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The Delusion of the Disappearing Self? Attachment Avoidance and the Experience of Externally Invisible Self-Loss in Romantic Relationships

Erin K. Hughes¹, Lydia F. Emery², Emma L. McGorray³, Wendi L. Gardner⁴, and Eli J. Finkel^{4, 5}

Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Fairfield University

Department of Psychology, University of Chicago

Department of Psychology, Carleton College

Department of Psychology, Northwestern University

Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

All of us experience self-change in relationships, but our subjective experiences of change may not always align with external metrics of such change. We hypothesized that people with higher attachment avoidance are more likely to experience self-change as a loss, which in turn predicts lower relationship commitment. We further hypothesized, however, that there would be a disparity in perceptions, such that avoidant people will experience self-loss that external metrics—including their own behaviors and ratings from third-party coders—do not detect. Results from four studies, which employed a variety of cross-sectional (Studies 1 and 4) and longitudinal (Studies 2 and 3) methods, demonstrated that higher attachment avoidance predicted greater experienced loss of self, which in turn predicted lower commitment. Studies 2–4 also revealed evidence for the hypothesized disparity in perceptions: Avoidantly attached individuals' experience of greater self-loss failed to emerge when using a variety of external metrics of self-loss, producing Avoidance × Loss Type (experienced vs. external metric) interaction effects. These studies suggest that avoidantly attached people, who tend to be vigilant to autonomy threats in relationships, experience relationship-linked changes as losses, even though external metrics fail to detect such loss.

Keywords: romantic relationships, attachment, self-concept

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000468.supp

We won't have to give up a thing

We'll stay who we are.

Right?

-Stephen Sondheim, Company

In the Act 1 finale of the 1970 musical *Company*, Bobby, the perpetually single protagonist, tries to convince himself that he is ready for a lifelong commitment. He paints a vision of marriage that, ultimately, speaks to his fears about commitment; he wants someone to "marry me," but only "a little." The type of marriage he imagines

would allow Bobby to avoid the perils of commitment—if someone marries him only a little, he will not have to change anything about who he is. Bobby fears that he will lose parts of himself in the pursuit of uniting his life with another person, and this fear of losing himself has prevented him from committing to a close, interdependent relationship. The present research examined this phenomenon: Avoidantly attached people, who are uncomfortable with closeness or emotional intimacy and who seek to maintain their independence and autonomy (Mikulincer, 1998), reported losing themselves in their relationships. In turn, these feelings of self-loss are linked to reduced commitment to the relationship.

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Erin K. Hughes https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9934-692X

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When we conducted these studies, Erin K. Hughes, Lydia F. Emery, and Emma L. McGorray were at Northwestern University. The work here is related to Erin K. Hughes' dissertation work.

Erin K. Hughes played a lead role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, and writing-original draft. Lydia F. Emery played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, and writing-review and editing. Emma L. McGorray played a supporting role in data curation, investigation, methodology, and writing-review and editing. Wendi L. Gardner played a supporting role in conceptualization and writing-review and editing. Eli J. Finkel played a supporting role in conceptualization and writing-review and editing.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Erin K. Hughes, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Fairfield University, 1073 North Benson Road, Fairfield, CT 06824, United States. Email: ehughes@fairfield.edu

A defining feature of romantic relationships is interdependence: the partners' influence on each other (Kelley et al., 1983). Among the most important domains of influence is the self-concept, which is the foundation for how people understand themselves and the world around them (James, 1890; McConnell, 2011). Given that romantic partners can shape each other's self-concepts in both beneficial and detrimental ways (Mattingly et al., 2014; Rusbult et al., 2009), interdependence involves risk (Murray et al., 2006).

Not everybody experiences the risks of interdependence in the same way. For example, people with higher attachment avoidance tend to be less trusting of their romantic partners and place a greater value on their own autonomy and independence (Collins, 1996), tendencies that may make them sensitive to the possibility of partner influence. Avoidantly attached people may also view partner influence in particularly negative ways, even more negatively than warranted—which, in turn, may be linked to reduced commitment to the relationship (Gere et al., 2013). Another central feature of avoidantly attached individuals is their need for self-reliance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). We argue that due to this need for selfreliance and their defensive autonomy, avoidantly attached people may be especially concerned with losing the self in the relationship and thus sensitive to any potential relationship-induced self-concept changes. Specifically, we hypothesized that attachment avoidance is linked to a person's belief that their involvement in the relationship is causing them to lose important aspects of their identity, which in turn predicts lower commitment to the relationship. We further hypothesized a disparity between (a) avoidantly attached people's subjective experiences of self-loss and (b) the self-loss of those individuals as captured by external metrics (metrics emerging from outside the mind of the individual reporting on their attachment avoidance), such that avoidantly attached people's experience of self-loss will be greater when compared with external metrics of self-loss.

Romantic Attachment

Bowlby (1969) identified attachment as a behavioral system that bonds an infant to their primary caregiver—their so-called attachment figure. The attachment system is especially activated when the infant is feeling a lack of security or is seeking support, affection, or protection by relying on an attachment figure. As children grow toward adulthood, their attachment figure often shifts to be their romantic partner rather than their childhood caregiver (Fraley, 2019; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994). People's experiences with close others, especially attachment figures, shape their working mental models, which, akin to scripts, predispose them to beliefs about what relationships should be like, how close others such as romantic partners will act toward them, and what sort of treatment they deserve in their relationship (Bowlby, 1973; Shaver et al., 1996). The theory suggests that people exhibit individual differences in their tendencies to experience attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance—with low scores on each of these dimensions characterized as attachment security.

Such individual differences in attachment orientation influence relationships through their effects on attention, memory, expectations, and beliefs about the self and others (Collins, 1996; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997; Sümer & Cozzarelli, 2004). People with a secure orientation are comfortable with closeness and intimacy, trust their romantic partner, and feel loved and respected by their partner (Collins, 1996; Mikulincer, 1998). In contrast, people with an anxious

orientation yearn to be close to others but fear being rejected by those same people, and people with an avoidant orientation prioritize self-reliance and distrust others' dependability and supportiveness. Anxious attachment has been characterized as a sensitivity to the possibility of rejection that colors the way anxious people view their environments and interact with their partners (Mikulincer et al., 2009)—for example, by producing more inflated perceptions of conflict than would be expected based on partner reports (Campbell et al., 2005) or by interpreting the partner evaluations as more negative than independent ratings would suggest (Collins & Feeney, 2004). We theorize that analogously, attachment avoidance can be characterized as a sensitivity to the possibility of self-change in intimate relationships, which can produce more inflated perceptions of self-loss than would be expected based on external metrics. In other words, perceptions of self-loss that emerge from within the mind of an individual with high attachment avoidance may be inflated relative to perceptions of that person's loss that emerge from outside of that individual.

Attachment Avoidance

Attachment avoidance centers on the distrust that one's partner is dependable and thus results in an overreliance on the self (Bowlby, 1969; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1991; Gere et al., 2013; Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003, 2007; Overall et al., 2015; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Highly avoidant people (relative to less avoidant people) keep an emotional distance from their romantic partner, are wary of relying on their romantic partner, and believe that they can and should handle situations on their own (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). For fear of having their autonomy encroached upon, avoidant individuals are more likely to withdraw from partners (Tan et al., 2012) and react negatively to situations in which they would be dependent on their partner, preferring to maintain their independence (Overall & Sibley, 2009). They are also less likely to use "we-talk" or plural pronouns when talking about their relationships (Dunlop et al., 2020). This vigilant emphasis on self-reliance ultimately makes them relatively inscrutable to their romantic partner, which undermines the partner's ability to know them accurately (Emery et al., 2018).

Avoidance also distorts people's perceptions in relationship-destructive ways. Avoidantly attached people overestimate their partners' experiences of negative emotions (Overall et al., 2015), exhibit relationship-destructive memory biases regarding their partner (Mikulincer, 1998; also see Luchies et al., 2013), and react with hostility and defensiveness when their partner relies on them for support (Overall et al., 2015; Overall & Sibley, 2009). In general, they are prone to perceiving their romantic partner and their romantic partner's actions in a negative light (Collins, 1996; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Whereas previous work has examined negative misperceptions regarding the partner, we hypothesize that those misperceptions would also translate to the self. In particular, we argue that avoidantly attached people should show a defensive tendency to perceive—more so than indicated by external metrics—that their relationship is undermining their own personal identity or self-concept. Those higher in attachment avoidance tend to limit their dependence on their partner and instead seek out autonomy and independence (Gere et al., 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Indeed, one hallmark of attachment avoidance is an overreliance on the self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). This self-reliance may in turn increase vigilance regarding their own self-concept.

Similar to how individuals with higher anxious attachment tend to be overly dependent on their partners and show heightened sensitivity to diminution in their partners' feelings for them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), individuals with higher avoidant attachment tend to be overly self-reliant and thus may show heightened sensitivity to diminution in the self-concept.

The Self-Concept

The self-concept encompasses anything a person considers "me" or "mine," including attributes, characteristics, perspectives, and roles (James, 1890; McConnell, 2011). It is the foundation of a person's identity and exhibits a blend of stability and change over time (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Shapka & Keating, 2005), with changes offering opportunities for growth but also the risk of loss. Relationships are a common avenue for both change and, more specifically, loss to the self (Mattingly et al., 2014; Rusbult et al., 2009). According to the two-dimensional model of self-change (Mattingly et al., 2014), romantic partners can change each other's self-concept by increasing or decreasing the positive or negative aspects of the self, resulting in four potential types of self-change: (a) adding positive content (self-expansion), (b) adding negative content (self-adulteration), (c) subtracting positive content (self-contraction), and (d) subtracting negative content (self-pruning).

Given that people change their partner's self-concept in both positive and negative ways, allowing oneself to be influenced is a risky proposition, especially for individuals who are prone to distrust romantic partners and are vigilant to maintain a sense of autonomy and independence. People who are prone to seeing partner influence in a negative light (Collins, 1996) are likely to be much more concerned about losing positive aspects of their self-concept (self-contraction) than about shaving off negative aspects of their self-concept (selfpruning). Thus, we hypothesize that, in the context of self-loss, avoidantly attached people are likely to be especially concerned with self-contraction. Such individuals are hypothesized to be especially vigilant toward losing their good qualities, which is likely to have adverse consequences for their relationship quality, as previous work has found that people who felt that their partner was detrimental to their self-concept had worse relationship outcomes (e.g., romantic commitment; Mattingly et al., 2014).

