The Push or Pull of Romantic Relationships for Women with an Insecure Attachment Style

A Hermeneutic Literature Review

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Abstract

The increasing public awareness of attachment theory and the impact of insecure attachment on romantic relationships highlights the importance of gaining insight into the implications of one's attachment style. This insight can aid insecurely attached adults in comprehending their behaviour, interpersonal connections, and the influence of their attachment styles on their romantic relationships. The current dissertation has a particular interest and focuses on insecure attachment in adult women and its impact on romantic relationships. Using a hermeneutic methodology, a hermeneutic literature review was conducted to investigate the research question, "What are the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships?".

The literature review findings revealed that romantic love is theorised as an attachment process. The adult attachment behavioural model posits that insecurely attached adults avoid pain, abandonment, intimacy, and vulnerability by deactivating or hyperactivating their attachment behavioural system. Due to their increased susceptibility to narcissism and lower self-esteem, people insecurely attached employ particular defense mechanisms to mitigate their behaviour. In women, insecure attachment is linked to negatively affecting sexual behaviour, functioning, and dynamics. This research can help mental health professionals understand insecure women, increase clients' awareness of how attachment styles affect interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics, and reassure insecurely attached women in romantic relationships that they are not alone in their experiences.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which, to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Julia Prouse

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Acknowledgments

Chapter 1: Introduction

From Disney's *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*; to teen movies, *Love and Basketball*, *The Notebook*; TV series, *Sex & The City*, *The L Word*; to reality TV series, *Married At First Sight* and *90 Day Fiancé*. What do these all have in common? Romantic love and romantic relationships. Only a few centuries ago, love was essentially a concern of family allegiances and regulated reproduction; and, as a result, romance took on a much less dominant role in the cultural imaginary. However, with the rise of modernity, romantic love gained the cultural significance it holds today. Romantic love has arguably inspired more works of art, literature, and music than any other human experience because it is infinitely intriguing and complex. The quality of someone's romantic relationships can be viewed as a form of attachment and impacts personal development and life satisfaction (Reis et al., 2000). According to attachment theory, our conception of love and how it should be is formed in our earliest relationships with our primary caregivers, generally our parents. The degree to which these people meet our physiological and emotional needs shapes our perception of ourselves and others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 2017).

In this chapter, I start by outlining the dissertation context, including the motivations for conducting this research. I introduce myself as the researcher and present a preliminary literature review on attachment theory. After that, key terms related to the question are defined; and the section concludes with a summary of the dissertation.

Psychoeducation regarding romantic relationships is growing; people are becoming more familiar with their attachment styles as attachment theory has become more known in social media (Shrikant, 2022). According to attachment theory, a child's current and future relationships will be influenced by their bond with their carer. John Bowlby's attachment theory (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) focused on the relationships between people, especially those that continue for a long time, such as between a child and a parent or long-term romantic partners. Attachment styles came from attachment theory which describes a person's typical ways of giving and receiving care in close relationships with attachment figures, usually parents, children, and romantic partners (Levy et al., 2011). It is recognised that gaining insight into a person's attachment style can be beneficial to providing insight into a person's life, including romantic relationships (Erber & Erber, 2017). The concept and term romantic relationships are often characterised by displays of affection, sometimes actual or expected sexual conduct (Collins et al., 2009), and mutually accepted ongoing voluntary contact (Collins, 2003; Collins et al., 2009). Whether the partners are of the same or different genders, the term 'romantic relationships' is applicable (Collins et al., 2009). A core belief from the perspective of attachment behavioural systems is that attachment, caregiving, and sex are facets of behaviour intersecting in romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). That said, because of individual

variances in the operation of attachment, caregiving, and sex (Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008b) different types of romantic relationships exist, for instance, committed relationships, ethical monogamy, causal relationships.

