Examining the Relationship Satisfaction of Mothers Returning to Work or Study: The Impact of Attachment, Commitment and Conflict.

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Declaration

I declare that this report does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree in any University, College of Advanced Education, or other educational institution and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I further declare that the ethical principles and procedures specified in the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee document have been adhered to in the preparation of this report.

Karen Johnson

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Abstract

The main aim of the present study was to examine the mediational effects of commitment and level of conflict on the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction of mothers who had recently returned to work or study. It also explored the relationship between attachment and commitment in the prediction of conflict resolution styles. The sample comprised 96 women aged from 29 to 46 years who were currently in a marital relationship and had two or more children with their current partner. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire which measured their scores on the two higher-order attachment factors (anxiety and avoidance), commitment, level of conflict, satisfaction, conflict resolution styles (voice, neglect, loyalty and exit) and social desirability bias. As predicted, commitment and level of conflict were generally found to mediate the relationship between attachment and satisfaction. It was also found that avoidance, but not anxiety was a significant predictor of three of the four conflict resolution styles. Commitment was found to be a significant predictor of exit only. The present findings have important implications for the development of intervention strategies for marital therapy.
1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Australian families, like those in many other western nations, have experienced rapid change over the past century. Notably, marriage and birth rates have declined, whilst divorces are on the rise, currently estimated to occur in almost one of two marriages, most commonly after a marital duration of only 12 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999, 2001; Weston, Stanton, Qu, & Soriano, 2001). Although the majority of couples report high levels of relationship satisfaction at the time of union, this has been found to decrease steadily over the first 10 years of marriage (Kearney & Bradbury, 1997). Despite this general trend, there appears to be great variation, with some couples able to maintain high levels of satisfaction over time and others becoming highly distressed (Halford, Wilson, Lizzio, & Moore, 2002), particularly during transitional times, such as becoming parents, when stress levels and conflict may increase (Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Wilson, & Tran, 2002). Hence this variation has attracted much empirical attention in order to inform the development of effective couple intervention programs aimed at helping couples stay together (Johnson, 2003).

The current study explored the variation in relationship satisfaction from an Attachment Theory perspective which provides a theoretical framework in which an individual’s relationships with close others can be understood. According to the theory’s founder, John Bowlby (1972; 1973; 1982, 1988), the relationship infants develop with their early caregivers creates internalised working models which continue to have an impact on future relationships. Although relatively stable, these working models may change in response to meaningful life events (Feeney, 1999). This theory has been extended to adult
romantic relationships in order to offer an explanation for differences in relationship factors that have been found to affect relationship satisfaction, such as commitment and conflict (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994), particularly during transitional times in relationships when couples may face additional stressors which are believed to activate the attachment system (Diehl, Elnick, Bourbeau, & Labouvie-Vief, 1998).

In line with past research, the present study looked at the history of Attachment Theory from both a childhood and adulthood perspective and considered the development of various attachment measures, the stability of attachment over time and the activation of attachment systems during transitional times in adulthood. Further, it explored attachment in relation to variables such as commitment, level of conflict and conflict resolution styles by considering the inter-relationship between these variables, including their ability to predict relationship satisfaction.

1.2 Origins of Attachment Theory

1.2.1 Attachment as an internal control system. Attachment theory was first developed and explored by John Bowlby in the 1950s in order to understand how animals and humans react to loss and separation from a primary caregiver (Bowlby 1982; Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). It was through Bowlby’s extensive research on the adverse emotional effects on human infants subjected to prolonged periods of institutionalisation and separation from their primary caregivers, that Attachment Theory was developed. Attachment behaviour has been defined as any type of behaviour that results in an infant attaining or retaining proximal closeness to a caregiver who is perceived to be stronger and wiser (Bowlby, 1972; 1973). This behaviour includes such things as smiling, crying, clinging and
following that tend to elicit a positive and protective response from an adult caregiver, thus creating a bond between the infant and adult.

A human’s attachment behaviour is believed to be an innate behavioural system that ensures the infant’s protection and security. This behavioural system functions as a “homeostatic” device which regulates the infant’s sense of security by maintaining a balance between exploratory behaviour and proximity seeking behaviour, depending on the perceived dangers in the environment. When infants feel secure, they are confident to explore their environment and play away from the primary caregiver (usually the mother), thus deactivating the attachment system. However, if under perceived stress or threat, the infant will activate the attachment system in order to maintain close proximity to the primary caregiver and seek comfort and reassurance from her. If these needs are met and the infant once again feels secure, further exploration of the environment will occur (Bowlby, 1982; Cassidy, 1999; Feeney & Noller, 1996).

According to Bowlby (1972, 1973), children internalise these early experiences into a working model that influences future relationships. This working model contains beliefs and expectations about whether the attachment figure is someone likely to respond to a request for support (model of other), and whether the infant perceives themself as someone worthy of care and attention (model of self). The experience of having an emotionally responsive caregiver in infancy also creates the expectation that, although life may present difficulties, with effort, these can be overcome. Insecure attachment, however, lowers internal resilience and creates a sense of inability to overcome life stressors, leading to emotional distress or detachment (Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1996; Mikulincer & Florian, 1998).
1.2.2 Childhood attachment research. Early childhood attachment research by Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), based on work with infants in both a naturalistic and laboratory setting, identified three distinct patterns of attachment behaviour: secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant. These attachment categories relate to the amount of interaction between the mother and infant, as well as the mother’s responsiveness to the infant’s needs. Secure infants use their mother as a safe base to explore the environment but become distressed upon her departure. Upon reunion, the infant seeks comfort from the mother which diminishes distress. The mother tends to display responsive and warm behaviour. Anxious/ambivalent infants tend to show some level of anxiety even prior to separation and this escalates to high levels of distress upon the mother’s departure. Once reunited with the mother, the infant demonstrates ambivalent behaviour, seeking close proximity, but resisting physical contact. Mothers tend to be either insensitive to the infant’s needs or overly intrusive. Avoidant infants are observed to be fairly disinterested in the mother either during her presence or in her absence. The mothers tend to display rejecting or hostile behaviour towards the infant (Ainsworth, 1979; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 1996).

1.3 Attachment in Adulthood

According to Bowlby (1979), the attachment bond developed in infancy plays an important role throughout a child’s life, influencing behaviour “from the cradle to the grave” (p. 129) due to the persistence of internal working models (Feeney & Noller, 1996). This view was supported by the work of Ainsworth (1989) who claimed that understanding the attachment bond between and infant and the primary caregiver can be applied to other “affectional bonds” in adulthood. As a result, research in adult attachment expanded in the

1.3.1 Development of adult attachment measures. Hazan and Shaver (1987) introduced the first self-report measure of adult attachment based on Ainsworth’s initial three categories of infant attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The measure required respondents to choose one of three descriptions that most closely represented their feelings towards their romantic partner. Hazan and Shaver reported that those who classified themselves as secure described their romantic relationship as happy and trusting. In contrast, those who classified themselves as avoidant tended to report jealousy, a fear of intimacy and emotional ups and downs. Those who classified themselves as anxious/ambivalent reported obsessive feelings, a desire for high levels of intimacy and extreme jealousy. Results indicated that, in line with proportions of attachment styles observed among infants (Ainsworth et al., 1978), approximately half of the respondents described themselves as secure and of the remainder, slightly more people described themselves as avoidant than anxious/ambivalent (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, despite some apparent similarities, child and adult attachment differ in that adult attachment relationships involve sexual intimacy and are generally reciprocal, with each partner both providing and receiving care (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Given the concerns of some researchers about psychometric limitations of Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) forced-choice measure of attachment, several continuous self-report scales were subsequently developed (Feeney & Noller, 1996; Feeney, Noller & Hanrahan, 1994). Whilst some were based on Hazan & Shaver’s (1987) three-category model (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) developed a four category model based on Bowlby’s theory of internal working models of self and other. Combining dichotomised
dimensions of self and other as positive or negative, Bartholomew and Horowitz developed a model conceptualising four discrete attachment categories; secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissing. This four category model is presented in Figure 1.

![Four-category model of adult attachment](image)

Figure 1. Four-category model of adult attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) with higher order factors of anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) in parentheses.