Relationship Commitment

Researchers have long known that attachment avoidance is associated with lower relationship quality (Collins, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These effects may be driven in part by the tendency of avoidantly attached people to limit their dependence on their romantic partner (Gere et al., 2013) and to experience discomfort with closeness or reliance on their partner (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Simpson et al., 2011). Such effects may be especially relevant to relationship commitment—a person's desire or intention to continue the relationship and the central subjective indicator of feeling dependent on the partner (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). As avoidantly attached people often have lower romantic commitment (Collins, 1996; Gere et al., 2013; Simpson, 1990), they are also less likely to engage in relationship-maintaining behaviors. We suggest that potentially perceiving self-loss could be a relationship-denigrating behavior that contributes to avoidantly attached individuals' lower levels of commitment. Yet, to reiterate, we also hypothesize that

reported experiences of self-loss will be discrepant from the degree of self-loss revealed by metrics outside of the perceiver (external metrics). Avoidant people are especially concerned with autonomy and protecting themselves from partner influence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), and these concerns can shape their experiences, including tendencies to overestimate their partner's negative emotions (as compared with partner reports; Overall et al., 2015) and underestimate their partner's level of support (as compared with third-party coders; Collins & Feeney, 2004). These mismatches between avoidant people's experiences and others' accounts may extend to the domain of the self as well, with avoidant people experiencing greater loss of self—especially self-contraction—than is captured by external metrics.

The Present Studies

In the present research, we considered the perception of self-loss as a novel process that is associated with both higher attachment avoidance and lower relationship commitment. Specifically, we reasoned that avoidantly attached people would be vigilant to influence from their romantic partner, to the point of reporting experiencing partner-induced losses to the self-concept that do not correspond with external metrics of self-loss. In the present work, our use of the term "external metrics" refers to assessments emerging from outside the mind of the individual reporting on their attachment avoidance. We further theorized that experiencing self-loss will, in turn, relate to lower romantic commitment.

Formally, our hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Attachment avoidance will be positively associated with experienced self-loss.

Hypothesis 2: Attachment avoidance will be negatively associated with romantic commitment, an effect that is mediated by experienced self-loss.

Hypothesis 3: The association of attachment avoidance with self-loss will differ between a person's own experiences and external metrics, such that avoidant people will experience greater self-loss than what external metrics would suggest is warranted (a self-loss discrepancy).

Study 1 examined the association between attachment avoidance and experienced self-loss cross-sectionally (Hypothesis 1) and tested whether experienced self-loss mediated the association between attachment avoidance and commitment (Hypothesis 2). Study 2 was a 5-week longitudinal study that tested all three of our hypotheses with participants reporting on self-loss from change requests from the partner. Independent coders then rated the change requests for how much such requests would typically result in a loss; thus, Study 2 afforded a first test of the hypothesis that avoidant individuals will report greater experiences of self-loss than the external metric (Hypothesis 3). In this study, we also examined the specific type of experienced self-loss, expecting that avoidantly attached individuals will specifically report self-contraction (losing positive aspects of the self) more so than self-pruning (losing negative aspects of the self). Study 3 was an 18-month longitudinal study of a community sample of romantic couples. As in Study 2, we considered both general self-loss and self-contraction; we also tested whether our effects of attachment avoidance are robust after controlling for the effects of distrusting their romantic partner, which has been considered a key aspect of attachment avoidance. Study 4 used a "choose-your-own-adventure" procedure in which participants read through an interactive story about themselves and their partner and chose between two options on how to react throughout the story. In each case, one choice resulted in a loss of self and one maintained the self. All four studies received an institutional review board approval from Northwestern University.

As noted previously, the current research examined how avoidant individuals' own reported experiences of self-loss may be greater when compared with external observations of their self-loss. In the present work, we used a variety of external metrics of self-loss to triangulate on whether avoidant individuals are experiencing greater self-loss than others might detect. First, in Study 2, we asked participants to write about a change request from their partner and had third-party coders rate the extent to which pursuing that change would generally tend to produce self-loss. We hypothesized a mismatch between the extent of self-loss avoidant participants reported would be induced by the partner's change request and the extent of self-loss that third-party coders perceived. In Study 3, we used third-party coders' ratings of how much participants' relationship-induced changes, as discussed in a filmed conversation, resulted in a loss to the self. Last, in Study 4, participants made choices regarding the "choose-your-own-adventure" scenarios that involved prioritizing either maintaining or jettisoning a trait they currently possessed. We used the proportion of loss choices made by the participant as our external metric of self-loss and predicted that avoidant participants would report experiencing more self-loss than their own behavioral choices actually reflected.

Although there may be other ways to measure how much self-loss has occurred, and certainly other external metrics, our use of these approaches enabled us to examine whether the experiences of self-loss reported by avoidantly attached individuals are detected by a range of other sources, evaluating the persistence of the effect. For each of the external self-loss metrics, there are associated strengths and limitations, which we detail in each study as well as in the General Discussion section. Available data, as well as all the materials and syntax from these studies, can be found at https://osf.io/7d2gn/?view_only=0c799e57ea3f4ebf879fca36971d3e61 (Hughes et al., 2024).¹

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested the hypotheses that attachment avoidance would be positively associated with reported experiences of self-loss in the relationship (Hypothesis 1) and that experienced self-loss would mediate the association between attachment avoidance and commitment (Hypothesis 2). We controlled for attachment anxiety in all of the analyses. We recruited an online sample of people in romantic relationships for this first test of these hypotheses. Study 1 solely focuses on the reported experiences of self-loss.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We obtained 198 participants through Prolific from the United States. Participants included 58.6% women, 38.9% men, 2.0% nonbinary/third gender, .5% no response; 81.8% European American,

White, Anglo, or Caucasian; 9.6% African American, Black, African, or Caribbean; 11.1% Asian American, Asian, or Pacific Islander; 8.6% Hispanic American, Latino(a), or Chicano(a); 2.5% Native American or American Indian; .5% other race or ethnicity; and 75.3% heterosexual, 5.1% gay or lesbian, 13.6% bisexual, .5% queer, 3.5% pansexual, 1.5% asexual, and .5% other orientation. All participants were in romantic relationships (58.6% married/committed lifelong partnership, 39.4% dating seriously, 2.0% dating casually; average relationship length of 8.25 years [SD=8.97]). The mean age was 31.58 years (SD=10.91, 18–77). Participants responded to a series of surveys, including our main variables as well as some additional measures.

Measures

Attachment (Wei et al., 2007). Participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships short form scale as our measure of attachment (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with subscales for attachment avoidance (e.g., "I try to avoid getting too close to my partner"; six items; $\alpha = .86$; M = 2.21, SD = 1.11) and attachment anxiety (e.g., "I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner"; six items; $\alpha = .77$; M = 3.57, SD = 1.31). Each study includes measures beyond what is included in the article. However, we report all measures that we analyzed for the purposes of the current studies.

Experienced Self-Loss (Adapted From Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Participants completed a measure of perceptions of losing the self in the relationship ($1 = strongly \ disagree$, $7 = strongly \ agree$; e.g., "as a result of our relationship, I have lost my sense of self" "I have lost parts of who I am in my relationship"; two items; $\alpha = .80$; M = 2.44, SD = 1.46).

Romantic Commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998). Participants completed a measure of romantic commitment ($1 = do \ not \ agree \ at \ all$, $9 = agree \ completely$; e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner"; seven items; $\alpha = .86$; M = 7.97, SD = 1.35).

Results

First, we grand mean centered all variables.⁴ Next, we tested our first hypothesis: that avoidance would be positively associated with reported experiences of self-loss in one's relationship. We conducted additional analyses controlling for demographic variables in all four studies, including relationship length, gender, and age, as well as self-esteem in Study 3. All hypothesis tests from these analyses

¹ The only data not publicly available are from Study 3, which involved a community sample of romantic dyads. These data are available upon request, but not publicly available, as we strive to maintain confidentiality of these participants in light of the unique confidentiality concerns associated with data from multiple partners in a relationship together (Joel et al., 2018). In addition, although our hypotheses were formed a priori, they were not preregistered.

² See the Supplemental Material for the results without anxiety in the models. All tests show identical conclusions when controlling or not controlling for attachment anxiety.

³ We originally recruited 200 participants, but two reported not being in a romantic relationship, leaving us with 198 participants.

⁴ In a post hoc power analysis for Study 1, Hypothesis 2, we were at 87% power with 1,000 simulations using the Monte Carlo power analysis for indirect effects (Schoemann et al., 2017).

yielded identical conclusions and can be found in the online Supplemental Material. A multiple regression analysis predicting self-loss from avoidance and anxiety revealed that avoidance was significantly associated with experienced self-loss, B = .322, SE = .093, t(194) = 3.451, p < .001, 95% CI [.138, .506], whereas anxiety was not, B = .106, SE = .079, t(194) = 1.339, p = .180, 95% CI [-.050, .263].

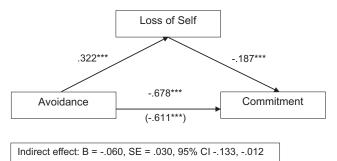
Next, we examined our second hypothesis: that avoidance would be negatively associated with commitment, mediated by reported experienced self-loss. First, we tested the direct effect and found that attachment avoidance was uniquely negatively associated with romantic commitment, B = -.678, SE = .075, t(195) = -9.077, p < .001, 95% CI [-.825, -.531], while attachment anxiety was not, B = .050, SE = .063, t(195) = .789, p = .431, 95% CI [-.075, .175]. Then we conducted a mediation analysis using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Hayes, 2013) with attachment avoidance as the predictor, reported experienced self-loss as the mediator, romantic commitment as the outcome variable, and attachment anxiety as a covariate. We found a significant indirect effect, indicating support for our second hypothesis (Figure 1).