Concerning romantic relationships is the concept of romantic love. According to Sternberg's (1986) love triangle theory, three primary aspects account for the romantic love that humans experience—passion, intimacy, and commitment. Passion generates attraction and desire that can lead to physical attraction, romantic love, and sexual activity (Sternberg, 1986). Intimacy is closeness, bonding, and partner connectivity (Sternberg, 1987), it is the part of love that makes a person feel warm and compassionate with their partner. The attachment and caregiving systems enhance the commitment part of romantic love (Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006); conscious decision-making is required, starting with the choice to fall in love and continuing to uphold that love (Acker & Davis, 1992).

The increasing public awareness of attachment theory and its impact on romantic relationships highlights the importance of gaining insight into the implications of one's attachment style. This understanding can aid individuals in comprehending their behaviour, interpersonal connections, and the influence of their attachment styles on their romantic relationships. In this dissertation, I explore the research question, "What are the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships?". In relation to the main question, there are two sub-questions that I will seek to answer: 1) How is an insecure attachment in adult romantic relationships understood in psychology literature? and 2) What are the lasting implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships in psychology literature? The literature review will focus on adult women in romantic relationships, with the understanding that sexual behaviour is not unique to romantic relationships and that being in a romantic relationship is not a requisite for engaging in sexual activity.

At the dawn of this dissertation, my initial biases, perspectives, and preconceptions led me to anticipate that the relevant literature I would be reviewing would be psychoanalytic and/or psychotherapeutic literature, and Western academics would author most of such literature. As a researcher entering this field of inquiry, I felt excited and terrified. I harboured reservations about the extent and diversity of literature available across various academic disciplines that delve into women's experiences. My initial assumption was that the literature on insecure attachment in adult women was limited. Further, that adult romantic relationships are primarily shaped by interactions with their primary carers. I understood that the literature on attachment theory concentrated mainly on the relationship between infants and their caregivers. Therefore, I was eager to explore what the literature may reveal about adult attachment and hoped that it would hold my attention. This endeavour felt challenging, and sustaining my interest in the research was crucial.

Due to my preliminary understanding of adult attachment theory, I anticipated that the literature would explore the utilisation of defense mechanisms by women with insecure attachment styles in their romantic relationships to protect themselves against emotional distress, vulnerability, and abandonment. When contemplating individuals who exhibit insecure attachment, terms such as defensive, dismissive, co-dependent, and intense readily emerge, resulting from my comprehension of insecure attachment theory.

I noticed in myself a greater degree of understanding and compassion towards individuals anxiously attached as opposed to individuals avoidantly attached; this is likely due to my experiences with some people avoidantly attached, my familial history, and media representations. My initial feelings revealed my prejudices and reactions towards people insecurely attached. It was intriguing to consider what terms would arise after this dissertation; and how the research process might change, affirm, or challenge my views on the topic.

Motivations for the Research

My multi-layered interest in this question stemmed from my understanding and experiences of romantic relationships as a cis-gendered woman and my clinical work with many insecurely attached women from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds. I am passionate about women's issues and empowerment, having become aware of the operation of patriarchy in my late teens and during my undergrad studies partook in a paper that explored women's issues and nights. Further, in my position as a psychotherapist, and a friend and sister, I hope to help women feel empowered and I believe this can occur through gaining and sharing knowledge. Hence, this dissertation subject arose from my motivation to share knowledge with women and the topic came to me while listening to women's stories of contention in their romantic relationships. I became more curious about their attachment styles and its implications on their romantic relationships. What were the effects of insecure attachment on romantic relationships? What was women's understanding of what was occurring in their romantic relationships? What do researchers know about working with this phenomenon? For these reasons, I explored what was written about the relationship between insecure attachment in women and its implications on romantic relationships.

About the Researcher

Researchers bring their own "tradition" (Gadamer, 1982, p. 293) of personal, cultural, and historical perspectives to every hermeneutic inquiry. I am a cis-gender New Zealand/European Cook Island woman. This study is situated within my quest to understand better how being insecurely attached affects my insecurely attached women clients; and as a psychotherapist, to help these women have

more self-awareness and bring about positive change in their lives and romantic relationships, and to help people who work in the field of mental health with insecurely attached women.