The **secure** attachment style indicates a sense of self worth coupled with the expectation that others are generally warm and responsive. The **preoccupied** attachment style indicates a low sense of self worth combined with a positive view of others, indicating a person who is likely to strive for the acceptance of others, whilst generally fearing abandonment. The **fearful** attachment style indicates both a low sense of self and of others. Fearful people are highly anxious and despite their need for closeness, tend to avoid intimacy.
with others in order to protect themselves from anticipated rejection. The *dismissive* attachment style indicates a positive view of self, but lack of worth in others. These individuals tend to be excessively independent and therefore avoid close relationships with others, whom they expect to disappoint them (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Cyranowski et al., 2002).

Expanding on the work of Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), Brennan et al. (1998) undertook a large factor analysis of several self-report measures of attachment. Using an extensive item pool, they discovered two higher-order factors of avoidance and anxiety, which were conceptually related to the models of self and other in Bartholomew and Horowitz’s model. Level of avoidance is associated with how uncomfortable one feels with closeness and dependency on a close other. Level of anxiety is associated with how anxious a person feels about being abandoned by a close other (Brennan et al.; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; MacDougall, 2003). From this they constructed the Experiences of Close Relationships (ECR) scale, comprising two, 18-item subscales, and demonstrated how the higher-order factors could be used to cluster participants into the four distinct attachment groups; *secure*- low anxiety, low avoidance; *pre-occupied*- high anxiety, low avoidance; *fearful*- high anxiety, high avoidance; *dismissive*- low anxiety, high avoidance (see Figure 1). According to Brennan et al., examining the higher-order attachment factors provides stronger statistical results than other self-classification questionnaires and supports the idea that attachment is better conceptualised as two continuous variables rather than as typological categories (Fraley & Waller, 1998).

In order to identify any scaling problems and to improve the psychometric properties of self-report attachment scales, Fraley, Waller and Brennan (2000) carried out an Item
Response Theory analysis of four commonly used self-report attachment questionnaires, including the ECR (Brennan et al., 1998). From this analysis, they constructed the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) scale, comprising two subscales of the 18 items found to have the highest discrimination values. Of these, seven of the avoidance items and 13 of the anxiety items were from the original ECR scale. Although the ECR was found to have the best psychometric properties of the four scales included in the analysis, the ECR-R was found to have even greater measurement precision and was therefore used as the measure of attachment in the current study to examine the higher order attachment factors.

1.3.2 Stability of adult attachment. Although research in childhood attachment has indicated that attachment style during infancy remains relatively stable, findings have been more contentious for adult attachment (e.g., Feeney, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Although the working models of self and other developed in infancy (Bowlby, 1979) become increasingly resistant to change once reinforced by repeated patterns of interaction with primary caregivers (Rothbard & Shaver, 1994), this is not to suggest that change is impossible. According to Bowlby (1982), being involved in a “corrective” relationship and an individual’s capacity to reflect on past experiences, are both avenues for change. When significant social situations occur that challenge existing preconceptions, the anomaly between one’s internal working models and one’s reality may act as an impetus for change as new information is accommodated and assimilated (Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999; Feeney, 1999; Rothbard & Shaver). This has been supported by longitudinal research which shows that individuals may become more securely attached over time due to a combination of social, individual and contextual factors, including the attachment orientation of their romantic partner (e.g., Davila et al., Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994).
These results imply that although working models exhibit stability, attachment change from insecure to secure may be possible, albeit gradually and in response to meaningful life events, including being in a relationship with a securely attached individual (Cook, 2000; Feeney, 1999; MacDougall, 2003; Solomon, 2003). Given this, the benefits of psychological therapy whereby the therapist acts as a “secure” base providing emotional sensitivity and support are evident. Within this environment, those who are insecurely attached may be able to explore past life events and develop new understandings and ways of relating to others that challenge existing working models and initiate life changes (Johnson, 2003; Slade, 1999).

1.4 Transitions in Adulthood and Attachment

There are many transitions that occur in adulthood including partnering, getting married, having children, and returning to the workforce (Vasquez, Durik & Hyde, 2002). Perhaps the most researched of these is the transition of becoming a parent, given the understanding that the arrival of the first child brings with it many on-going changes to the parents’ lives in both personal and professional domains (Levy-Shiff, 1994). This often results in a decline in marital satisfaction over time due to increased conflict and less available time to spend together as a couple (Curran, Hazan, Jacobvitz, & Feldman, 2005; Helms-Erikson, 2001; Kearney & Bradbury, 1997; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Levy-Shiff, Dimitrovsky, Shulman, & Har-Even, 1998; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2000).

According to Bowlby (1973, 1988), the attachment system is most strongly activated in times of stress resulting from personal, environmental or relationship factors and is particularly prominent for adults in the periods following parenthood (Diehl et al., 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 1994; Vasquez et al., 2002). This could include various periods of
transition as mentioned above, which may exacerbate relationship anxiety and avoidance of intimacy, leading to heightened couple conflict and lower levels of satisfaction (Feeney, Alexander, Noller, & Hohaus, 2003). This would be expected to be particularly pertinent for working mothers who often feel overburdened due to the fact that they continue to perform more childcare and domestic chores than their male partners (Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001). Further, an individual’s own attachment issues become more prominent when they become parents themselves and reassess relationships with their own parents (Vasquez et al.).

Many researchers have utilised attachment theory to offer an explanation for different outcomes that people experience when they first become parents and, although using various attachment measures, findings have generally supported the notion that one’s level of anxiety and discomfort with closeness (i.e., avoidance) have an impact on relationship satisfaction (e.g., Curran et al., 2005; Feeney et al., 2003; Simpson et al., 2002). In one of the few studies to investigate attachment in relation to early parenthood beyond the birth of the first child, Vasquez et al. (2002) conducted a longitudinal study of couples pre-parenthood to 4.5 years following the birth of their first child, when most of the female partners had returned to paid employment and some had given birth to a second child. Using Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) four category measure of attachment, they found that fearful mothers reported the most stress and least rewards in both the family and work domains, with secure mothers faring best overall, and dismissing and preoccupied mothers falling somewhere in between. Whilst the generalizability of findings were limited due to the demographics of the sample, the authors imply that the various attachment styles impact differently on a mother’s functioning, both within and outside the family. Together, the findings from the above studies suggest an under-researched link between attachment and the marital satisfaction of
working mothers, who must often deal with the added stress of juggling multiple roles, thus bringing attachment issues to the fore (Vasquez et al.).

1.5 Conflict in Adult Romantic Relationships

Whilst conflict is a common component of close adult relationships and may actually be a positive element if dealt with constructively, it can also lead to anger, frustration and disengagement from the relationship if couples are unable to resolve conflict effectively (Gottman, 1998; Pistole & Arricale, 2003). The increasing incidence of separation and divorce and the detrimental effects this has on the physical and mental health of couples and their children, has prompted an extensive amount of research on marital processes (Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Katz & Gottman, 1997), and in particular marital conflict, which has been shown to have a significant negative impact on marital satisfaction (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). According to Gottman (1999), teaching couples to effectively regulate conflict helps them to build a more satisfying and stable relationship through a more flexible alliance, self-responsibility and respect of each other’s feelings. Further, conflict patterns and communication are considered to be amenable to change and may therefore be useful to target in marital intervention programs (Stanley, Markman, St Peters, & Leber, 1995).

1.5.1 Level of conflict and adult attachment. Given that attachment theory proposes the activation of internal models during times of increased distress, it stands to reason that this would occur during times of couple conflict when a person’s need for psychological support increases (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994; Pistole & Arricale, 2003). More securely attached individuals, who are less anxious or avoidant, may perceive conflict as an opportunity for relationship enhancement through the experience of identifying and resolving
differences. Alternatively, those who are insecurely attached, and therefore more avoidant and/or anxious, may perceive conflict as a threat to security and therefore react to conflict in a more negative way (Pistole & Arricale, 2003).