Study 1 Discussion

This first study provided initial evidence for Hypotheses 1 and 2. We found that attachment avoidance was associated with experienced self-loss in the relationship and, in turn, lower commitment, beyond any potential effects of anxiety. However, Study 1 focused solely on one's own *reported experiences* of self-loss. It is possible that those higher in attachment avoidance report experiences of self-loss that differ from external metrics. As we propose in Hypothesis 3, people higher in attachment avoidance may report experienced self-loss in the relationship that is greater than what might be anticipated based on external metrics—those from outside those individuals' minds. In Study 2, we examined whether those higher in attachment avoidance show such a discrepancy between their experiences and an external metric of self-loss.

Figure 1

In Study 1, Experienced Self-Loss Mediated the Association Between Attachment Avoidance and Romantic Commitment, Controlling for Attachment Anxiety



Note. $(-.611^{***})$ represents the direct effect between avoidance and commitment when loss of self is included in the model. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

In Study 2, we also tested whether the association of avoidance with self-loss is uniquely relevant to the loss of positive qualities (vs. negative qualities). According to the two-dimensional model of self-change (Mattingly et al., 2014), there are two types of self-loss: self-contraction and self-pruning. Self-contraction is the loss of a person's positive qualities due to their romantic relationship. Self-pruning is the loss of a person's negative qualities due to their romantic relationship. As avoidantly attached people often experience overly negative perceptions of their relationship and romantic partner (Collins, 1996; Overall et al., 2015), we expected that highly avoidant people would report experiencing self-contraction more so than self-pruning.

Study 2

In Study 1, we found that attachment avoidance was positively associated with experienced self-loss, which in turn was associated with lower relationship commitment. In Study 2, we further tested those hypotheses and conducted the initial test of the third hypothesis that those higher in attachment avoidance will show a mismatch between experienced self-loss and an external metric of self-loss. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a 5-week longitudinal study that began with participants writing a change their romantic partner wanted them to make. Then, each week, participants saw their partner's change request and reported how much their pursuit of that change resulted in them losing parts of themselves. This study built on Study 1 in three key ways. First, the longitudinal design enables us to examine changes in commitment over time in relation to reported experienced self-loss. Second, our external metric of selfloss is determined by independent coders' ratings of change requests from participants' partners, offering our first metric of self-loss from outside the mind of the perceiver. Third, we examined the specific type of perceived self-loss among those higher in attachment avoidance—whether they believe they are losing positive qualities (self-contraction) or negative qualities (self-pruning).

Method

Participants and Procedure

We obtained 165 undergraduate students in romantic relationships via the psychology subject pool at a midwestern U.S. university. Participants were 63% women, 36.4% men, and .6% another gender identity; 49.7% White or Caucasian, 24.8% Asian or Asian American, 10.9% Latino(a), 8.5% multiracial, 4.8% Black, African American, or African, and 1.2% Middle Eastern or Arab; and 80.9% heterosexual, 8.8% bisexual, 4.4% unsure/questioning, 2.9% gay or lesbian, 1.5% queer, and 1.5% pansexual. Participants had a mean age of 19.10 years (SD = 1.21, 18–23). The average relationship length was 1.25 years (SD = 1.08).

Participants first responded to an intake questionnaire, which included a prompt asking them to describe in detail a change that their partner wanted them to make. After responding to the intake survey, participants received a follow-up survey once a week for 5 weeks. Each week, participants were shown their partner's change request before responding to the questionnaires. All of the participants

^{***} *p* < .001.

⁵ We originally recruited 168 participants but two dropped from the course and one no longer reported being in a romantic relationship before we collected our follow-up measures. Thus, we were left with 165 participants.

participated in the follow-up portion of the study, completing an average of 4.53 out of the five surveys (91%), producing a total of 752 observations. Over the course of the study, 22 participants' relationships ended; these participants no longer responded to our measures of interest following the breakup.

Intake Measures

Change Prompt (Sisson et al., 2022). The change prompt asked participants to respond to the following:

In this longitudinal study, we will ask you questions about an aspect of yourself that your partner has asked you to change. People commonly report wanting to change aspects of their romantic partners. Common desires to change include wanting more commitment, intimacy, emotional expression, and confidence from a romantic partner. These desires can often also include wanting a partner to change their appearance, the way they spend money, their level of tidiness, how sociable they are, or their sleeping patterns. Please describe the change your partner wants you to make in as much detail as possible.

Participants' responses were then piped in to the survey every week when they answered the follow-up measures regarding the change request.

Attachment (Wei et al., 2007). This was the same measure of attachment used in Study 1 (avoidance: $\alpha = .90$; M = 2.02, SD = 1.14; anxiety: $\alpha = .77$; M = 3.62, SD = 1.17).

Types of Self-Change (Mattingly et al., 2014). To minimize participant burden in our study, we adapted the full version of this scale to pull a single item $(1 = not \ very \ much; 7 = very \ much)$ from each type of self-change. For the present study, we focused on the two types of self-loss: (a) self-pruning ("Due to my relationship, I have been able to lose undesirable aspects about myself"; M = 4.47, SD = 1.56) and (b) self-contraction ("Due to my relationship, my positive attributes have decreased"; M = 1.78, SD = 1.17).

Romantic Commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998). This was the same measure as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .89$; M = 7.40, SD = 1.62).

Longitudinal Measures

Experienced Self-Loss. Each week after seeing their response to the change prompt, participants responded to a single item measure of loss: "This last week, this change [the one they had listed and we had piped back to them] made me lose parts of myself" (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; M = 2.48, SD = 1.32).

Romantic Commitment. Participants responded to a singleitem measure of commitment: "In the past week, I felt committed to maintaining my relationship to my partner" (1 = strongly disagree;7 = strongly agree; M = 6.13, SD = 1.02).

External Metric Coding

Coded Self-Loss. A team of two research assistants who were unaware of the hypotheses coded each of the change responses for "how much the change represents a loss of self" on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely; M = 2.53, SD = 1.41, intraclass correlation = .71). The research assistants were trained to note whether complying with the change request would result in lessening or subtraction from the self-concept, which would be scored high on the scale, or would result in growth or no change to the self-concept, which would be scored low on the scale. The

average of the two research assistants' ratings was used for the external self-loss measure.

An example of a low self-loss response (M = 1.00) is: "My partner would like me to have more self-confidence in myself and love myself as much as I love him or the people close to me." This is an example of low self-loss because the participant is saying that their partner wants them to be *more* of a specific trait (e.g., "My partner would like me to have *more* self-confidence"). An example of high self-loss (M = 5.00) is: "I think my partner wants me to be less sociable because his perception of college is frat parties and cheating so he would feel more comfortable if I didn't go out as much." This is an example of a high self-loss because the participant is noting that their partner wants them to be *less* of a specific trait that the participant identifies as part of the self (e.g., "My partner wants me to be *less* sociable.").

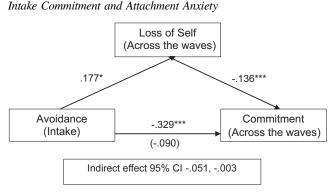
Results

First, we grand-mean centered all variables. Due to the longitudinal nature of our study, we used a two-level multilevel model, with waves of data collection nested within individuals. We then examined the association between attachment avoidance and reported experienced self-loss across the 5 weeks (Hypothesis 1), with both avoidance and anxiety as predictors. Avoidance was significantly positively associated with experienced self-loss, b = .250, SE = .068, t(157.073) = 3.667, p < .001, 95% CI [.115, .385] whereas anxiety was not associated with experienced self-loss, b = .089, SE = .063, t(155.583) = 1.401, p = .163, 95% CI [-.036, .214].

Next, we examined whether experienced self-loss averaged across the 5 weeks mediated the association between attachment avoidance at intake and commitment averaged across the 5 weeks (Hypothesis 2). First, we tested the direct effect with both avoidance and anxiety as predictors and found that attachment avoidance was uniquely negatively associated with romantic commitment, b = -.329, SE = .061, t(138.633) = -5.428, p < .001, 95% CI [-.448, -.209], while attachment anxiety was not, b = .006, SE = .056, t(137.344) =.111, p = .911, 95% CI [-.105, .118]. Next, for the mediation, we controlled for intake attachment anxiety and intake commitment to test for changes in commitment over time. We used the Monte Carlo method for assessing mediation (MCMAM; Selig & Preacher, 2008) with 20,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. We found evidence for mediation (see Figure 2), suggesting that experienced self-loss is associated with a decline in commitment over time for those higher in attachment avoidance.

Next, we examined whether attachment avoidance was associated with the external metric of self-loss, the third-party coding of the change request. We used a multiple regression because our measures of avoidance, anxiety, and the change request prompt were collected at a single timepoint. Attachment avoidance was not associated with coded self-loss, B = -.018, SE = .101, t(154.00) = -.178, p = .859, 95% CI [-.218, .182], nor was attachment anxiety, B = -.025, SE = .097, t(154.00) = -.261, p = .795, 95% CI [-.217, .167]. Thus far, we have found that attachment avoidance was associated with reported *greater* experienced self-loss but *not* associated with external self-loss. These findings provide support for our hypotheses, but they do not test whether those two effects differ significantly from each other. In a sense, they test the simple effects underlying an Avoidance \times Loss Type interaction effect, which tests whether the association of attachment avoidance with experienced self-loss

Figure 2In Study 2, Experienced Self-Loss Mediated the Association Between Attachment Avoidance and Romantic Commitment, Controlling for



Note. (-.090) represents the direct effect between avoidance and commitment when self-loss is included in the model. CI = confidence interval.

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

differed significantly from the association of attachment avoidance with an external metric of self-loss.

Next, we tested this interaction effect, using multilevel modeling. To do so, we restructured the data set as follows: (a) We had each participant contribute two rows to the data set, one for reported experienced self-loss and one for the external metric of self-loss; (b) we created a new loss variable indicating whether that row in the data set contained the experienced (.5) or the external (-.5) loss measure; and (c) we created a new self-loss column that contained both the experienced and external metrics. We also standardized the measures of self-loss because they were on different scales. Testing the interaction effect involved specifying a two-level multilevel model in which observations (one for external and one for experienced) were nested within individuals. The model predicted self-loss from attachment avoidance, loss type, and their interaction.⁶ The interaction was significant, such that the association between attachment avoidance and experienced self-loss was significantly more positive than was the association between avoidance and external self-loss, b = .302, SE = .110, t(157.503) = 2.740, p = .007, 95% CI [.08, .52] (see Figure 3).