While training to become a psychotherapist, I have been especially drawn to attachment theory in explaining the differences in people's ability to create and sustain relationships, particularly adult women's romantic relationships. Relationships are essential to being human; we are social beings who require connection via relationships with others. Relationships can be a place of great love, security, and connection, but they can also be challenging, painful, and traumatic.

A Preparatory Review of Literature

Attachment theory

"All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 62). Preceding research by Bowlby revealed that a delicate and crucial bond had been broken in separating a child from its caregiver. Bowlby (1958) claimed that evolution and natural selection equipped newborns with a pre-programmed behavioural system to assist them in staying close to their caregivers for safety and security. This led him to create attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980); which, in quintessence, is a spatial theory, both figuratively and metaphorically (Holmes, 2014). When one is near someone they love, they feel good; when they are far from their loved one, they feel worried, sorrowful, and alone. With the proximity in which we feel close to a loved one, we can become relaxed, which enables us to pursue other interests and explore our outer and inner worlds (Holmes, 2014). Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory is founded on the fundamental principle that connection with significant persons is an essential human motivation.

Providing empirical support for attachment theory, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) developed a 'strange situation' in a laboratory setting where newborns and mothers were observed in controlled settings to examine the attachment between a mother and her infant (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Ainsworth co-founded attachment theory and used the term 'secure base' to define the function of the attachment figure/caregiver. The secure base is ultimately the sense of safety created by an attachment figure/caregiver to a child, which encourages the child to explore away from the secure base. When there is a threat, the child returns to their attachment figure/caregiver. Once the threat has gone, the child resumes exploring and playing; however, only if the child is certain that the attachment figure/caregiver will be there to provide a secure base (Holmes, 2014).

Adult Attachment in Romantic Relationships

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980) and the adult attachment interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1998), which measures individual differences in representations of attachment figures in adults, has demonstrated that a person's early ties with their caregivers have a significant impact on how they behave and feel in romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1977; Main et al., 1985 Waters et al., 1991).

The relationship between adult romantic love and attachment theory was initially investigated by Hazan and Shaver (1987). They proposed that romantic love is an attachment process using the same attachment behavioural system that results in the relationship between newborns and their carers (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982). Further, Hazan and Shaver (1987) discovered strong connections between self-reported romantic attachment styles and interpersonal relationship quality. Kerns (1994) demonstrated that as a person matures, their attachment figure shifts from their parents to their romantic partner.

According to various studies, a person's adult attachment style is a reliable indicator of the quality of their romantic relationships (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Cann et al., 2008; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1999; Simpson, 1990), and predicts patterns of interpersonal relationships between adults in romantic relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Fraley & Spieker, 2003; Fraley et al., 2000b; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2012), attachment styles can potentially impact sexual behaviour. Additionally, more relationship interdependence, commitment, trust, and satisfaction are linked to the secure attachment style for both men and women than insecure attachment styles. In relationships, insecure attachment styles are linked to fewer positive feelings and more negative feelings (Simpson, 1990).

Defining Key Terms

In this section, I define key terms used in the literature review.

Insecure Attachment. Is an interpersonal style that develops due to negative early childhood experiences with one's caregivers. The phrase 'insecure attachment' is derived from the term 'attachment style', which is the state and quality of a person's attachment style (Holmes, 2014). People are viewed as having either a secure or insecure attachment style, with the latter further differentiated into anxious, avoidant, and disorganised attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). With regard to the current dissertation, I will be examining only the anxious and avoidant attachment styles. An increased need for emotional safety and closeness with an attachment figure, along with concerns about the figure's availability and one's value to the