In a recent study, Campbell, Simpson, Boldry and Kashy (2005), using the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), a measure similar in structure to the ECR-R, examined how the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance relate to perceptions of conflict in the romantic relationships of dating couples. They found that more anxiously attached individuals perceived higher levels of relationship conflict, as reported in a daily diary, than those who were less anxious. This in turn meant that they had a less optimistic outlook on the future of the relationship. Interestingly, they found no significant difference in the conflict perceptions of individuals with high or low levels of avoidance. Similarly, MacDougall (2003) found that of individuals in short-term relationships, those with higher levels of anxiety (i.e., preoccupied and fearful attachment styles) reported greater levels of conflict than those with lower levels of anxiety (i.e., secure and dismissing attachment styles). Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994), also using a sample of dating couples in relatively short-term relationships, found that a woman’s level of anxiety and a man’s level of avoidance were related to more negative relationship outcomes, including increased levels of conflict.

Despite these findings, it would be expected that for longer term marital couples, whose attachment bond has been fully formed, both level of anxiety and avoidance would have an impact on the level of conflict, and hence marital satisfaction, given that a long-term partner’s ability to provide a secure base assumes a much greater importance when couples are more committed to the relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney,
Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Further, a high level of avoidance in one partner has been found to have more long-term effects on a relationship and may lead to increased levels of conflict and even aggression, particularly if one partner is avoidant, fearing intimacy, and the other is anxious, fearing abandonment (Roberts & Noller, 1998; Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2003) typically resulting in a destructive pattern of demand and withdrawal (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Together these findings imply that levels of anxiety and avoidance are both important to consider in regard to the level of conflict in longer term relationships.

1.6 Conflict Resolution Style in Adult Romantic Relationships

As mentioned above, it is not simply the amount of conflict that an individual perceives in a relationship, but also the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies that impact on relationship satisfaction (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In order to look at how individuals respond to dissatisfaction in their relationship, Rusbult et al. (1991) developed a theory of Accommodation which refers to an individual’s willingness to partake in constructive rather than destructive behaviour when one’s partner is behaving in a negative way. This theory proposes a typology of four conflict resolution styles: voice, loyalty, neglect and exit, which differ along two underlying dimensions of conflict responding (i.e., active/passive and constructive/destructive).

The use of different conflict styles has been found to be influenced by level of commitment and relationship satisfaction (Rusbult et al., 1982, 1991). For example, Rusbult et al., (1982) found that for dating individuals, those who were more committed and satisfied with their relationship tended to enact more constructive responses to conflict rather than destructive ones.
1.6.1 Conflict resolution style and adult attachment. There has been an increasing amount of research evidence to suggest a link between attachment and the way individuals deal with conflict in their romantic relationships (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Whilst variation exists in the types of attachment and conflict resolution measures used (Shi, 2004), generally results have consistently confirmed that securely attached people tend to communicate more openly, effectively express their feelings and move to a state of repair fairly readily. Alternatively, more anxiously attached individuals, through their fear of abandonment, tend to become clingy and display less effective mood regulation. Those who are more avoidant tend to withdraw from conflict, partake in ineffective arguing and refuse to compromise (Collins & Read, 1990; Corcoran & Mallinckrodt; Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999; Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; MacDougall, 2003; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Pistole & Arricale, 2003; Simpson et al., 1996).

In a study examining the relationship between Rusbult et al.’s (1982, 1991) four conflict resolution styles and Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) four attachment categories for individuals in short-term relationships, Dougall (1998) found that securely attached males and females were more likely to openly communicate (voice), whereas preoccupied women tended to passively wait for things to improve whilst remaining loyal to their partners (loyalty). Whilst more fearfully attached men tended to pay little attention to the relationship (neglect) and more dismissing men tended to threaten to leave (exit), the most important predictor of these conflict styles was the level of security (i.e., less secure men tend to use neglect and exit). According to Dougall, mixed findings may have been related to the underlying dimension of avoidance in both these attachment styles which may be an important predictor of conflict style. Further, in line with the past findings of Rusbult
et al., (1991), Dougall found that more committed individuals were more likely to inhibit destructive conflict styles than they were to promote constructive ones.

More recently, Shi (2003), using a sample of dating individuals, examined the relationship between the higher order attachment factors i.e., avoidance and anxiety (Brennan, et al., 1998) and five conflict styles i.e., integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding and compromising (Rahim, 1983). Shi found that level of avoidance predicted all five conflict styles, whereas anxiety predicted only obliging and dominating. According to Shi, a high level of avoidance, leading to couple disengagement, has a much more detrimental effect on a relationship than high levels of anxiety, which at least keep the couple engaging, with the possibility of some conflict resolution. However, a limitation of this study was the use of a conflict measure that was constructed for organisational purposes, based on a sample of management executives. Whilst somewhat inconclusive, together the findings from these studies imply a relationship between attachment and conflict resolution styles that may be worthy of exploring with people in longer term relationships, using a model of attachment based on the higher order factors of avoidance and anxiety.

1.7 Commitment in Adult Romantic Relationships

Commitment is regarded as a major factor in the establishment and continuance of close personal relationships, and although the way in which it actually stabilises relationships remains unclear, research has shown that more committed people tend to have greater relationship satisfaction (Adams & Jones, 1997; Le & Agnew, 20003). Rather than just indicating one’s devotion to a partner, Stanley & Markman (1992) have conceptualised commitment as two related constructs: personal dedication which refers to an individual’s willingness to maintain and continually improve the relationship and constraint commitment.
which refers to structural constraints that keep an individual in the relationship, regardless of their personal dedication, and would result in economic, social or psychological hardship if the relationship dissolved. Both types of commitment have been found to be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and are important to consider, particularly for couples in longer term relationships with young children, where constraint commitment may help individuals remain in their relationship and work through difficult times when perhaps their personal dedication to their partner is being challenged (Stanley & Markman).

1.7.1 Commitment and adult attachment. According to Hazan and Shaver (1994), attachment theory offers an additional explanation for why people remain committed to their relationship. The emotional bond that attachment creates between couples offers security and acts as a psychological connection, keeping them together, even through times of relationship distress. Further, when faced with the fear of relationship breakdown, the resulting distress activates the attachment system keeping an individual bound to their partner unless there is a viable alternative. Although using different measures of attachment and commitment, research has consistently shown that securely attached individuals tend to develop more stable relationships and therefore show higher levels of commitment. Conversely, individuals who are insecurely attached tend to either avoid intimacy or become clingy and mistrusting and, in turn, tend to be less committed (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Pistole & Clark, 1995; Simpson, 1990). Despite this, a serious limitation of past research is a reliance on samples of younger dating couples or university students, indicating an important area for future research with individuals in longer term relationships.
1.8 The Present Study

1.8.1 Aims. Based on the above research findings, the aims of the present study were threefold. First, the relationships between attachment and each of the relationship variables, i.e., commitment, level of conflict and satisfaction, were explored using the ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000) to see if past findings in relation to these variables were supported with a more psychometrically sound measure of attachment, based on the higher order factors of anxiety and avoidance. Second, past research has found that not only are attachment, commitment and level of conflict each related to satisfaction, but attachment is also related to commitment and level of conflict. This suggests the possibility that commitment and level of conflict, which are both variables amenable to change, mediate the relationship between attachment and satisfaction (Frazier, Tix & Barron, 2004), which may be important information in the context of applying appropriate interventions in marital therapy. Third, given that past research demonstrates a link between attachment, commitment and conflict resolution styles, the current study aimed to conduct an exploratory analysis to determine which conflict styles were able to be predicted from the higher order attachment factors and level of commitment, again using a more psychometrically sound measure of attachment and a measure of conflict style appropriate for adult romantic relationships.

Further, as much past research has focussed on short-term relationships and adulthood transitions, typically after the birth of a first child, the current research examined a previously unexplored area by focussing on longer-term marital relationships where couples had two or more children and the woman had recently returned to work or study after spending time at home raising children. This was thought to be a potential time of conflict due to multiple role demands, that challenges commitment, thus activating attachment systems and affecting relationship satisfaction. As this transition was expected to be
particularly pertinent for the women returning to work, only female partners were used in the current study. Finally, given that self-report scales were to be used, a measure of social desirability bias was included to control for socially desirable responding.

1.8.2 Hypotheses. It was predicted that there would be a significant negative correlation between each of the attachment variables (i.e., avoidance and anxiety) and both satisfaction and commitment, as well as a significant positive correlation between each of the attachment variables and level of conflict. Further it was predicted that attachment would affect relationship satisfaction directly, as well as indirectly through its effects on commitment and level of conflict as depicted in Figure 2. That is, commitment and level of conflict would mediate the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction. Finally, although no specific predictions were made, the study explored whether the attachment variables and commitment were able to predict conflict resolution styles.