Next, we examined the simple effects. For those with high attachment avoidance, there was a positive association with loss type (external self-loss = -.5, experienced self-loss = .5), suggesting that highly avoidant people report experiencing greater self-loss than do third-party coders, b = .318, SE = .156, t(158.881) = 2.039, p = .043, 95% CI [.010, 625]. For those with low attachment avoidance (-1 SD), there was a nonsignificant negative association with loss type, b = -.286, SE = .155, t(158.002) = -1.847, p = .067, 95% CI [-.592, .020]. Ultimately, this may suggest that avoidant people perceive requested changes as losses in a way that third-party coders may not.

Thus far, we have considered our measure of reported experienced self-loss likely to be representative of self-contraction (the loss of positive qualities) rather than self-pruning (the loss of negative qualities). To test this assumption, we conducted two validity tests in Study 2. First, we examined the correlations of attachment avoidance with both self-contraction and self-pruning, hypothesizing that the

positive association with self-loss would be limited to self-contraction. In support of this hypothesis, attachment avoidance was indeed positively associated with self-contraction, r(121) = .222, p = .014, but not with self-pruning, r(121) = -.104, p = .254. Second, we conducted a multiple regression to test whether the association of attachment avoidance with self-contraction was robust beyond any association with self-pruning. As expected, this multiple regression analysis revealed a significant positive association of avoidance with self-contraction, b = .224, SE = .090, t(118) = 2.491, p = .014, 95% CI [.046, .401]. These two validity checks provided support for our assumption that our self-loss measures across studies were tapping into self-contraction rather than self-pruning.

Study 2 Discussion

In Study 2, we found further evidence to support our hypotheses. First, attachment avoidance was associated with experienced self-loss when participants thought about a specific change their partner asked them to make (Hypothesis 1). We also found that attachment avoidance at intake was positively associated with experienced self-loss throughout the 5 follow-up weeks, which predicted decreases in commitment (Hypothesis 2). However, attachment avoidance was not associated with external coding of the change as a loss, suggesting a discrepancy between experienced self-loss and external ratings of the change request (Hypothesis 3). Additionally, evidence suggested that the type of self-loss relevant to the current studies is that of self-contraction (the loss of positive qualities) rather than self-pruning (the loss of negative qualities).

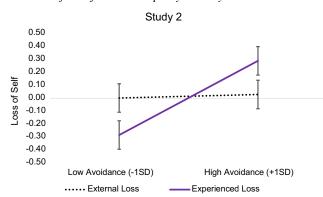
Our third hypothesis implied a contrast between experienced self-loss and an external measure of self-loss—a test of whether attachment is linked to a tendency to experience self-loss even though external metrics fail to detect such loss. To investigate this comparison, we sought metrics that allowed for a direct comparison between participants' perceptions and a potentially more objective perspective. A strength of the Study 2 metrics was that they were very precise in using almost identical wording for what the participants reported on and the wording that the coders reported on. Specifically, participants wrote what their partner wanted them to change at intake (e.g., "be less sociable ...") and then each week saw the change request and reported on how much: "This last week, this change made me lose parts of myself." Independent coders saw the change request itself (e.g., "be less sociable ...") and rated: "How much the change represents a loss of self."

However, a limitation of this comparison is that whereas participants reported weekly on how much the change made them lose parts of themselves, the coders have information only on the change request, not on the participant's pursuit of the change. Thus, it is possible that the requested changes may not seem particularly imposing to independent coders but that highly avoidant people find the pursuit of the change requests to be self-loss inducing. That said, the coders' focus on the change implied by the request itself (rather than the participant's pursuit of the change) was unlikely to explain the discrepancy between participants' reports and independent coders' ratings. On average, the independent coders evaluated the outermost

⁶ We obtain identical results when including anxiety in the model for Hypothesis 3. Please see the Supplemental Material for those models.

⁷ In a post hoc power analysis for Study 2, Hypothesis 3, we were at 79.20% power (95% CI [76.55, 81.68]) with 1,000 simulations.

Figure 3 *Evidence of a Self-Loss Discrepancy in Study 2*



Note. In study 2 findings, attachment avoidance has a positive association with experienced self-loss but a negative association with an external metric of self-loss, suggesting a self-loss discrepancy. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

limit for how self-loss inducing the change request could be (i.e., the maximum potential self-loss that could occur if the change was made), and it is unlikely that participants pursued the change request to such a high degree. This suggested that Study 2 likely provided a conservative test of our hypothesis. Nonetheless, we addressed this limitation directly in Studies 3 and 4.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 tested our hypotheses across distinct samples (an online sample of individuals in more established relationships and an undergraduate sample of individuals with shorter relationship lengths) and timeframes (cross-sectionally and longitudinally across 5 weeks). In Study 3, we conducted an 18-month longitudinal study with a community sample of couples. Once again, we tested all three hypotheses, and we attempt to rule out alternative explanations. Specifically, in this study, we control for trust in analyses predicting commitment. Lower levels of trust in one's partner are typically proposed as a major mechanism linking attachment avoidance to low relationship quality (Bowlby, 1969; Collins & Read, 1990; Overall et al., 2015; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Indeed, trust is foundational for romantic partners and relationship well-being (Campbell & Stanton, 2019), and individuals who have lower trust in their partner tend to misremember transgressions to be more severe and harmful than they actually were (Luchies et al., 2013). To ensure that our effects are robust when accounting for a previously established link, we tested whether our mechanism (experienced self-loss) independently contributes to low commitment, over and above the implications of trust.

In this study, we filmed romantic partners discussing how they each have changed as a result of involvement in their romantic relationship, and independent coders rated how much those changes represent self-loss. To account for the limitation of our external self-loss metric in Study 2, we created a more direct comparison between the experienced self-loss metric and external self-loss metric in Study 3. Additionally, we further probed self-contraction as the specific type of self-loss in this study. In Study 2, we found that those higher in

attachment avoidance reported greater experienced self-loss in terms of self-contraction—a loss of positive qualities due to their relationship. However, the evidence in Study 2 was only cross-sectional, as we assessed self-contraction at intake only. In Study 3, we examine both experienced self-loss and self-contraction longitudinally.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited a diverse community sample of 108 couples (216 individuals) from a large metropolitan area in the midwestern United States (49.1% men, 49.1% women, 1.4% nonbinary; age: M = 36.38 years, SD = 12.64; 63.4% European American, White, Anglo, or Caucasian; 24.1% African American, Black, African, or Caribbean; 8.3% Asian American, Asian, or Pacific Islander; 7.9% Hispanic American, Latino(a), or Chicano(a); 2.3% Native American or American Indian; 2.8% another race or ethnicity; 78.7% heterosexual, 6.0% gay or lesbian, 5.6% bisexual, 5.6% queer, 2.3% pansexual, 1.4% another orientation; relationship duration: M = 8.26 years, SD = 8.41; 37.0% married). Eligibility criteria for this study included being in a relationship for at least 6 months, being at least 25 years old, having been born in the United States, and having internet access.

Participants completed an online screening questionnaire. After enrolling in the study, both members of the couple completed an intake questionnaire. Next, they completed a series of filmed discussions. These discussions were filmed in the couple's home or place of residence to reach a wider range of couples (see Emery et al., 2023). These discussions were facilitated by teams of research assistants who traveled around the Chicagoland area. The couples completed five discussion topics; of relevance to the current work, they engaged in a 7-min discussion about how each of them had changed, if at all, over the course of their relationship.

Next, both members of the couple completed follow-up surveys 6, 12, and 18 months later, with 864 total observations.

Measures

Attachment (Wei et al., 2007). This was the same measure of attachment used in Studies 1 and 2 (avoidance: $\alpha = .78$, M = 2.19, SD = .95; anxiety: $\alpha = .75$, M = 3.28, SD = 1.19). This measure was taken at intake.

Experienced Self-Loss (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). This was the same measure used in Studies 1 and 2. For Study 3, this measure was taken at intake and all three follow-ups (intake: $\alpha = .73$, M = 2.37, SD = 1.33; follow-ups: $\alpha = .85$, M = 2.39, SD = 1.31).

Two-Dimensional Model of Self-Change–Self-Loss Subscales (Mattingly et al., 2014). This included the two full self-loss subscales from the two-dimensional model of self-change and measured self-contraction (the loss of positive qualities due to one's relationship) and self-pruning (the loss of negative qualities due to

⁸ Six couples were not comfortable with researchers in their homes, so these interviews were conducted instead in our lab space on campus.

⁹ We originally aimed to recruit 150 couples; however, we had to stop enrolling new participants in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the follow-up surveys analyzed here, participants completed a 2-week daily diary, a COVID-19 specific survey, and a 2-year follow-up survey. However, only the intake, 6-month, 12-month, and 18-month surveys contain the key measures of experienced self-loss.

one's relationship). These measures were taken at intake and all three follow-ups. In the current study, we use self-contraction at the four time points (intake: $\alpha = .79$, M = 1.89, SD = 1.18; follow-ups: $\alpha = .73$, M = 2.02, SD = 1.21) for hypothesis testing and self-pruning at intake only (intake: $\alpha = .74$, M = 4.28, SD = 1.35) for validity testing.

Romantic Commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998). This was the same measure used in Studies 1 and 2, except on a 7-point scale rather than a 9-point scale. For Study 3, this measure was taken at intake and all follow-ups (intake: $\alpha = .74$, M = 6.55, SD = .67; follow-ups: $\alpha = .88$, M = 6.45, SD = .84).

Trust (**Fletcher et al., 2000**). This was the three-item trust subscale from the perceived relationship quality components scale (e.g., "How much do you trust your partner?" $1 = not \ at \ all$, 7 = extremely). This measure was taken at intake and all three follow-ups (intake: $\alpha = .75$, M = 6.35, SD = .80; follow-ups: $\alpha = .82$, M = 6.26, SD = .91).