relationship, are characteristics of anxious attachment. Further characteristics include the use of hyperactivating tactics: increased signs of distress, watching attachment figures closely for signs of oncoming abandonment, and trying to stay emotionally close to attachment figures (Mallinckrodt, 2010) to cope with insecurity and stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Avoidant attachment is characterised by a preference for psychological distance and independence, as well as employing deactivation strategies, including exerting a great deal of mental effort to distract oneself from negative thoughts and emotions related to personal relationships (Mallinckrodt, 2010) due to an inability to cope with insecurity and stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Women. A term socially constructed to identify how femaleness is performed (Nagoshi et al., 2012). Some feminists argue that the term 'women' refers to a social position or status—extending the definition of women beyond a single biological word to cis-gendered women includes a variety of meanings (Bettcher, 2013). This means including those who identify as transgender, who are not born with the sexual origins of a female, or who identify as a woman (Nagoshi et al., 2012). In conjunction with the term women, a woman belongs to a specific group (as determined by birth, residency, membership, or employment) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). Regarding the current dissertation, the term female is used when relevant or an author or citation has used the term.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed my incentives for this research, and introduced my interest in the topic and myself as a researcher. Additionally, I provided relevant literature on the research topic. I shared my understanding of defined vital terms "romantic relationships", "insecure attachment", and "women" as they are central to my research question.

Overview of the Subsequent Chapters

Chapter 2 details the qualitative methodology and method employed to gather literature for the hermeneutic literature review and why I thought it appropriate for my research. Chapters 3 and 4 consist of a discussion of the findings from the literature review. Starting with the theoretical and conceptual understating of adult attachment in romantic relationships and ending with insecure attachment in adult women and its implications on romantic relationships. These chapters include my thoughts and reflections on the literature and findings.

Chapter 5 summarises the findings and explores the strengths and limitations of the research. I reflect on the implications for clients and those working in the mental health field in Aotearoa New Zealand and suggestions for future research are proposed.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method

In this chapter, I explicate my rationale behind the methodology and method adopted, which is a hermeneutic literature review. Additionally, I explicate my position as a hermeneutic researcher and expound upon the hermeneutic circle of investigation employed to examine relevant literature during the research process.

Methodology

I have chosen a qualitative interpretive/hermeneutic methodology since it feels instinctively appropriate for the issue and is akin to the psychotherapy process. The decision to 'do it this way' is referred to as resonance and attunement (Smythe et al., 2008). Like the psychotherapist, the hermeneut is experienced in revealing, interpreting, and making things comprehensible. When considering the aptness of a hermeneutic approach, I reflected on the similarities between the roles of researcher and psychotherapist; both need to be in the unknown. There are sometimes numerous layers of a client to unearth in the therapy process, and sometimes they are conflicting components of a person, each with its own voice and need. To hear each voice, the therapist must be attuned to the client. Similarly, the researcher must be attentive to how the text speaks to them (Smythe et al., 2008) and how the researcher responds to texts; like the therapist's countertransferential responses to clients, all are subjective. A hermeneutic methodology requires my subjectivity to be used to uncover meaning.

Qualitative research aims to enhance comprehension of the significance of human existence and their societal environments (Fossey et al., 2002). The authors suggest empirico-analytical, critical, and interpretive qualitative research paradigms for human and social studies. I have employed an interpretive paradigm as it aligns most closely with the intended aim of this study. Fossey et al. (2002) argue that empirico-analytical research seeks objectivity and rationality by using observational and experimental methods to draw conclusions about the phenomena under study. The study does not involve human subjects, experimentation, or observations. Hence, an empirico-analytical study design is unsuitable.

Interpretivism

Researchers may use interpretivism to understand better "human thought and action in social and organisational contexts" (Klein & Myers, 1999, p. 67). Interpretivism posits that the reality that people perceive is a subjective construct shaped by social and experiential factors, mainly through the development of meanings and understandings. According to Grant and Giddings (2002), a connection

exists between the investigator and the object of investigation. Our history and identity significantly shape our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. This opposes the positivist paradigm, which asserts that the nature of reality is objective and gives importance to the pursuit of consistent facts. Further, a positivist paradigm also maintains that the researcher should ideally preserve independence from the observed and described subject.