Figure 2. Mediation model
2.0 Method

2.1 Participants

The sample comprised 96 female participants, ranging in age from 29 to 46 years (\(M = 37.67, SD = 4.03\)), who each had two or more children with their current partner and had recently returned to either study or paid work (return to work: \(M = 2.10\) years, \(SD = 1.83\) years; return to study: \(M = 1.09\) years, \(SD = .88\) years). The sample originally consisted of 100 participants, but data from two participants who had returned to work more than 10 years ago and two participants who had only one child were removed from the analysis as they did not meet participation criteria.

Of the 96 remaining participants, 80% worked, 8% studied and 12% did a combination of work and study. Of those who worked, 94% were employed part-time, 5% full-time and 1% did not indicate employment status. Hours worked per week ranged from 4-40 hours (\(M = 17.24, SD = 8.03\)), with 53% earning less than $20,000 per annum, 40% earning between $21,000-40,000 per annum and 7% earning over $41,000 per annum. Of the students, 30% were full time and 70% were part-time.

Participants were either in a marital or defacto relationship, ranging in length from 2-24 years (\(M = 11.90, SD = 4.39\)). The majority had two children (69%), 24% had three children, 7% had four or more children. The sample, as a whole, was fairly well educated, with 66% having completed a tertiary qualification and a further 7% in the process of doing so. Of the participants’ partners, 92% were working full time, 2% were working part-time and 6% were unemployed. The majority of working partners earned in excess of $41,000 per year (86%) with the remainder earning less than this.
2.2 Materials

Participants were given an eight-part self-report questionnaire to complete (see Appendix A). The questionnaire comprised the following sections: (a) an introductory cover sheet, (b) a demographic questionnaire, (c) Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire - Revised (ECR-R, Fraley et al., 2000), (d) Commitment Inventory, (Stanley & Markman, 1992), (e) Responses to Relationship Problems Scale (Rusbult et al., 1991), (f) Conflict Subscale from the Quality of Relationship Inventory (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991), (g) Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), and (h) Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982).

The introductory letter provided details of the researcher and outlined the general aims of the study. Further, it explained what would be required of participants who agreed to complete the questionnaire, the methods that would be employed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of data, the participant’s right to withdraw at any time, as well as enquiry contacts and details of how counselling could be sought if necessary.

The demographic questionnaire asked general questions about the participant and her partner’s age, marital status, length of relationship, number of children, educational level and employment/student status. As well, it asked more specific questions about the length of time the participant had spent caring for children whilst not working or studying, reasons for returning to work or study, intention to have more children, perceived level of support from partner and other life demands.

2.2.1 Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire- Revised. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire- Revised (ECR-R, Fraley et al., 2000) was used to
measure two higher-order attachment factors, anxiety and avoidance. The scale consists of 36 items, of which 18 measure anxiety and 18 measure avoidance. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believe each statement was true for them in their relationship with their partner using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”. Wording of items was modified slightly to reflect the participant’s current relationship with her partner, not other past romantic partners. An example of an anxiety item was, “I’m afraid that I will lose my partner’s love”, and an avoidance item was, “I prefer not to show my partner how I feel deep down”. After reverse coding negatively worded items, item scores for each subscale were totalled to obtain separate anxiety and avoidance scores ranging from 18-126, with higher scores indicating higher levels of anxiety or avoidance. Fraley et al. (2000) reported a test-retest reliability alpha for the anxiety and avoidance subscales above .93.

2.2.2 The Commitment Inventory. The Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) was designed to measure participants’ level of commitment to their romantic relationship in terms of two related constructs, personal dedication and constraint commitment. In line with Dougall (1998), the present study used a short form of the original 60 item Commitment Inventory by selecting 12 dedication and 12 constraint items. Wording of items was slightly modified to refer to one’s “partner”, rather than “spouse” and to refer to “marital/defacto relationship” rather than “marriage” in order maintain consistency of wording throughout the questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”. An example of an item was, “My relationship with my partner is clearly part of my future life plans”. For the purpose of the multiple regression analyses in the present study, only a total commitment score was calculated by reverse coding negatively
worded items and totalling item scores to obtain a score ranging from 24-168 with higher scores indicating a greater level of commitment.

Stanley and Markman (1992) reported acceptable levels of reliability with alpha coefficients for dedication and constraint commitment above .90. Dougall (1998) reported an alpha co-efficient of .90 for total commitment. Evidence for the concurrent validity of the scale has been found by establishing significant correlations with other commitment measures. Evidence for the construct validity of the scale has been found by correlating subscale scores and total scores with a series of other measures such as relationship satisfaction, disclosure and relationship length, with correlations all in the expected directions (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

2.2.3 My Responses to Relationship Problems Scale. The “My Response to Relationship Problems” Scale (Rusbult et al., 1991) consists of 16 items designed to measure four conflict resolution styles: voice, loyalty, neglect and exit. In line with Dougall (1998), only 12 items were used in the present study. The items comprised one of three situational stems (e.g., “When my partner is angry at me and ignores me for a while…”), each followed by four different reaction statements designed to reflect each of the above conflict resolution styles (e.g., voice response: “I talk to him about what’s going on’”). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they would react in each situation on an 8-point Likert scale from 0 = “never do this” to 8 = “always do this”. The voice response was measured by items 1, 5 and 12 which were designed to assess the participant’s propensity to discuss relationship problems with her partner and reach a solution. The loyalty response was measured by items 4, 7 and 10 which were designed to assess the participant’s propensity to support her partner and wait patiently for things to improve. The neglect response was measured by items 2, 9
and 11 which were designed to measure the participant’s propensity to sulk, ignore the problem and avoid her partner. The exit response was measured by items 3, 6 and 8 which were designed to assess the participant’s propensity to consider ending the relationship. Item scores for each conflict resolution style were totalled to obtain subscale scores ranging from 0-24, with higher scores indicating greater propensity to use that particular style.

This scale has been found to display acceptable reliability, with Rusbult et al. (1991) reporting an alpha coefficient of .63 for constructive responses (i.e., voice plus loyalty) and .77 for destructive responses (i.e., exit plus neglect). Further, Dougall (1998) reported acceptable alpha coefficients for the four subscales as follows: voice, .87, loyalty, .85, neglect, .77 and exit, .93. The scale has also been shown to display both convergent and discriminant validity when correlated with several behavioural measures of conflict styles (Rusbult et al., 1991).

2.2.4 Conflict subscale from the Quality of Relationship Inventory. The Conflict subscale from the Quality of Relationship Inventory (Pierce et al., 1991) consists of 12 items designed to measure the level of conflict and ambivalence found in a relationship and the participant’s feelings of anger, guilt or upset towards an important other. For the purpose of the present study, wording of items was modified slightly so that the subject of the items became “your partner” rather than “this person”. Further, contrary to past use of the subscale (Pierce et al., 1991; Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, & Solky-Butzel, 1997; Ptacek, Pierce, Eberhardt, & Dodge, 1999) the present study measured items using a 5-point Likert scale anchored differently according to the wording of each item in order improve scale interpretation. Participants were asked to rate “how much” a particular event occurs in their relationships on a scale from 1 = “not at all” to 5 = “extremely/very much (e.g., “How much
do you argue with your partner?”). Participants were asked to rate “how often” a particular event occurs in their relationship on a scale from 1 = “never” to 5 = “always” (e.g., “How often does your partner make you feel angry?”). A level of conflict score between 12-60 was obtained by totalling item scores, with higher scores indicating a higher level of conflict. This subscale has been found to have acceptable levels of reliability with alpha coefficients reported as .88 and above (Pierce et al., 1991), with evidence also found to support the construct and discriminant validity of the subscale (Pierce et al., 1997).

2.2.5 Relationship Assessment Scale. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS, Hendrick, 1988) is a seven-item measure of general relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to rate how much they believe each statement is true for them in their current relationship with their partner on a 5-point Likert scale, with wording of anchor points reflecting the wording of each item. An example of an item was, “How well does your partner meet your needs?” After reverse scoring negatively worded items, item scores were totalled to obtain a relationship satisfaction score ranging from 7-35 with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. Hendrick (1988) reported acceptable scale reliability with an alpha coefficient of .86 and a mean inter-item correlation of .49, and found the scale to display convergent validity by correlating highly with other measures of relationship satisfaction.

