaning making tendencies. Future researchers are advised to ask about partner perception as well. Assessing a partner's meaning making of conflict might impact the primary partner's meaning of conflict. For example, if your partner tends to focus on your role in conflict, you might be more likely to be self-focused when reflecting on meaning-making around that conflict as well.

Finally, our sample is predominately drawn from a college sample and the relationship that the participants reflected on was likely short-term and/or casual. While it is valuable to know how meaning making of conflict is understood in young relationships, it is possible that meaning making tendencies present differently in long-term relationships (e.g., marriage) given the unique features of these relationships (such as children, commitment level, etc.). Future research could focus on a variety of covariates such as developmental stage, current relationship status, number of relationships previously held, or commitment level of relationship.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, these studies reveal unique findings. This study provided a theoretical framework for patterns of meaning-making in relationship conflict. Results suggest that people make meaning of relationship conflict by focusing on themselves, their partner, or their relationship more broadly. Future studies could explore the three identified subscales further. Emotional processes are likely to influence these tendencies. Results confirm that attachment style is one these processes in that dismissive attached individuals are more likely to focus on their partner when making meaning around romantic relationship conflict. Clinical researchers should continue to explore the ways in which attachment influences meaning making and relational conflict. Securely attached individuals may experience meaning making differently and further research could examine a fourth, neutral meaning making dimension. Additionally, therapists could use the MORC scale to reveal client tendencies and behaviors when it comes to making meaning or processing relationship conflict.

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APPENDIX

Tables

Table 1.1
Participant Demographics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Deviation
Age	18	26	21.3	1.9

	Frequency	Percent		
Gender Identity				
Female	88	73.95		
Male	29	24.37		
Non-binary	2	1.68		
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	81	68.06		
Lesbian	2	1.68		
Gay	21	17.64		
Pansexual	1	0.84		
Asexual	0	0		
Queer	14	11.76		
Race				
Black / African American	9	7.56		
American / Alaska Native	1	0.84		
Pacific Islander	11	9.24		
Latino, Latina, Latinx	33	27.73		
White, European	57	47.89		
Mixed Race	8	5.88		
Other	1	0.84		

Table 1.2

Exploratory Factor Analysis for the Meaning of Conflict Scale

	Initial Eigenvalues		
Factor	Eigenvalue	Percent of Variance	Cumulative Percent
1	18.3	41.9	41.7
2	11.1	9.1	50.7
3	7.2	5.6	56.3

Table 1.3

Initial Factor Loadings of Items

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1. I am bad at relationships.	**.81**	.21	.20
2. Why can't I be better at communicating/fighting?	**.86**	.39	.31
3. I'm not sure they like/love me.	.22	**.79**	.19
4. I will try harder next time.	**.70**	.31	.23
5. They pick fights with me all the time.	.33	**.71**	.20
6. Why are they like this?	.09	**.68**	.29
7. They are trying to make me the bad person.	.48	.59	.55
8. Why don't they understand my point of view?	**.55**	.31	.28
9. If they just changed a little, we wouldn't fight all the time.	.56	.65	.73
10. They never listen to me.	.61	.72	.53
11. I'm not sure this relationship is going to last.	.21	.37	**.89**

12. Maybe they are not the right partner for me.	.30	.14	**.77**
13. We are not good as a couple.	.11	.15	**.81**
14. We push each other's buttons, even when we don't mean to.	.21	.34	.35
15. Why can't we stop these fights?	.22	.37	**.69**
16. This isn't going to work.	.14	.27	**.71**

Table 2.1

Participant Demographics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. Deviation
Age	18	25	24.1	1.3

	Frequency	Percent		
Gender Identity				
Female	102	47.66		
Male	98	45.79		
Non-binary / queer	14	6.54		
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	170	79.43		
Lesbian	11	5.14		
Gay	20	9.34		
Pansexual	0	0		
Asexual	3	1.40		
Queer	10	4.67		
Race				
Black or African American	39	18.22		
American Indian	3	1.40		
Alaska Native	0	0		
Pacific Islander	12	5.60		
Latino, Latina, Latinx	41	19.15		
White, European	98	45.79		
Mixed Race	17	7.94		
Other	4	1.89		

Table 2.2

Bivariate Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. MORC	--					
2. Rumination	.70***	--				
3. Mindfulness	-.63**	-.55**	--			
4. Avoidant Attachment	.59*	.32	.21	--		
5. Anxious Attachment	.71***	.58**	.22	.66**	--	
6. Secure Attachment	.61**	.21	.49*	.20	.19	--

Note. MORC refers to Meaning of Relationship Conflict Scale

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*

Table 2.3

Hierarchical Regression Predicting MORC

	B	β	ρ
Anxious attachment	.39	.34	< .001
Avoidant attachment	.44	.41	<.001
Secure attachment	.25	.22	.14

Table 2.4

Measures

Scales	M	SD	Range
Experiences in Close Relationship Scale – Short Form (ECR-SF)	4.1	1.2	1-7
Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale – Revised (CAMS-R)	3.5	0.6	1-7

Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ)	1.9	0.9	1-4
Meaning Making of Relationship Conflict (MORC)	3.8	1.3	1-5