What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics, in its simplest form, means interpretation. More specifically, the interpretation of texts. Both hermeneutics and interpretation come from the same Greek word (Schmidt, 2014). Although the word hermeneutics is not frequently employed in English, the word interpretation is. The Bible has been interpreted in various ways, actors interpret scripts to comprehend their role, and musicians interpret music sheets. I, like everyone else, am an interpreter. I interpret my clients' motivations for doing something in addition to understanding them.

The Current Philosophical Significance of Hermeneutics

According to Gadamer's (1975) work in *Truth and Method*, hermeneutics is the philosophical theory of knowledge and an understanding that incorporates both interpretation and application. Hermeneutics, as a system of principles for interpretation, was traditionally only used when a portion of text did not make sense (Schmidt, 2014). Although to be aware that something does not make sense, we must already understand something to see the problem. What then does the interpreter need first to know to understand the text? To begin, the interpreter must be familiar with the language in which the text was written. The type of text to be translated also determines the circumstances for interpretation (Schmidt, 2014).

Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics

Grammatical Interpretations

The text's linguistic components, such as the language in which it was written, are known as grammatical interpretations. Reconstructing the author's discourse is the aim of hermeneutics. To do that, the reader must first understand the language of the author. With time, language has changed and continues to evolve; words acquire new meanings and lose old connotations. Since the author is attempting to communicate something to the reader, the first canon stipulates that the author's language must be the intended reader's language. Due to shared meanings, the reader can understand a new metaphor from its context because of common meanings (Schmidt, 2014). The

second canon stipulates that the appropriate sense of a word must be ascertained from its context (Schmidt, 2014).

Psychological Interpretations

Grammatical interpretation is enhanced by psychological interpretation which aims to understand the author's thoughts and how they have expressed them. As a result, psychological interpretation has two components: purely psychological and technical. The psychological component aims to uncover the author's seminal decisions that guided their thinking and writing. The technical component seeks to understand how the author's thoughts are expressed in their compositions. Psychological interpretation aims to comprehend the author's individuality as expressed in the text (Schmidt, 2014).

The Aim of Hermeneutics

Schleiermacher stated that the aim of hermeneutics is to deeply know the author better than one knows oneself since we are all interpreters and might come to find something of hidden or unconscious intentions (Schmidt, 2014).

Method

A hermeneutic literature review was my chosen method for this research. I decided to ask the research question, "What are the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships?". In relation to the main question, there are two sub-questions that I sought to answer: 1) How is an insecure attachment in adult romantic relationships understood in psychology literature? And 2) What are the lasting implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships in psychology literature?

The interpretivist paradigm emphasises comprehending the human condition and the significance individuals attribute to their encounters (Grant & Giddings, 2002). The aforementioned theoretical foundations align with my comprehension of the subjective experience of truth and meaning. Thus, I chose a qualitative review method as it would allow me to examine nuances of meaning and reflect on the authors' ideas, rather than a positivist approach which would have allowed me to measure the long-lasting impact.

The Hermeneutic Circle

"The parts can only be understood from an understanding of the whole, but the whole can only be understood from an understanding of its parts" (Schmidt, 2014, p. 4). According to Schleiermacher, we can break the hermeneutic circle by starting with an overall impression of the text while doing a

preliminary reading. Then, until everything fits, we switch between portion and whole. Heidegger claimed that the circle cannot be avoided and must be entered in the correct manner (Schmidt, 2014). First, one must start with a brief reading to get an overall sense of the text. The subsequent readings enable individual concepts and their development to be linked with the basic ideas. The reader must start with a broad overview of the text before moving on to its components' grammatical and psychological interpretations, according to a general rule of hermeneutics. If both interpretations concur, the reader can move on to the next part; if there is conflict, one needs to uncover the source of the conflict (Schmidt, 2014). The circle also addresses the author's writing and its part in relation to their culture. The reader must be familiar with the author's language and cultural background to comprehend what the author has written. Therefore, comprehension is impossible without some prejudicial preconceptions about the text as a whole or its parts.