2.2.6 Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982) is a 33-item scale designed to measure participants’ tendency to respond to self-report measures in a socially desirable way which may distort test results. For the purpose of the present study, the 13-item short-form of the scale developed by Reynolds was utilised. Each item reflects a social situation to which the
participant was asked to indicate whether it was an accurate description of what they would
normally do (e.g., “No matter who I’m talking to I’m always a good listener”). In order to
increase the reliability of the scale, the present study asked participants to rate each item on a
5-point Likert scale from 1 = “not true of me” to 5 = “very true of me”. After reverse
scoring negatively worded items, item scores were totalled to give an overall social
desirability score ranging from 13-65, with higher scores indicating a greater level of socially
desirable responding by the participant. Reynolds (1982) reported a Kuder-Richardson
formulae scale reliability co-efficient of .76, with inter-item correlations between .32-.47,
and found the scale to display concurrent validity by correlating moderately with other social
desirability scales.

2.3 Procedure

The data was collected from participants who were recruited in two ways. First, the
participants were recruited via the Research Experience Program (REP) at Swinburne
University of Technology, Hawthorn, which is a program designed to encourage first year
psychology students to participate in post-graduate research as a learning experience.
Participants were informed of the study by viewing an overhead at the start of their lecture,
outlining the research and participation requirements, and were invited to take a
questionnaire home to complete if interested. Students were given a course credit for
participation in the study and were asked to return their completed questionnaires to a
designated box at the university. Second, participants were recruited by networking personal
contacts of the researcher and were asked to return their questionnaires in the pre-paid
envelope provided with the questionnaire. Return rate was approximately 33%.
3.0 Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses

Participants’ responses to questionnaire items were represented numerically to allow results to be analysed using SPSS Version 12.0 statistical package. Although there were originally 100 participants, four cases were deleted from the data set as participants did not meet criteria for inclusion. All further analyses were conducted based on the 96 remaining participants. Scale and subscale scores were calculated according to the scoring procedures for each measure.

3.1.1 Data screening. Data was screened to detect out-of-range values and several data entry errors were corrected after referring back to the original questionnaires. There were no cases containing more than 30% of missing values that required deletion. No variables contained more than two missing values, other than particular demographic variables that did not apply to all participants (e.g., paid hours of work), nor were there any obvious patterns in the missing data. As a result, missing values were replaced with the mean of the remaining variables of the subscale for each case (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

All continuous variables to be used in multivariate analyses were checked for univariate outliers and normality of score distribution. The commitment score was found to be significantly negatively skewed due to an extreme outlier. The extreme value was altered to the nearest, less extreme value to improve normality (Pallant, 2001; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The avoidance, anxiety and exit scores were found to be significantly positively skewed, not as the result of extreme outliers. Logarithm transformations were performed on each of these variables which improved the normality of avoidance and anxiety, decreasing skewness to non-significance. As the normality of exit scores was not greatly improved by
the transformation, it was decided to conduct analyses with this variable in both its transformed and untransformed state and to compare results of both. The relationship satisfaction score was found to be significantly negatively skewed, not due to extreme outliers. A reflect and square root transformation was performed on this variable to improve normality and decrease skewness to non-significance (Pallant; Tabachnick & Fidell).

3.1.2 Descriptive statistics and internal reliability of main measures. Cronbach’s alpha co-efficients were calculated to assess the reliability of all scales and subscales and are presented in Table 1 along with the mean, standard deviation and range of all measures.

Table 1
Mean, Standard Deviation, Range and Internal Reliability of Scales/Subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>44.03</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>18-126</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>37.97</td>
<td>17.57</td>
<td>18-126</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>109.97</td>
<td>14.65</td>
<td>21-147</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>13.78</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>0-24</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>9.48</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>0-24</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>0-24</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>9.17</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0-24</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Conflict</td>
<td>27.88</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>12-60</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>28.31</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>7-35</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Desirability</td>
<td>46.47</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>13-65</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 96
Acceptable reliability was shown for all scales and subscales with Cronbach’s alphas above .69. As items 2, 4 and 14 of the commitment scale displayed negative corrected item-total correlations below .11, they were excluded to improve reliability and the score range adjusted accordingly. Although the three exit items were highly correlated, as evidenced by the high Cronbach’s alpha for this subscale, a low correlation between exit and social desirability scores indicated that this did not adversely affect the validity of the exit subscale.

3.1.3 Relationship between main variables used in study. Pearson’s correlation coefficients were calculated between the demographic variables and the main variables to be used in the analyses, but none were significant. In order to establish the relationship between all main variables to be used in further analyses, Pearson’s correlation coefficients were calculated and these are displayed in Table 2. There was a significant moderate negative relationship between each of the attachment variables (i.e., avoidance and anxiety) and both satisfaction and commitment. As well, there was a moderate significant positive relationship between each of the attachment variables and level of conflict.

3.2 Main Analyses

3.2.1 Comparing relationship variables and conflict styles of groups. In order to determine whether further analyses should be conducted separately for different groups, Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVA) were conducted to compare the relationship variables (i.e., avoidance, anxiety, commitment, level of conflict and satisfaction) and the conflict resolution styles (i.e., voice, loyalty, neglect and exit) of three groups: students and non-students; those who worked for financial or career reasons; and those with or without other life demands. Prior to conducting each separate analysis, the assumptions of MANOVA were tested. The assumption of independence of observation was met and all
### Table 2

*Intercorrelations Between Scales and Subscales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale/ Subscale</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Neglect</th>
<th>Exit</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Avoidance</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Commitment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
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<td>.42***</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.40***</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit</td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>-.65***</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>.38***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td>.68***</td>
<td>-.46***</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>.66***</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>-.75***</td>
<td>-.66***</td>
<td>.64***</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>-.43***</td>
<td>-.75***</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.81***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Desir</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.21*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Social Desir = Social Desirability score, Conflict = Level of Conflict

*N = 96*

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*
dependent variables were normally distributed for each group, with the exception of exit scores, which were significantly positively skewed as discussed above. However as MANOVA is robust to modest violations of normality, if non-normality is due to skewness rather than outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), then it was decided to use this variable in its untransformed state. An examination of the Mahalanobis distance scores indicated an absence of multivariate outliers. Bivariate correlations and scatterplots indicated that the relationship variables were moderately correlated and linearly related, satisfying the assumptions of collinearity and linearity. Although not all the conflict resolution styles were moderately correlated, a MANOVA was conducted given the theoretical relationship between these variables (Coakes, 2005; Rusbult et al., 1991). Non-significant Box M tests indicated the assumption of covariance was upheld for each MANOVA.

One-way between groups MANOVAs were conducted which revealed no significant difference in the mean score of relationship variables of students and non-students, Hotelling’s Trace = .11, $F(5,86) = 1.91$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$, of participants who returned to work for financial or career reasons, Hotelling’s Trace = .05, $F(5,74) = .73$, $p > .10$, $\eta^2 = .05$, or of those participants who had other life demands and those who did not, Hotelling’s Trace = .12, $F(5,86) = 1.97$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .10$.

With regard to conflict resolution styles, the MANOVA analysis was conducted with exit scores in both a transformed and untransformed state. As there was no difference in the overall interpretation, the untransformed results have been reported along with Pillai’s Trace statistics which are more robust to violations of assumptions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). There was no significant difference in the
mean conflict resolution style scores of participants who returned to work for financial or career reasons, Pillai’s Trace = .107, $F(4,77) = 2.30, p > .05, \eta^2 = .11$, or of those participants with or without other life demands, Pillai’s Trace = .04, $F(4,89) = .89, p > .10, \eta^2 = .04$. Multivariate tests revealed a significant difference in the conflict resolution styles of students compared to non-students, Pillai’s Trace = .12, $F(4, 89) = 3.14, p < .05, \eta^2 = .12$. However, univariate tests with Bonferroni adjustment revealed no significant difference in the voice, neglect, exit or loyalty scores for the two groups. As a result, the participants were all analysed together as one group.