External Coded Self-Loss. After the filmed discussion was completed, three research assistants unaware of the study hypotheses watched the videos and summarized the major relationship-induced changes that participants discussed. Then, a separate set of two research assistants, unaware of the study hypotheses, rated these descriptions as to how much the changes represent a loss to the self (1 [not at all], 7 [extremely]; M = 2.84, SD = 2.26, ICC = .91). The research assistants were trained to note whether the change would result in a lessening or subtraction from the self, which would be scored high on the scale, or would result in growth or no change to the self, which would be scored low on the scale. The average of the two research assistants' codes was used as our external metric of self-loss. Some examples of changes that were coded as high self-loss included less outgoing, less independent, and prioritizing the relationship over exploring. Some examples of changes that were coded as low self-loss included healing from loss in life, becoming more mature and responsible, and being able to focus more on professional goals.

Results

Due to the dyadic and longitudinal nature of Study 3, the data were nonindependent. Thus, we grand-mean centered all the variables and used multilevel modeling for all of the analyses. For the intake we used a two-level multilevel model with individuals nested within couples, and for the follow-up data, we used a two-level multilevel model where individuals were nested within couples, and waves were crossed. Last, for Hypothesis 3, we used a three-level multilevel model with loss type (experienced vs. external) nested within individuals, which were nested within couples.

Intake Analyses

First, we examined whether attachment avoidance was positively associated with greater reported experienced self-loss (Hypothesis 1). We used both avoidance and anxiety as predictors and found that both attachment avoidance, b = .402, SE = .095, t(210.996) = 4.221, p < .001, 95% CI [.214, .589], and attachment anxiety, b = .175, SE = .075, t(199.767) = 2.325, p = .021, 95% CI [.027, .323], were positively associated with experienced self-loss in the relationship.

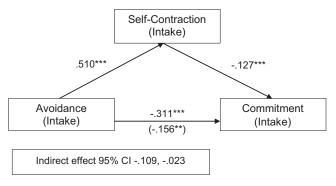
Next, we examined the direct effect of avoidance on commitment with both avoidance and anxiety as predictors and found that attachment avoidance was uniquely negatively associated with commitment, b = -.303, SE = .044, t(200.664) = -6.963, p < .001, 95% CI [-.389, -.217], while attachment anxiety was not, b = -.027, SE = .033, t(173.953) = -.804, p = .423, 95% CI [-.093, .039]. We then tested whether experienced self-loss mediated the association between attachment avoidance and commitment (Hypothesis 2), controlling for attachment anxiety and trust, using the MCMAM. However, we did not find a significant indirect effect (95% CI [-.044, .014]).

Next, we also tested our hypotheses using a specific type of self-loss: self-contraction. As we did in Study 2, we focused on self-contraction, as attachment avoidance was positively associated with self-contraction, r(214) = .463, p < .001, and negatively associated with self-pruning, r(214) = -.143, p = .037, at intake. Additionally, the positive association between self-contraction and avoidance, b = .524, SE = .077, t(209.921) = 6.779, p < .001, 95% CI [.372, .677], held, even when controlling for self-pruning. Similar to reported experienced self-loss, both attachment avoidance, b = .404, SE = .076, t(207.580) = 5.228, p < .001, 95% CI [.253, .555], and attachment anxiety, b = .270, SE = .059, t(186.099) = 4.565, p < .001, 95% CI [.154, .387], were positively associated with self-contraction.

Next, we examined whether self-contraction mediated the association between attachment avoidance and commitment, controlling for attachment anxiety and trust, again using the MCMAM. We found a significant indirect effect, such that attachment avoidance was associated with self-contraction, which in turn was negatively associated with commitment (see Figure 4).

To test our third hypothesis, we first examined whether attachment avoidance was associated with the third-party coders' ratings of self-loss from the participant's own description of how they changed. To do so, we used actor attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety at intake as our predictor variables and the third-party coders' rating of the actor's change as self-loss as the outcome variable. Neither attachment avoidance, b = -.308, SE = .181, t(184.637) = -1.701, p = .091, 95% CI [-.664, .049], nor attachment anxiety, b = -.029, SE = .141, t(166.806) = -.203, p = .839, 95% CI [-.308, .250], was associated with the third-party coders' ratings of actor's self-loss.

Figure 4
In Study 3 Intake, Self-Contraction Mediated the Association Between
Attachment Avoidance and Romantic Commitment, Controlling for
Attachment Anxiety and Trust



Note. $(-.156^{**})$ represents the direct effect between avoidance and commitment when self-contraction is included in the model. CI = confidence interval

^{**} p < .01. *** p < .001.

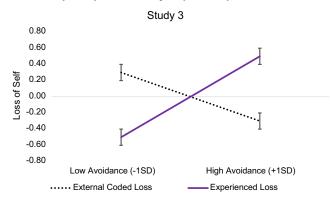
Thus far, we found that attachment avoidance was associated with greater reported experienced self-loss but not associated with an external metric of self-loss. Next, we tested whether those two effects differ significantly from each other by examining the Avoidance × Loss Type interaction effect. We used multilevel modeling to test this interaction effect. To do so, we restructured the data set and standardized our measures to align with the same analyses conducted in Study 2. To remain consistent with Study 2, we used general experienced self-loss ratings, instead of selfcontraction. We used the third-party coding of the actor's change as the external metric of self-loss. Testing the interaction involved specifying a three-level multilevel model in which observations (one for external and one for experienced) were nested within individuals and individuals were nested within couples. The model predicted self-loss from attachment avoidance, loss type, and their interaction. The interaction was significant, such that the association between attachment avoidance and reported experienced self-loss was significantly more positive than the association between avoidance and third-party coded loss of self, b = .401, SE = .098, t(393.676) = 4.107, p < .001, 95% CI [.209, .594] (see Figure 5).¹⁰

Next, we examined the simple effects. For those with high attachment avoidance (+1 SD), there was a significant positive association with loss type (external coded self-loss = -.5; experienced self-loss = .5), suggesting that highly avoidant people report experiencing greater self-loss than is warranted by external metrics, b = .398, SE = .139, t(392.433) = 2.866, p = .004, 95% CI [.125, .004]. For those with low attachment avoidance (-1 SD), there was a significant negative association with loss type, suggesting that less avoidant people report experiencing less self-loss than is warranted by external metrics, b = -.405, SE = .137, t(395.931) = 2.962, p = .003, 95% CI [-.673, -.136]. Ultimately, these effects suggest that highly avoidant people experience changes to the self as a loss more so than less avoidant people do.

Longitudinal Analyses

Next, we tested our hypotheses over time. For Hypothesis 1, we predicted experienced self-loss across the follow-up waves from

Figure 5
Evidence of a Self-Loss Discrepancy in Study 3



Note. In study 3, attachment avoidance had a positive association with experienced self-loss at intake but a nonsignificant association with our external self-loss metric, coded filmed discussions, suggesting a self-loss discrepancy. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

attachment at intake. Both attachment avoidance, b = .312, SE = .080, t(201.890) = 3.908, p < .001, 95% CI [.155, .470], and attachment anxiety, b = .256, SE = .063, t(184.709) = 4.080, p < .001, 95% CI [.132, .379], were positively associated with experienced self-loss.

Next, we examined the direct effect for Hypothesis 2. We found that both attachment avoidance, b = -.265, SE = .047, t(197.037) = -5.623, p < .001, 95% CI [-.358, -.172], and attachment anxiety, b = -.105, SE = .036, t(160.029) = -2.938, p = .004, 95% CI [-.176, -.035], were negatively associated with commitment across the waves. For Hypothesis 2, we tested whether experienced self-loss across the waves mediated the association between attachment avoidance at intake and romantic commitment across the followups. In this analysis, we controlled for intake attachment anxiety, intake commitment, and trust across the waves and used the MCMAM. Contrary to our hypothesis, we did not find a significant indirect effect (95% CI [-.045, .002]).

Next, we tested our hypotheses with self-contraction specifically. For Hypothesis 1, we examined the associations between intake attachment avoidance, intake attachment anxiety, and self-contraction across the waves. Both attachment avoidance, b=.360, SE=.062, t(172.950)=5.821, p<.001, 95% CI [.238, .482], and attachment anxiety, b=.297, SE=.047, t(140.826)=6.294, p<.001, 95% CI [.204, .391], were positively associated with self-contraction.

For Hypothesis 2, we examined whether self-contraction across the waves mediated the association between attachment avoidance at intake and commitment across the follow-up waves, controlling for intake attachment anxiety, intake commitment, and trust across the waves and used the MCMAM. We found a significant indirect effect (95% CI [-.046, -.002]; see Figure 6).

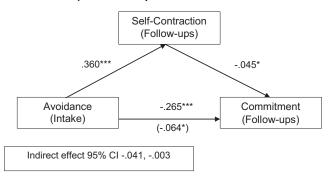
Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 tested all three of our hypotheses in a community sample of couples. Attachment avoidance was associated with both greater experienced general self-loss and self-contraction specifically at intake as well as across the follow-up waves (Hypothesis 1). We did not find evidence that experienced general self-loss mediated the association between avoidance and commitment, but we did find that self-contraction mediated this association (Hypothesis 2), even when controlling for trust, anxiety, and intake commitment. These effects may indicate that those with higher attachment avoidance are particularly sensitive to the perceived loss of their positive qualities, which has downstream consequences for commitment, over and above the effects of trust. Given that trust is often a key explanation as to why those higher in attachment avoidance have lower relationship quality (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the robustness of our findings when controlling for trust suggests that the perceived sense of losing positive qualities due to the relationship may be another key aspect. Ultimately, we found that avoidantly attached people may show defensiveness against partner-induced change to their own self-concept, and this is associated with negative relationship outcomes. Additionally, we found that despite avoidantly attached individuals experiencing self-loss, independent coders' ratings of filmed discussions of the couples talking about how they have

¹⁰ In a post hoc power analysis for Study 3, Hypothesis 3, we used the simr package for *R* (Green & MacLeod, 2016). This analysis revealed we were at 99.80% power (95% CI [99.28, 99.98]) with 1,000 simulations.