Understanding a text requires understanding its parts and its sentences, but understanding the meaning of the sentences requires understanding the text as a whole. (Schmidt, 2014). Schleiermacher breaks the impasse of the hermeneutic circle by arguing with sufficient knowledge of the language in which the text is written, the reader can and must conduct a cursory reading to get a sense of the whole text; this gives way to a detailed interpretation of the parts (Schmidt, 2014). My experience is just one perspective; not to say that it is not valuable, but I acknowledge that it is one aspect of the phenomenon. Likewise, everything I have gone through has a specific significance inside a relevant framework.

I kept Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) two-part hermeneutic circle of inquiry as per Figure 1 (p. 12) in mind throughout my research journey as it offered me some grounding during the hermeneutic process. The first step was searching, filtering, choosing, collecting, reading, identifying, and reviewing existing material. This procedure is performed numerous times until the data is suitable for the second stage of analysis and interpretation, which includes mapping, categorising, critically analysing, and building a case for the research topic. Before the final consolidation and write-up, the second circle might be repeated and improved multiple times.

Searching, Collecting, and Organising

My main objective in conducting the search was to acquire knowledge regarding the existing literature on insecure attachment in adult women and its implications on romantic relationships across psychology empirical quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical literature; psychotherapeutic, psychoanalytic, and psychotherapeutic theory literature.

Searching the Auckland University of Technology library databases for relevant material was a practical and obvious beginning point. PsycINFO (via OVIDO), MEDLINE (via PubMed), PEP

(Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing), Google Scholar, Scopus, and Sage were the databases utilised. I started by searching key terms relevant to the literature, such as "insecure attachment", "adult attachment", "women", 'female*', and "romantic relationships". I needed to organise the articles to help me keep track of the literature I had accumulated, so I created a spreadsheet that listed the journal articles. Table 1 (p. 13) shows my original keyword and search combination. My search for relevant literature led me to focus on and review empirical quantitative, qualitative and theoretical psychology literature.

Figure 1

The Hermeneutic Circle
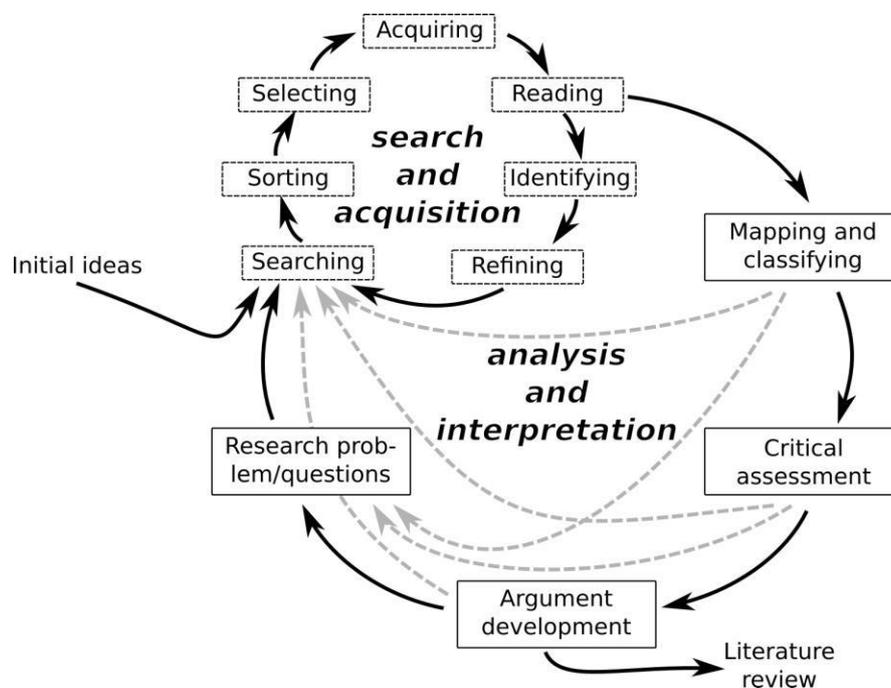
Note. A hermeneutic framework for reviewing literature contains two critical hermeneutic circles (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Reading, Thinking, and Writing