3.2.2 Predicting satisfaction from attachment, commitment and level of conflict. Prior to conducting a hierarchical multiple regression, the relevant assumptions of this statistical analysis were tested. Firstly, a sample size of 96 was deemed adequate given five independent variables to be included in the analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The assumption of singularity was also met as the included independent variables (i.e., avoidance, anxiety, commitment and level of conflict) were not a combination of other independent variables. An examination of correlations (see Table 2) revealed that no independent variables were highly correlated, with the exception of conflict and satisfaction. However, as the collinearity statistics (i.e., Tolerance and VIF) were all within accepted limits, the assumption of multicollinearity was deemed to have been met (Coakes, 2005; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Extreme univariate outliers identified in initial data screening were modified as above. An examination of the Mahalanobis distance scores indicated no multivariate outliers. Residual and scatter plots indicated the
assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were all satisfied (Hair et al.; Pallant, 2001).

A four stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with satisfaction as the dependent variable. Social desirability was entered at stage one of the regression to control for socially desirable responding. Avoidance and anxiety were entered at stage two, commitment at stage three and level of conflict at stage four. The relationship variables were entered in this order as it seemed chronologically plausible, given attachment is relevant from infancy, whereas commitment and conflict issues occur once a person is in a romantic relationship. Intercorrelations between the multiple regression variables were reported in Table 2 and the regression statistics are in Table 3. At stage one, social desirability contributed significantly to the regression model, $F (1, 90) = 4.05, p< .05$, and accounted for 4.3% of the variation in satisfaction. Introducing the attachment variables explained an additional 55.2% of variation in satisfaction and this change in $R^2$ was significant, $F (2, 88) = 60.10, p < .001$. Adding commitment to the regression model explained an additional 6.2% of the variation in satisfaction and this change in $R^2$ was significant, $F (1, 87) = 15.74, p < .01$. Finally, the addition of level of conflict to the regression model explained an additional 10.7% of the variation in satisfaction and this change in $R^2$ square was also significant, $F (1, 86) = 39.18, p < .001$. When all five independent variables were included in stage four of the regression model, neither social desirability, nor anxiety were significant predictors of satisfaction. The most important predictor of satisfaction was conflict, which uniquely explained 11% of the variation in satisfaction. Together the five independent variables accounted for 76.5% of the variance in satisfaction.
### Table 3

**Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables predicting Satisfaction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Squared semi partial correlation</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
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<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>.21</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Desirability</td>
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<td>2.01*</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Desirability</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Avoidance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 94;  
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
3.2.3 Predicting conflict resolution styles from attachment and commitment.

A more general hypothesis of the present study was to explore the relationship between the attachment variables and commitment in the prediction of conflict resolution styles. However, correlations between these variables (see Table 2) indicated that of the four conflict resolution styles, commitment was not significantly correlated with voice, neglect or loyalty and was therefore not included in the regression analysis for those conflict styles. Prior to conducting regressions, the relevant multiple regression assumptions were tested and found to be met as above. An examination of Mahalanobis distance scores indicated no multivariate outliers. Four separate hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. For each regression, social desirability was entered into the model at stage one, in order to control for socially desirable responding and the attachment variables at stage two. For the multiple regression predicting exit scores, commitment was also entered at stage three.

3.2.3.1 Predicting voice from avoidance and anxiety. Regression statistics pertinent to this analysis are in Table 4. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, social desirability contributed significantly to the regression model, $F(1, 90) = 9.24, p < .01$ and accounted for 9.3% of the variation in voice. Introducing the attachment variables explained an additional 10.2% of the variation in voice and this change in $R^2$ was significant, $F(2, 88) = 5.55, p < .01$. Only social desirability and avoidance were significant predictors at stage two. The most important predictor was avoidance. Together the three independent variables accounted for 19.5% of the variation in voice.
Table 4

**Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Voice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Squared semi partial Correlation</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
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<td>.09</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.44</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.01</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N = 94
* = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001

3.2.3.2 *Predicting loyalty from avoidance and anxiety.* Regression statistics pertinent to this analysis are in Table 5. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, social desirability did not contribute significantly to the regression model, $F (1, 90) = .32, p > .10$, and accounted for only 0.4% of the variation in loyalty. Introducing the attachment variables at stage two explained an additional 3.5% of the variation in loyalty, but this change in $R^2$ was non-significant, $F (2, 88) = 1.61, p > .10$. None of the predictors were significant at stage two. Together the three variables accounted for only 3.9% of the variation in loyalty.
### Table 5

**Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Loyalty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
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<td>Social Desirability</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N = 94*

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

---

3.2.3.3 **Predicting neglect from avoidance and anxiety.** Regression statistics pertinent to this analysis are in Table 6. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, social desirability did not contribute significantly to the regression model, $F(1, 90) = 3.49, p > .05$ and accounted for 3.7% of the variation in neglect. Introducing the attachment variables at stage two explained an additional 22.30% of the variation in neglect, and this change in $R^2$ was significant, $F(2, 88) = 13.30, p < .001$. Only avoidance was a significant predictor at stage two. Together the three variables accounted for 26.1% of the variation in neglect.
Table 6

**Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Neglect**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>β</th>
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<th>Squared semi partial R Correlation</th>
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<th>R²</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.51</td>
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<td>.22</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 94  
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

### 3.2.3.4 Predicting exit from avoidance, anxiety and commitment.

Given the difficulty in transforming the exit variable as mentioned above, the regression analysis was conducted using exit in both a transformed and untransformed state. As the interpretation of results was the same for both, the untransformed results have been reported (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Regression statistics pertinent to this analysis are in Table 7. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, social desirability contributed significantly to the regression model, \( F(1, 90) = 7.01, p < .05 \), and accounted for 7.2% of the variation in exit. Introducing the attachment variables at stage two explained an additional 42.2% of the variation in exit and this change in \( R^2 \) was significant, \( F(2, 88) = 36.79, p < .001 \). Introducing commitment at stage three explained an additional 9.2% of the variation in exit and this change in \( R^2 \) was significant, \( F(1, 87) = 19.25, p < .001 \). When all four variables were included in the
A regression model at stage three, only avoidance and commitment were significant, and equally important predictors of exit. Together the four independent variables accounted for 58.6% of the variation in exit.

Table 7

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Exit

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Squared semi partial Correlation</th>
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<th>R²</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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*Note: N = 94
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*
4.0 Discussion

4.1 Overview of Aims and Findings

The general aims of the present study were to investigate the relationship between the higher order factors of attachment (i.e., avoidance and anxiety) with commitment, level of conflict and satisfaction for mothers with two or more children, currently in a long term relationship, who had recently returned to work or study. Specifically the study aimed to explore the mediational effects of both commitment and level of conflict in the prediction of satisfaction from the higher order attachment factors. The study further aimed to explore which conflict resolution styles could be predicted from both commitment and the higher order attachment factors.

The results of the present study supported the prediction of a significant negative relationship between the attachment variables and both satisfaction and commitment, as well as a significant positive relationship between the attachment variables and level of conflict. Further, as predicted, level of conflict was found to have a full mediational effect on the relationship between anxiety and satisfaction and a partial mediational effect on the relationship between avoidance and satisfaction. Contrary to prediction, commitment partially mediated only the relationship between avoidance and satisfaction. It was also discovered that in relation to the conflict resolution styles, avoidance, but not anxiety, was a significant predictor of voice, neglect and exit. Commitment was found to be a significant predictor of exit only.

4.2 The Relationship Between the Attachment Variables and Relationship Variables

The first three hypotheses proposed a linear relationship between the attachment variables and each of satisfaction, commitment and level of conflict.
Consistent with past research (Curran et al., 2005; Feeney et al., 2003; Simpson et al., 2002), the hypothesis that participants with higher levels of anxiety and avoidance would report lower levels of satisfaction in their relationship was supported. The finding that participants with higher levels of avoidance and anxiety would also experience decreased commitment to their relationship was also in line with past findings in this area (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Pistole & Clarke, 1995; Simpson, 1990).