Figure 6

Self-Contraction Mediated the Association Between Attachment Avoidance and Romantic Commitment, Controlling for Intake Attachment Anxiety, Intake Commitment, and Trust Across the Waves, in Study 3 Follow-Ups



Note. (-.064*) represents the direct effect between avoidance and commitment when loss of self is included in the model. CI = confidence interval

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

actually changed in their relationship did not match the participants' perceptions (Hypothesis 3).

In Study 3, we created an external self-loss metric that was more comparable with participants' experienced self-loss metric than the external metrics used in the previous two studies. For the experienced self-loss metric, participants rated how much they have lost parts of themselves due to their relationship. Participants also took part in a filmed discussion with their partner in which they talked about how they have changed due to their relationship. Independent coders then rated the changes from the filmed discussion in terms of how much they would result in a loss of self. Thus, a strength of Study 3 is that both the experienced and external self-loss metrics were global evaluations of how the participant has changed in their relationship, unlike in Study 2. However, our approach in Study 3 still relied on the perceptions of outside coders' perceptions, who do not have all of the information participants do and who may have their own biases. In Study 4, we created an external metric of self-loss that examined self-change behaviorally rather than through evaluation by coders, which allowed us to capture potential discrepancies between what changes individuals perceive and what changes they have actually incorporated.

Study 4

In Study 4, we further tested the hypotheses that attachment avoidance is associated with reported experiences of self-loss due to the relationship (Hypothesis 1) and that experiences of self-loss mediate the association between attachment avoidance and commitment (Hypothesis 2). We also examined our third hypothesis, using the same experienced self-loss metric as in the previous studies, and a behavioral external metric of self-loss. To test this hypothesis, we employed a choose-your-own-adventure methodology in which participants imagined confronting a series of dilemmas in which their partner asked them to jettison a specific trait (e.g., a partner requesting them to be less sarcastic). For each dilemma, they chose between two responses, one of which involved acquiescing to the

partner's request (i.e., relinquishing an aspect of the self) and the other of which involved resisting the request (i.e., maintaining that aspect of the self). This methodology provided a behavioral external metric of self-change: the proportion of choices made that acquiesce to rather than resist the partner's request. After completing this choose-your-own-adventure procedure, participants again rated the centrality of the trait their partner had asked them to jettison. These ratings of trait centrality allowed us to test an additional possibility: that the extent to which individuals change in how central they feel the focal trait is after making behavioral choices would differ by attachment avoidance.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We obtained 279 participants from the United States via Prolific Academic. ¹¹ Participants were 52.7% women, 47% men, 0.4% nonbinary/third gender; 73.8% European American, White, Anglo, or Caucasian, 14.0% African American, Black, African, or Caribbean, 5.4% Asian American, Asian, or Pacific Islander, 12.9% Hispanic American, Latino(a), or Chicano(a), 2.2% Native American or American Indian, 1.8% other race or ethnicity; and 83.2% heterosexual, 1.1% gay or lesbian, 10.4% bisexual, 1.1% queer, 3.6% pansexual, 0.4% asexual, and 0.4% other orientation. Participants were in a romantic relationship (55.2% married/committed lifelong partnership, 40.9% dating seriously, 3.9% dating casually, mean relationship length of 7.38 years [SD = 6.95]) with a mean age of 31.05 years (SD = 9.65, 18–56).

Participants first responded to a series of questionnaires including the demographic questions, a measure of attachment, the centrality of a series of traits to the self, and their partner's name and pronouns. We pulled the series of traits from a list that had been rated in terms of likability (Dumas et al., 2002) and used 25 traits whose likability ratings were around the midpoint of the scale and were thus neutral in terms of valence. We then pilot tested the traits in terms of changeability and likelihood that someone would ask their partner to change that trait (see Supplemental Material for pilot results) and ultimately used 21 traits for the present study. Participants rated how central to the self each of the traits was. From the participants' initial rating of the traits, we randomly selected one of the traits they rated as a 5 out of 7 on centrality to the self to be piped in as the trait their partner wanted them to change, which we call the focal trait moving forward. We chose a trait rated as a 5 for two reasons: (a) so there was the possibility for both downward and upward movement on the scale between the Time 1 and Time 2 ratings of the trait and (b) so it would be a trait above the midpoint, representing a trait that participants would consider part of their self-concept and moderately important to who they are.

Next, participants read that they would be reading a series of scenarios in which they would have to make a choice on how to act, based on a choose-your-own-adventure methodology (Vicary & Fraley, 2007). Participants were told to imagine they were actually conversing with their romantic partner and to make choices based on how they would truly act in that scenario. To make the story as

¹¹ We originally recruited 298 participants, nine reported not being in a relationship, and eight did not choose one of the attributes as a five out of seven on centrality. Thus, we were left with 279 participants.

realistic as possible, the participant's partner's name and pronouns were piped into the scenarios. The story started off with the participant's partner sitting down on the couch with them and saying that they want to talk to the participant about a change they want the participant to make—specifically, a change to possess less of the focal trait (e.g., to be less sarcastic) for the partner and the relationship's well-being (see Supplemental Material for all of the scenarios). Moving through the choose-your-own-adventure procedure, participants encountered 10 scenarios in which they had to make a choice between two options. One of the options would result in loss of self on the focal trait, while the other option would result in not changing the focal trait. For instance, consider a participant whose focal trait was "sarcastic" and who is in a relationship with a partner named "Jay." A sample scenario for this participant is as follows: "Later that day, you are with [Jay] doing different errands. When you get to the first store you have the opportunity to act less [sarcastic]. What are you most likely to do?" For this scenario, the two options were as follows: (a) "Act less [sarcastic]" or (b) "Act as [sarcastic] as you normally would." After going through the 10 scenarios, participants reported their experienced self-loss based on the scenarios, rated the focal trait a second time on its centrality to the self, and rated their level of commitment to the relationship.

Measures

Attachment (Wei et al., 2007). This was the same measure of attachment used in Studies 1–3 (avoidance: $\alpha = .84$; M = 2.77, SD = 1.13; anxiety: $\alpha = .64$; M = 3.92, SD = 1.03).

Centrality. Participants at Time 1 rated 21 traits (e.g., sarcastic, perfectionistic, reserved) on how central each of the traits was to the self $(1 = not \ at \ all, 7 = extremely)$. At Time 2, participants only rated the focal trait a second time on centrality using the same scale (M = 4.16, SD = .77).

Experienced Self-Loss–Adapted (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Participants rated an adapted self-loss scale from Study 1 after going through all of the scenarios (e.g., "As a result of the changes my partner asked me to make, I lost my sense of self," "As a result of the changes my partner asked me to make, I have lost parts of who I am in my relationship"; $\alpha = .88$; M = 3.09, SD = 1.58).

Romantic Commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998). This was the same measure as in Studies 1–3, and it was taken on a 9-point scale ($\alpha = .85$; M = 7.67, SD = 1.40).

Results

First, we grand-mean centered all variables. Next, to examine whether attachment avoidance was associated with reported experienced self-loss, we used a multiple regression analysis. This analysis predicting experienced self-loss from avoidance and anxiety revealed that both avoidance, B = .530, SE = .081, t(276) = 6.580, p < .001, 95% CI [.371, .689], and anxiety, B = .250, SE = .088, t(276) = 2.820, p = .005, 95% CI [.075, .421], were positively associated with reported experienced self-loss.

Next, we examined our second hypothesis that experienced selfloss would mediate the association between attachment avoidance and commitment. First, we conducted a multiple regression analysis with both avoidance and anxiety as the predictors. We found that attachment avoidance was uniquely negatively associated with romantic commitment, B = -.794, SE = .063, t(276) = -12.646, p < .001, 95% CI [-.918, -.671], while attachment anxiety was not, B = .056, SE = .056, t(276) = .817, p = .415, 95% CI [-.079, .191]. Next, we conducted a mediation analysis using Model 4 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences with attachment avoidance as the predictor, experienced self-loss as the mediator, commitment as the outcome variable, and attachment anxiety as a covariate. We found a significant indirect effect, such that attachment avoidance was associated with experienced self-loss, which in turn was negatively associated with commitment (see Figure 7).

Next, we examined the hypothesis that there would be a discrepancy between experienced self-loss and the external metric of self-loss, based on participants' own decisions in the scenarios (Hypothesis 3). Specifically, we examined whether attachment avoidance predicted making fewer choices that would result in jettisoning the focal trait. For this multiple regression, the predictor variables included avoidance and anxiety, and the outcome variable was the proportion of choices that resulted in making the change the partner requested. Despite the association between attachment avoidance and greater reported self-loss, attachment avoidance was associated with fewer change choices, B = -.051, SE = .011, t(276) = -4.626, p < .001, 95% CI [-.073, -.030], indicating a discrepancy between what individuals are experiencing compared with the choices they are making. Attachment anxiety was not significantly associated with the proportion of change choices, B = -.010, SE = .012, t(276) = -.820, p = .413, 95% CI [-.034, .014].

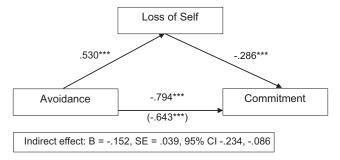
Next, we tested whether the association between attachment avoidance and self-loss differed from one another using the same approach as in the previous studies. To do so, we conducted an Avoidance × Loss Type interaction effect. As we did in Studies 2 and 3, we used multilevel modeling to test this interaction effect, restructured the data set, and standardized our measures. Testing the interaction effect involved specifying a two-level multilevel model in which observations (one for external [-.5] and one for experienced [.5]) were nested within individuals. The model predicted self-loss from attachment avoidance, loss type, and their interaction. As predicted, the interaction was significant, such that the association of attachment avoidance with reported experienced self-loss was significantly more positive than its association with the proportion of change choices, b = .742, SE = .097, t(277.00) = 7.613, p < .001, 95% CI [.550, .933] (see Figure 8). ¹² This interaction suggested that those higher in attachment avoidance do report experiencing significantly greater self-loss than may be warranted.