After completing the first part of the hermeneutic process: searching, collecting, and organising, I felt apprehensive to start reading the entire articles. Would I begin to feel lost, confused, and out of my depth? Though, feeling unsure of where things were going was something I was familiar with as a psychotherapy student, referred to as 'being in the unknown'. I tried to stay open and curious, and I

proceeded to the second half of the process by reading, interpreting, comprehending, sorting, categorising, criticising, and analysing the literature. This process included moving back and forth from the whole to the parts, as Schleiermacher (1977) advocated. An article's summary, abstract, and conclusion frequently gave me a basic impression of the material. Still, each paragraph supplied me with specifics and examples that helped me appreciate the overarching themes. Thinking and writing were ongoing. On occasion, making sense was challenging as I struggled to fully grasp the overall themes. In instances of cognitive impasse, I would disengage from the literary material to afford myself temporal and spatial leeway to contemplate both the author's viewpoint and my own.

Table 1

Initial Literature Search

Search term	Database	Findings
insecure attachment AND adult attachment AND female* OR women AND romantic relationship	PsycINFO (via OVIDO)	17
insecure attachment AND adult attachment AND female* OR women AND romantic relationship	MEDLINE (via PubMed)	106
insecure attachment AND adult attachment AND female* OR women AND romantic relationship	PEP (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing)	207
insecure attachment AND adult attachment AND female* OR women AND	Google Scholar	62,200

romantic relationship		
insecure attachment AND adult attachment AND female* OR women AND romantic relationship	Scopus	83
insecure attachment AND adult attachment AND female* OR women AND romantic relationship	Sage	5,960

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have defined the methodology and method used to conduct a hermeneutic literature review. I have evaluated the suitability of the approach for answering my research question, and my experiences with the various stages of the hermeneutic circle of inquiry are also discussed.

In the subsequent two chapters, I shall discuss the findings of my literature review. Chapter 3 considers the empirical quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical psychology literature I have selected and reviewed. It provides an overview of the application of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships; the attachment behavioural system in adults and its application and conceptualisation of the impact of insecure attachment in romantic relationships; and, lastly, the links in the literature between insecure attachment, narcissistic vulnerability, and self-esteem and their impact on adult romantic relationships.

Chapter 4 reviews empirical quantitative and qualitative psychology literature exploring the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships. The focus is on sexual behaviour, specifically sexual functioning and sexual dynamics.

Chapter 3: Findings
Insecure Attachment in Adult Romantic Relationships

In this chapter, I discuss my review of empirical quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical psychology literature. First, I present an overview of the application of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships and its implications. This discussion is followed by literature that focuses on conceptualising the attachment behavioural system in adulthood and its application to and implications for insecurely attached adults in romantic relationships. Lastly, I note links between insecure attachment, narcissistic vulnerability, and self-esteem; and their impact on adult romantic relationships.

The Application of Attachment Theory to Adult Romantic Relationships

Romantic Love as an Attachment Process

A common argument in adult attachment literature is that romantic love, also known as pair bonding, is an attachment process (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver et al., 1988). Fundamental claims by various researchers in favour of this idea are as follows: firstly, Bowlby (1969/1982) suggested that the attachment behavioural system is an intrinsic motivational mechanism 'engineered' by natural selection to promote infant safety and survival. Attachment behaviour is understood as patterns of behaviour activated when a child experiences anxiety or worry due to a perceived threat to the connection between the caregiver (attachment figure) and themselves or the self (i.e., illness, fear, or separation); thus, they look to their primary carer for attention and support. Restoring closeness to the carer and 'terminating' attachment behaviour are conditions that indicate safety, comfort, and security.