Contrary to past findings that more anxious people, rather than more avoidant people tend to experience greater levels of conflict (Campbell et al., 2005; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; MacDougall, 2003), results from the present study supported the contention that high levels of both anxiety and avoidance would be related to increased levels of conflict. This was thought to be due to the fact that women in the current study were all in longer term relationships with two or more children. Consequently, they had formed a stronger attachment bond with their partner, whose ability to provide a secure base took on more importance due to a greater investment in the relationship, than for those people in the above mentioned studies who were in dating or short-term relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Rusbult et al., 1982, 1991). Therefore, when attachment models are activated under stress, women with higher levels of anxiety would be expected to display more vulnerability and higher levels of distress given their on-going fears of abandonment, thus leading to increased conflict in their relationship (Campbell et al., 2005). Although higher levels of avoidance may have limited impact on conflict levels for short-term relationships, where it could act as a means of circumventing disagreements (Campbell et al.), for longer term relationships, this would be expected to increase the frustration of the other partner,
who may continue to pursue the avoidant partner for some kind of resolution, which also leads to increased conflict (Bradbury et al., 2000; Roberts & Noller, 1998; Schachner et al., 2003).

The fact that the above relationships were all moderate to strong and in the expected direction also gave further support to the sound psychometric properties of the ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000) attachment measure used in this study and the contention of the present study that internal attachment models would be strongly activated for working mothers in longer term relationships, due to the stress associated with juggling commitments both inside and outside the home. Further, establishing that these significant relationships existed in the current study justified testing the proposed mediational effects of commitment and level of conflict on the relationship between attachment and satisfaction (Frazier et al., 2004).

4.3 Mediational Effects of Commitment and Level of Conflict on the Relationship between Attachment and Satisfaction.

The hypothesis that both commitment and level of conflict would mediate the relationship between the attachment variables and satisfaction was partially supported by findings in the present study. This was in line with the above past findings regarding the well established relationships between the attachment variables and each of commitment, level of conflict and satisfaction, as well as past findings that people who are more committed and have lower levels of conflict tend to also be more satisfied with their relationship (Driver & Gottman, 1999; Gottman et al., 1998; Stanley & Markman, 1992).
4.3.1. Mediational effects of commitment. Whilst each of the attachment variables was a significant predictor of satisfaction in their own right, when the effects of commitment were included, both the attachment variables and commitment remained significant predictors of satisfaction. However, whilst the effect of avoidance was reduced when commitment was taken into account, the effect of anxiety remained relatively stable. This suggested that although satisfaction was directly affected by level of avoidance and anxiety, this was also due to the indirect effects of avoidance, but not anxiety, on commitment.

Regarding avoidance, it makes sense that women who are uncomfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy would be less committed and in turn may feel less satisfied with their relationship. However, the fact that commitment did not appear to mediate the relationship between anxiety and satisfaction is less clear given the present findings that more anxious women also tend to be less committed, and less committed women tend to be less satisfied. This may be explained by the indirect effects of avoidance, given the moderate to strong positive relationship between avoidance and anxiety, combined with the moderate negative relationship between avoidance and commitment. That is, women who were more anxious also tended to be more avoidant, and more avoidant women were also less committed, indicating that of the attachment variables, perhaps a woman’s level of avoidance was the most important predictor of commitment. Although, on average, the women in the present study scored relatively low on both anxiety and avoidance, those who tended to have difficulty maintaining emotional closeness also had a higher tendency to feel anxious, perhaps due to the vulnerability they felt in having to deal with the change of going back to work or study while also managing young children. Also, with regard to past
findings that insecurely attached people in general tend to be less committed (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Pistole & Clarke, 1995; Simpson, 1990), perhaps the use of less psychometrically sound attachment measures and different commitment scales in past studies were not able to adequately identify the separate predictive effects of the underlying major attachment factors revealed in the present study.

4.3.2. Mediational effects of level of conflict. When the effect of level of conflict was taken into account, avoidance, commitment and level of conflict were significant predictors of satisfaction. Whilst the effect of avoidance was reduced, but remained significant, the effect of anxiety was reduced to non-significance. This suggested that a woman’s high level of avoidance has a direct impact on her decreased level of satisfaction, but it also leads her to experience more conflict, which in turn, decreases satisfaction. In addition, for highly anxious women, their low level of satisfaction appears to be due to the fact that they tend to experience more conflict, which in turn leads them to feel less satisfied, but was apparently not due to the direct effect of their level of anxiety. This suggested that the increased conflict associated with a high level of anxiety is a more important correlate of satisfaction than level of anxiety itself (Meyers & Landsberger, 2002). This may have been due to the fact that, as proposed by Campbell et al. (2005), high levels of anxiety impact more on level of conflict than high levels of avoidance. Anxious women worry excessively about being abandoned, constantly monitor their partners and generally have a pessimistic outlook on their relationship (MacDougall, 2003), which leads to lower satisfaction only indirectly through its tendency to create more conflict in the relationship. While more avoidant women also experience increased conflict and therefore lower satisfaction due to their tendency to remain detached during conflict,
usually by blaming or criticising their partner (MacDougall), it is also simply their tendency to feel uncomfortable with emotional intimacy that decreases their satisfaction.

While the effect of attachment was strong, accounting for the largest proportion of variance in satisfaction, level of conflict was the most important individual predictor of satisfaction. Although other factors may also have contributed to the level of satisfaction that were not explained by the current model, such as personality factors (Frazier et al., 2003), level of psychological distress and social support (Meyers & Landsberger, 2002), impressively the attachment variables, commitment and level of conflict together accounted for a very large proportion of the variance in satisfaction, suggesting that as a group, they were important predictors. Further, although women who were more satisfied with their relationship tended to show a greater propensity to respond in a more socially desirable way, indicating that a positive illusion bias may have been operating (Taylor & Brown, 1988), this effect was not significant when the other variables were taken into account and was therefore not considered to have a problematic impact on the prediction model.

Overall, findings from the mediation model suggest that more secure women (i.e., those low in avoidance and anxiety) possess an inner resource that is directly related to higher levels of satisfaction, but that also helps them to maintain commitment to their relationship and protects them from the adverse effects of conflict, therefore also enhancing marital quality (Meyers & Landsberger, 2002). This has important implications for the development of intervention strategies for relationship counselling aimed at increasing marital satisfaction and therefore
preventing relationship dissolution. By adopting an attachment focus, counselling interventions may instigate changes to commitment and level of conflict that together may enhance relationship satisfaction (Cobb & Bradbury, 2003). If counselling therapy addresses attachment and satisfaction without considering conflict and commitment issues, therapeutic interventions may be less beneficial (Beck, Dudley, & Barsevick, 2005). Further, by providing a secure base themselves, therapists can assist clients to heal past emotional wounds and, in time, to become more securely attached, thus correcting maladaptive relationship patterns, and gaining protection from further psychological stress (MacDougall, 2003).

4.4 Predicting Conflict Resolution Styles from Attachment and Commitment

Findings from the present study that level of avoidance was a significant predictor of the voice, neglect and exit conflict resolution styles was generally in line with the findings of Corcoran and Mallinckrodt, 2000, Creasey et al. (1999), MacDougall (2003), Pistole and Arricale (2003), and Shi (2004), that individuals who are more avoidant tend to withdraw from conflict situations, often arguing ineffectively and refusing to compromise. However, the finding that anxiety was not a significant predictor of any of the conflict resolution styles was contrary to findings of Corcoran and Mallinckrodt (2000), Creasey et al. (1999), MacDougall (2003), Shi (2003) and Simpson et al. (1996), that more anxious individuals tend to become overly clingy and demanding and often feel hurt or guilty during and after conflict. These findings for each conflict style are discussed in more detail below.

Findings from the present study that commitment was a negative predictor only of exit, only partially supported past findings that people who are more
committed tend to inhibit destructive conflict styles rather than promote constructive ones (Dougall, 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991). This discrepancy may have been due to the fact that past studies used samples of people in dating or shorter-term marital relationships. For women in the present study who were in longer term relationships, had at least two children and were, on average, quite highly committed to their relationship, their tendency to use a particular conflict resolution style may have been related more to their underlying attachment models than their level of commitment, except in the case of making threats to leave. When we consider that commitment refers to both personal dedication to one’s partner and structural constraints that help to maintain the relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992), especially through difficult times, this offers a possible explanation for why women in the present study would be more likely to inhibit this particular destructive conflict response, given their high rate of personal investment in the relationship and the potential hardship associated with walking away from it.