Next, we examined the simple effects. For those with high attachment avoidance (+1 SD), there was a significant positive association with loss type, suggesting that highly avoidant people report experiencing greater self-loss than is warranted based on their behavioral choices, b = .742, SE = .138, t(277.00) = 5.388, p < .001, 95% CI [.471, 1.013]. For those with low attachment avoidance (-1 SD), there was a significant negative association with loss type, suggesting that less avoidant people report experiencing less self-loss than is warranted based on their behavioral choices, b = -.742, SE = .138, t(277.00) = -5.388, p < .001, 95% CI [-1.013, -.471]. Ultimately, this may suggest that avoidant people exhibit a detrimental discrepancy in how they view changes to the self in the context of their relationship.

 $^{^{12}}$ In a post hoc power analysis (with 1,000 simulations), the statistical power of Study 4 to test Hypothesis 3 was 100% (95% CI [99.63, 100.00]).

Figure 7

In Study 4, Experienced Self-Loss Mediated the Association Between Attachment Avoidance and Romantic Commitment, Controlling for Attachment Anxiety

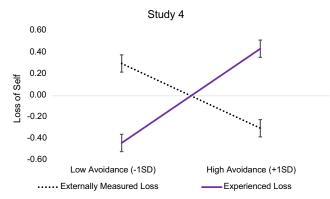


Note. $(-.643^{***})$ represents the direct effect between avoidance and commitment when loss of self is included in the model. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

*** p < .001.

Last, we examined whether attachment avoidance was associated with changing the centrality of the focal trait after going through the scenarios. As previously discussed, all participants had initially rated the focal trait as a 5 on a 1-7 scale assessing centrality to the self-that is, prior to imagining their partner had asked them to change the self, all individuals rated the trait as similar in centrality to the self. After imagining their partners asking them to change the trait, however, we expected that due to their hypothesized sensitivity to self-loss, those higher in attachment avoidance would be less likely to reduce the importance of the trait's centrality. For this model, we included both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety as predictors with the end-of-study rating of the focal trait centrality as the outcome. We found that indeed, attachment avoidance was positively associated with the focal trait centrality at the end of the study, B = .226, SE = .083 t(276) = 2.711, p = .007, 95% CI [.062, .390], whereas attachment anxiety was not, B = .140, SE = .091,

Figure 8
Evidence of a Self-Loss Discrepancy in Study 4



Note. In study 4 findings, attachment avoidance has a positive association with reported experienced self-loss but a negative association with an external metric of self-loss, suggesting a discrepancy between metrics of self-loss. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

t(276) = 1.536, p = .126, 95% CI [-.039, .319]. Additionally, it seems that while, on average, participants accommodated the hypothetical partner request, demonstrating a decline in centrality from the pretest to the posttest (M = 4.16, SD = 0.77), highly avoidant people accommodated less so than more secure people did.

Study 4 Discussion

Study 4 used a choose-your-own-adventure methodology to distinguish between people's reported experiences of self-loss and a behavioral external metric of self-loss in their relationships. Results revealed that attachment avoidance is associated with greater reported experiences of self-loss in the relationship (Hypothesis 1) and that experienced self-loss is linked to lower commitment (Hypothesis 2). However, there was a discrepancy between experienced and external metrics of self-loss for people higher in avoidance, with avoidantly attached people reporting losing parts of the self despite making fewer choices that would result in change (Hypothesis 3). Further, it seems that less avoidant people did change in the direction of their partner's hypothetical request, while more avoidant people did not jettison the focal trait to such an extent.

A limitation of the Study 4 stimuli is that they were hypothetical. A major strength is that they were standardized—all participants encountered identical self-change dilemmas, and the target traits that were focused upon were all initially rated by all participants as similarly central to the self. Using such stimuli afforded a relatively more objective external self-loss metric using the number of choices selected that would result in a loss to the target trait, eliminating any potential biases from coding or differences in the types of changes requested.

General Discussion

In the current work, we examined how avoidantly attached people's sensitivity to the risks of interdependence might manifest as experiencing greater levels of relationship-induced self-loss than is detected by metrics outside the mind of the perceiver, termed external metrics. Although interdependence is typically a key feature of romantic relationships (Kelley et al., 1983), those with higher attachment avoidance are often overly self-reliant and independent (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). We hypothesized that this emphasis on self-reliance would result in a vigilance to defend the self-concept against partner influence to the point of reporting greater partner influence than detected by other metrics, such as ratings from thirdparty coders and participants' own behavioral choices. Specifically, we hypothesized that attachment avoidance would be associated with reporting experiencing self-loss due to the relationship (Hypothesis 1) and that experienced self-loss would mediate the association between attachment avoidance and romantic commitment (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, we hypothesized a discrepancy between experienced and external metrics of self-loss such that avoidant people would report self-loss that metrics that occur outside the mind of the participant do not seem to capture (Hypothesis 3).

Results revealed clear and consistent support for Hypothesis 1 across all four studies. Results also revealed clear and consistent support for Hypothesis 2 across all four studies, including in longitudinal analyses controlling for baseline commitment. The only exception was a nonsignificant effect for experienced self-loss in Study 3, but the effect was robust in that study when using the more

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Strengths and Limitations of the Experienced Self-Loss Metrics and the External Self-Loss Metrics

| Study no. | Experienced self-loss metric | External self-loss metric | Interaction effect | Simple effect | Limitation of external metric | Strength of external metric |
|--------------|---|---|---------------------------|---|---|--|
| Study 2 | Study 2 "This last week, this change, [pipe in Independent coders rating participants' • b = .302 High avoidance: Participants are reporting on self-loss change request from their partner: • p = .007 • b = .318 in their pursuit of the change, change request from the change represents a per soft more parts of myself." • p = .043 whereas coders are reporting on loss of self." • p = .043 whereas coders are reporting on Low avoidance: self-loss due to the change request • b =246 itself. | Independent coders rating participants' change request from their partner: "How much the change represents a loss of self." | • $b = .302$ • $p = .007$ | High avoidance: • $b = .318$ • $p = .043$ Low avoidance: • $b = .246$ • $p = .067$ | Participants are reporting on self-loss in their pursuit of the change, whereas coders are reporting on self-loss due to the change request itself. | High level of precision vis-à-vis the wording comparing the perceived to the external metric of self-loss (identical language piped in for both). |
| Study 3 | Study 3 "As a result of my relationship, I lost Independent coders rating participants' • $b = .401$ my sense of self." • $b = .401$ why sense of self." • $b = .401$ why sense of self." • $b = .401$ why sense of self." • $b = .401$ my relationship, I have changed in their relationship. "How lost parts of who I am in my much the change represents a loss relationship." • $b = .401$ | Independent coders rating participants' descriptions of how they have changed in their relationship: "How much the change represents a loss of self." | • $b = .401$ • $p < .001$ | | Slight imprecision vis à vis the wording for the discussion that couples had in comparison to what the coders then rated (e.g., "I lost my sense of self"). | An apples-to-apples comparison between experienced and external metric of self-loss, with both focusing on how much involvement in the relationship in general predicts actual self-loss |
| Study 4 | Study 4 "As a result of the changes my partner Behavioral measure: Number of asked me to make, I lost my sense choices made that would resul of self." "As a result of the changes my partner asked me to make, I have lost parts of who I am in my relationship." | Behavioral measure: Number of • $b = .742$ choices made that would result in a • $p < .001$ lessening of the focal trait. | • $b = .742$ • $p < .001$ | | As unambiguous as the behavioral measure of self-change is, one might argue that such change is not unambiguously self-"loss." | No subjectivity in the external metric of self-loss, as this is a behavioral measure |

focused measure of self-contraction (the loss of positive qualities). Finally, results revealed clear and consistent support for Hypothesis 3 across all three studies in which such tests were feasible (Studies 2–4). These moderational results—which rely on diverse external metrics (independent codings of what the participant thought their partner wanted them to change in Study 2, independent codings of the participant's description of how they actually changed due to their relationship in Study 3, and proportion of change choices in Study 4; see Table 1 for a breakdown of the strengths and weaknesses associated with each metric)—reveal that avoidant people experience feelings of self-loss that do not align with the levels of loss that others perceive or that their own behavioral choices indicate what is happening.

Implications and Future Directions

The current set of studies suggests that those with higher attachment avoidance experience relationship-induced changes to their self-concept in a negative light. More specifically, those with higher attachment avoidance reported experiencing greater self-loss, which external metrics, whether measured by outside observers' impressions or their own behavioral choices, do not detect. Furthermore, experiencing self-loss may contribute to the lower romantic commitment avoidantly attached people often experience in their relationships. Those with higher attachment avoidance are especially protective of their autonomy and independence (Overall & Sibley, 2009). Thus, they may be vigilant against any possible influence on their self-concept, but especially from their romantic partner, whom they often do not trust (Collins, 1996).

In the broader attachment literature, attachment avoidance has traditionally been conceptualized as a model of others, such that avoidantly attached people do not believe others will be available when needed and are not trustworthy (e.g., Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Conversely, attachment anxiety has traditionally been conceptualized as a model of self, such that anxiously attached people are uncertain about their own worth and lovability. Much of attachment research has been conducted along those lines: Attachment avoidance has been studied as it relates to others (e.g., perceived social reward for intimacy; Spielmann et al., 2013), whereas attachment anxiety has often been studied as it relates to self-outcomes (e.g., self-concept malleability; Slotter & Gardner, 2012). Thus far, research on attachment anxiety has expanded to include outcomes related to the partner, such as idealizing the partner (Feeney & Noller, 1991) or fear of abandonment (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). However, less research has considered attachment avoidance in relation to the self. Yet, a person's perception of their self-concept, and how their romantic partner influences their self-concept, has implications for relationship quality (Mattingly et al., 2014). In the current work, we found that self-related outcomes are both important for relationship quality and linked to attachment avoidance. Future work might consider how else attachment avoidance may be related to selfoutcomes, such as the other self-change processes like selfexpansion. Self-expansion, or the addition of positive qualities, is linked to increased feelings of self-efficacy (Aron et al., 1995), something that avoidantly attached individuals, who focus on self-reliance, would likely find motivating. However, self-expansion often occurs in the context of romantic relationships by taking on a partner's qualities as one's own. Thus, it is also possible that avoidantly attached individuals would not be motivated by self-expansion. Future work pushing beyond the boundaries of theorized models of self and others may lead researchers to discover fruitful new questions to ask, such as the association between avoidance and self-expansion.