4.4.1 Predicting voice from attachment. Findings from the present study revealed that avoidance was a significant negative predictor of voice, but there was no significant relationship between voice and anxiety. This indicated that, as expected, individuals who avoid emotional intimacy and are uncomfortable relying on close others, are less likely to openly communicate and discuss problems with their partner since their defensiveness inhibits their ability to seek constructive interactions that may help to resolve conflict (Shi, 2003). However, for women in the present study, their propensity to be overly anxious due to fear of rejection did not predict their use of voice when in conflict. This may have been due to the fact that, as proposed by Shi, more avoidant people are at a greater disadvantage in conflict situations because
of their tendency to withdraw, shutting down any possibility of resolution which has an important impact on the conflict style they use. In contrast, more anxious people tend to pursue, but this is due to their desire to alleviate a fear of rejection and seek emotional reassurance rather than for conflict resolution. This could explain why a woman’s level of avoidance is more predictive of conflict resolution style than level of anxiety. Interestingly, the current study found that social desirability was also a positive predictor of voice. This meant that those women who reported using open and communicative conflict techniques also had a tendency to present themselves in a positive light. Although this may be a beneficial personal quality (Taylor & Brown, 1988), it should be taken into account when interpreting the present findings. Despite this, avoidance was still found to be the most important predictor of voice. Further, the attachment variables and social desirability combined explained only a relatively small proportion of the variance in voice scores, indicating the presence of other important predictors that were not considered in the present model.

4.4.2 Predicting loyalty from attachment. Findings from the present study revealed that neither the attachment variables nor social desirability were significant predictors of loyalty. This indicated that a woman’s tendency to sit back and wait for things to improve during conflict, whilst remaining loyal to the partner, was not determined by levels of anxiety or avoidance, nor was it affected by socially desirable responding. This was inconsistent with past findings (Dougall, 1998; Pistole & Arricale, 2003; Shi, 2003) that those people who are high in anxiety are more likely to demonstrate passive responses to conflict. This may have again been due to the use of samples of people in short-term relationships in these past studies. Perhaps for longer term relationships, a woman’s tendency to just wait for things to get better and
to “forgive and forget” is simply not related to a fear of abandonment or intimacy, but could be explained more by other variables such as personality or experiences in her family of origin. Alternatively, of the four conflict styles, loyalty had the lowest reliability score and was not significantly related to any of the relationship or conflict style variables, suggesting that current findings with regard to this conflict style could also be due to the methodological problems of this particular subscale that require further investigation.

4.4.3. Predicting neglect from attachment. The current findings indicated that avoidance, but not anxiety, was a significant positive predictor of neglect, and that neglect scores were not affected by socially desirable responding. Interestingly, neglect scores were moderately positively correlated with both avoidance and anxiety, but when included in the regression model, only avoidance was found to be a significant predictor. Given the moderate to strong positive correlation between the attachment variables, this indicated that level of anxiety may have been affecting a woman’s tendency to actively ignore conflict indirectly through its effect on avoidance. That is, women who were more anxious tended to be more avoidant which in turn increased the likelihood of them trying to ignore conflict situations. Also, as discussed above, avoidance was thought to be a more important predictor of conflict styles, as the tendency to withdraw from conflict may have a more detrimental effect on how one reacts in conflict situations than the tendency to pursue. Together the attachment variables accounted for approximately a quarter of the variation in neglect scores, indicating the presence of other important predictors which were not considered in the present model.
4.4.4. Predicting exit from attachment and commitment. The current findings indicated that avoidance, but not anxiety, was a significant positive predictor of exit, suggesting that women who avoid emotional intimacy and place little value on relationships are more likely to threaten to leave the relationship when in conflict. As with neglect scores, this was despite the fact that individually, both the attachment variables were moderately positively correlated with exit, again indicating the possible indirect effects of anxiety on exit, due to its shared variance with avoidance. Further, of the attachment variables, avoidance was found to be the most important predictor of this conflict style for reasons also discussed above.

When the effects of commitment were controlled, avoidance remained a significant predictor of exit, but its effect was reduced. Commitment was an equally important and significant negative predictor of exit. This suggested the partial mediating effect of commitment on the relationship between avoidance and exit. That is, highly avoidant women tend to threaten to leave when in conflict, but their high level of avoidance also means they feel less committed to their relationship which, in turn, adds to their desire to walk away when there is conflict. Together the attachment variables accounted for half the variation in exit indicating that they were the strongest predictors of exit, with commitment adding a smaller, but significant proportion of the variation. Although participants who had a tendency to respond in a more socially desirable way indicated they would be less likely to threaten to exit when in conflict, this effect was no longer significant when the effects of attachment and commitment were taken into account, suggesting that their tendency to present themselves in a positive light (Taylor & Brown, 1988) was generally not having an important impact on the prediction of this conflict style.
Overall, the present findings with regard to attachment, conflict resolution styles and commitment also have important implications for marital therapy. By developing a more complex understanding of how clients’ underlying attachment issues, particularly their tendency to avoid intimacy, may be impacting on how they respond in conflict situations, the therapist can structure interventions accordingly. Through a process of initially providing a secure base, validating fear of intimacy issues and supporting clients to make important links between their family of origin, attachment style and current conflict behaviour (MacDougall, 2003), the therapist may be able to help clients move towards increased inner security and therefore more constructive ways of dealing with conflict in their current intimate relationship. In time, the couple may also be able to provide a more secure base for each other (Shi, 2003). Further, if clients have a tendency to threaten to end the relationship when in conflict, then it may also be valuable to address underlying commitment issues in order to inhibit this destructive conflict response (Dougall, 1998).

4.5 Limitations of the Present Study and Directions for Future Research

Despite the implications of the current findings with regard to marital therapy, the present study also has certain limitations which need to be addressed. First, the sample used in the current study consisted only of women which limited the generalisability of the findings. It is possible that different patterns of relationships between the attachment variables, relationship variables and conflict resolution styles may exist for the male partners (Meyers & Landsberger, 2002). Research that incorporates the relationship experiences of both partners may provide a more comprehensive view of the interaction effects of different attachment styles,
commitment levels, perceptions of conflict and conflict styles for women and men (Dougall, 1998; Feeney, 1999).

Second, the present study utilised a sample of convenience, obtained predominantly from the researcher’s local community, of whom the majority were well educated and financially secure, which also limited the generalisability of findings. To consider the impact of other factors such as culture, socio-economic status and educational level, may also be a useful avenue for future research. Third, the sample, as a whole, reported that they were quite satisfied with their relationship, were relatively low in anxiety and avoidance, and had a low tendency to threaten to exit their relationship when in conflict, which should be taken into consideration when interpreting the present findings.

Finally, there are several issues that should be acknowledged when interpreting findings from mediation analyses (Frazier et al., 2004), such as the likelihood that there may be other theoretically meaningful models that also fit the data, that the present study was unable to identify and test. Further, as discussed above, there may be other variables that were not included in the current mediation analyses such as personality, psychological or social factors that may impact on both the mediating variables (i.e., commitment and level of conflict) and the outcome variable (i.e., satisfaction). As well, the current study was predominantly correlational and non-experimental, meaning that causal inferences between the variables could not be made (Frazier et al.). Consequently, additional research that addresses these limitations would be beneficial.
4.6. Conclusion

In summary, the results obtained from the present study of mothers returning to work or study revealed that generally, the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction was mediated by the effects of both commitment and level of conflict, and that conflict resolution style was determined more by level of avoidance than by level of anxiety or commitment. Specifically, commitment partially mediated the relationship between avoidance and satisfaction. Level of conflict partially mediated the relationship between avoidance and satisfaction and fully mediated the relationship between anxiety and satisfaction. Further, the present study discovered that whilst the conflict resolution styles of voice, neglect and exit were affected by level of avoidance rather than level of anxiety, loyalty was not influenced by either of the attachment variables. Of the conflict resolution styles, only exit was found to be affected by level of commitment to the relationship. These findings, whilst still requiring further validation, are believed to have important theoretical and practical implications for adult romantic relationships in the context of marital therapy. Understanding more about the interplay between attachment, commitment, levels of conflict and their effect on relationship satisfaction, together with an appreciation of conflict resolution styles from an attachment perspective, may assist marital therapists to structure intervention strategies more effectively. In turn, this will hopefully assist distressed couples to increase satisfaction and therefore repair, rather than dissolve, their marital relationship.
5.0 References