The attachment literature also notes that in times of distress or insecurity, anxiously attached people use hyperactivating strategies, such that they experience a stronger desire for closeness with their romantic partner and showcase intense fears about their romantic partner's love and availability to them (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Conversely, avoidantly attached people use deactivating strategies, suppressing the need for partner responsiveness or closeness and using self-reliance to deal with the situation on their own (Bowlby, 1973; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). As such, the existing literature suggests that in times of distress, anxiously attached people become vigilant toward their romantic partners, whereas avoidantly attached people turn away from their romantic partners. Yet, the current work suggests that avoidantly attached people may simply showcase a different type of vigilance. As avoidantly attached people find partner influence distressing, they may be amplifying their autonomy needs in response to perceiving partner-induced self-loss, such that they become vigilant toward protecting their self-concept. Indeed, in Study 4, not only did avoidantly attached people make fewer choices that would result in self-change, but they also actually resisted diminishing the trait they had been asked to change as compared with less avoidant people, potentially showing vigilance to their autonomy.

This vigilance may speak to a dynamic pinpointed in risk regulation theory (Murray et al., 2006), which argues that people experience a trade-off between connection and self-protection—or between relationship enhancement and vigilance. This trade-off occurs because connection and relationship enhancement are risks that leave people more vulnerable to potentially being hurt or exploited. Historically, the risk regulation literature has focused primarily on attachment anxiety and low self-esteem as predictors of self-protection and vigilance. However, our work suggests that, for avoidant people, self-protection may look more like vigilance around protecting the self from being changed by their partner. Future work may consider how avoidantly attached people may perceive a greater need for protection rather than connection and if that relates to greater self-reliance.

To expand on self-processes and avoidance, in our current work, Study 3 showed that the association between attachment avoidance and romantic commitment is mediated by self-contraction (the loss of positive self-aspects due to one's romantic relationship), even when controlling for trust in one's partner. While these studies focused on how avoidantly attached individuals see their partners as making them worse people, future work may consider examining how avoidantly attached people may also not trust that their partner could make them better people. As previous work has found that avoidantly attached people do not disclose to their partner (Emery et al., 2018), it is possible that the lack of disclosure would impact their partner's ability to serve a strong role in self-growth-based processes through which partners help shape one another into the person they each ideally want to be (Rusbult et al., 2009), which requires disclosure of ideal selves. Future work might consider examining how avoidantly attached people experience, or do not experience, the Michelangelo phenomenon or other positive self-growth processes.

It would also be interesting to consider how self-growth-based processes may be beneficial for avoidantly attached people, if they are less aware that those processes are occurring. Avoidantly attached people are wary of partner influence and strive to maintain their independence/autonomy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Thus, avoidantly attached people may respond better if their partner can help shape them using invisible rather than visible support (Girme et al., 2019). Thus, future work might consider how romantic partners can best assist in self-growth processes for their avoidant partner.

In our mediational analyses, the direct effect of avoidance on commitment generally remained significant across studies—in other words, experiences of self-loss were a partial mediator in this link. We were not surprised that experiencing self-loss did not fully account for this association because we would not have hypothesized that it was the only mediator. In fact, recognizing that other mechanisms would likely be present was one of the reasons why we controlled for trust in Study 3. Our goal was not to claim that we have identified the only driver of the link between avoidance and commitment but instead to identify self-loss as a previously unrecognized mechanism linking these two variables. We hope that future work will continue to investigate other factors, including potential mechanisms tied to the self-concept, that also contribute to lower relationship quality among avoidant individuals.

For Hypothesis 3, we expected that for highly avoidant individuals, we would find a discrepancy such that they experienced greater selfloss when compared with external metrics of change. Indeed, we did find support for this hypothesis across three studies. In a less anticipated finding, in two of the three relevant studies, we found that less avoidant people reported significantly less self-loss when compared with external metrics of change. This reversal suggests that more secure individuals manifest a relationship-benefiting discrepancy by not perceiving changes to the self as a loss. Although not something we hypothesized, we think this represents a fascinating avenue for future research and, if robust, could be evidence to suggest that securely attached individuals understand that modifying a behavior in response to a partner's request does not have to entail a diminishment of the self-concept—in other words, perhaps securely attached individuals recognize that accommodation for a partner is not a zero-sum game with the self.

Last, similar to the majority of relationship studies, our participants showed high levels of romantic commitment and other relationship-benefiting variables and relatively lower levels of attachment avoidance. When comparing the two types of self-loss, people rated self-pruning as occurring more often than self-contraction in their relationship, suggesting that most people experienced more beneficial self-loss in their relationships. Relatedly, as our studies involved nonclinical samples, on average, our participants were not extremely avoidant. In the future, it may be interesting to try to recruit clinically avoidant individuals to see if this exacerbates our effects and if we see greater levels of self-contraction as compared with self-pruning.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of the current studies lies in the focus on the largely overlooked intersection between attachment avoidance and the self-concept. In Study 3, for example, we find that self-contraction, the loss of positive self-aspects, contributes to lower romantic commitment for those with higher attachment avoidance, even when controlling for trust and baseline commitment. Furthermore, in Study 4, we find that those with higher attachment avoidance resist changing a self-attribute. Specifically, we assessed how centrally participants rated the target attribute (e.g., sarcastic) both prior to

and after imagining their partner asked the participants to reduce the attribute and found that more securely attached participants rated the attribute as less important after being asked to lose it. We hope that future research will expand to consider the role of attachment avoidance in the context of other theories about the self that have been historically overlooked.

The current set of studies sought to identify differences in the links between avoidant attachment, experienced self-loss, and external metrics of self-loss. Our goal with our external self-loss metrics was to gain a more distanced, unbiased (or differently biased) sense of what was occurring in people's relationships. There is no perfectly unbiased measure of loss, and all of the ones used in this article have some weaknesses (see Table 1). Given these limitations, we used three different external metrics of self-loss with strengths that complemented one another. In Study 2, participants wrote about how their partner wanted them to change and reported on that change request each week. We then had independent coders rate how much these change requests would result in self-loss. One limitation of Study 2's method is that the losses resulted from explicit change requests and did not capture the types of changes that occur more naturally from being in a relationship. A second limitation is that the experienced self-loss metric and external self-loss metric are not an apples-to-apples comparison. To provide an external metric of loss that complemented these limitations, in Study 3, we used filmed discussions between partners in which they each described how they have changed as a result of being in their romantic relationship, thus allowing for both explicit and more incidental changes. We coded those changes to capture how much that change was a loss to the self. This allowed for a more direct comparison between our experienced and external self-loss metrics. However, a weakness in Study 3 is that there is still the potential for bias. Thus, in Study 4, we used the number of behavior choices that would result in change or a resistance to change. A key strength of this metric is that the standardized study stimuli and controlled study setting enabled us to determine a factual, indisputable metric of the number of times a participant chose to behave in a way that would result in the loss of a self-aspect. However, a weakness of this metric is that it involves hypothetical scenarios that are separated from reality. Reality is slippery and may be especially so when it comes to the self-concept, and using a variety of metrics allowed us to triangulate across methods to get the clearest picture of whether any of a wide range of external sources capture the self-loss that avoidant individuals are reporting. The results across these metrics consistently supported the hypothesis that highly avoidant people are reporting greater experiences of selfloss compared with what external metrics might have anticipated.

Future work may consider what other external metrics would help identify self-loss and in what other relationship contexts self-loss may occur. One potential approach may be to first measure what partners want each other to change. Then, over time, participants would report how much they have that specific trait while also reporting their experienced self-loss. Researchers could then make a comparison between whether participants are indeed reporting both experienced loss and lower levels of that specific trait. It would be interesting to also consider if both the participant and their partner have similar or dissimilar reports of the partner losing self-aspects and whether avoidant people's partners are asking them to make qualitatively different types of changes. Additionally, it would be interesting to consider whether these experiences of self-loss occur not only over the course of the established relationships that we examined across

the studies in the present research but also during the earlier stages of relationships. For example, understanding whether avoidant people's experiences of self-loss result simply from entering a relationship—regardless of their partner exerting any attempts at influence—would help to further establish the strength and bounds of these effects.

This work is limited by the lack of experimental methods and our use of cross-sectional mediation for some analyses of our second hypothesis. Some previous work has questioned the use of crosssectional mediation (Bullock et al., 2010). To help address these critiques of cross-sectional mediation, we conducted longitudinal mediations in Studies 2 and 3 that control for the baseline version of our outcome variable. More specifically, we find that experienced self-loss in Study 2 and self-contraction in Study 3 mediated the association between attachment avoidance and romantic commitment in our follow-up waves even when controlling for intake commitment. While nonexperimental mediation is never definitive, we feel more confident in our hypothesis, being able to control for the baseline version of our outcome. However, future work may consider how experimental methods could be used to examine our effects. While it is difficult to experimentally manipulate attachment style, it may be possible to instead manipulate experiences of self-loss. One possibility could be to have people either write about the ways they have lost or lessened aspects of who they are by being in their relationship or write about the ways they have added or increased aspects of who they are by being in their relationship. Researchers could then determine whether these primes differently impact relationship quality and if such an effect is moderated by attachment avoidance.

Conclusion

The current studies examine how those with higher attachment avoidance experience changes to the self-concept in the context of romantic relationships. In particular, we found that those with higher attachment avoidance report losing aspects of their self-concept due to their relationship. However, this experience may not be completely accurate as multiple external measures reveal no such self-loss. Furthermore, self-contraction mediated the negative association between attachment avoidance and commitment, even when controlling for relational trust and baseline levels of commitment in a longitudinal study. This work clarified the nature of the loss that avoidant people are more likely experiencing-believing that they are losing positive aspects of themselves in particular. Overall, this work suggests that those higher in attachment avoidance experience a discrepancy between their own experiences of self-loss and the loss captured by external metrics, which undermines their commitment to their romantic partner.

Although Act 1 of *Company* features Bobby who is driven to defend his self-concept from any partner, perhaps he really does not need to. Indeed, he eventually comes to the realization that relationships, even with all the risk they pose of losing independence, are actually worth that risk. By the end of Act 2, Bobby finds he is finally ready for commitment—perhaps this is in part because he has abandoned his fear of losing himself along the way.

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