Secondly, Hazan and Shaver (1987) asserted that adults in romantic relationships display the same behaviour and attachment styles identified in the infant-caregiver relationship. For instance, adults who are distant, unavailable, and inconsistent (insecure attachment) with their partner have likely experienced less safety and security with their caregivers. Adults who are close, accessible, and attentive (secure attachment) to their partner likely experienced more safety and security with their caregivers. Thirdly, the literature suggests that variations in attachment styles are caused by a person's 'internal working models', which are the standards and convictions people hold regarding their worth, self-worth, and expectations of others. People's internal working models are cultivated from their attachment history with their attachment figures (caregiver) and deemed persistent throughout their life (Verschueren et al., 1996).

Infants establish a set of cognitive structures or internal working models that anticipate how attachment figures will respond, affecting the internal regulation of the attachment behavioural

system. An infant typically grows up with an internal working model of an insecure attachment style if attachment figures are emotionally distant, hostile, unreliable, threatening, or unsympathetic. The narrative argued in the literature is that insecure children will likely self-regulate in one of two ways: either by being extremely needy of care (anxious attachment) and attention, or by isolating themselves and striving for extreme independence (avoidant attachment) which is carried through into adulthood and likely has negative implications on romantic relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1987; Shaver et al., 1988). The idea of romantic love as an attachment process intrigued me as it acknowledges the diversity in individuals' relational experiences and behaviours. The texts posited that acknowledging the influential impact of one's environment on the development of attachment behaviour is crucial. It further suggests that a collection of internal working models are integral to maintaining individual stability. The aspect of individual differences within adult attachment theory and literature also piqued my interest.

Hazan and Shaver's (1987) research on adult attachment in romantic relationships posited that avoidantly attached people have a lower likelihood than anxious or securely attached individuals to believe in or experience love, trust, closeness, and long-term romantic relationships due to their internal working models. The most common sentiment expressed by people with an avoidant attachment style is captured as "The kind of head-over-heels romantic love depicted in novels and movies does not exist in real life, romantic love seldom lasts, and it is rare to find a person one can really fall in love with" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 515). Hazan and Shaver found that among their participants, 15% of the securely attached people and 32% of the anxiously attached people agreed with the statement, "It's easy to fall in love. I feel myself beginning to fall in love often" (p. 515); whereas none of the avoidantly attached people agreed with the statement.

Moreover, 80% of avoidantly attached people endorsed the sentiment, "It is rare to find someone you can really fall in love with" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p. 515), compared to 41% securely and 55% anxiously attached participants. The statements expressed by avoidantly attached people evoked my feelings of sadness and empathy due to their insecure attachment histories which have negatively impacted their perceptions of people and love. Rothbard and Shaver (1994) postulated that avoidantly attached adults are likely to perceive people as predominantly untrustworthy and unreliable and that relationships threaten their sense of control. Hence, relationships are seemingly not worth the effort. Likewise, contributing to the view that avoidantly attached people are less likely to experience romantic relationships, Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) claimed that avoidantly attached people struggle with intimacy, dependency, and forming intimate connections. Whilst moving back and forth between the parts and whole of the texts (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), I felt more compassion and understanding of avoidantly attached people's behaviour and attitudes. In my clinical work, I have witnessed how challenging it can be for people who are avoidantly attached

in romantic relationships to be vulnerable with their partner and acknowledge that they want to love, closeness and long-term relationships (Arriaga et al., 2014; Guina, 2016). My engagement with the literature has changed my understanding of avoidantly attached people and that romantic relationships are a potential source of repair for insecurely attached people to heal from the pain caused by their primary attachment figures.
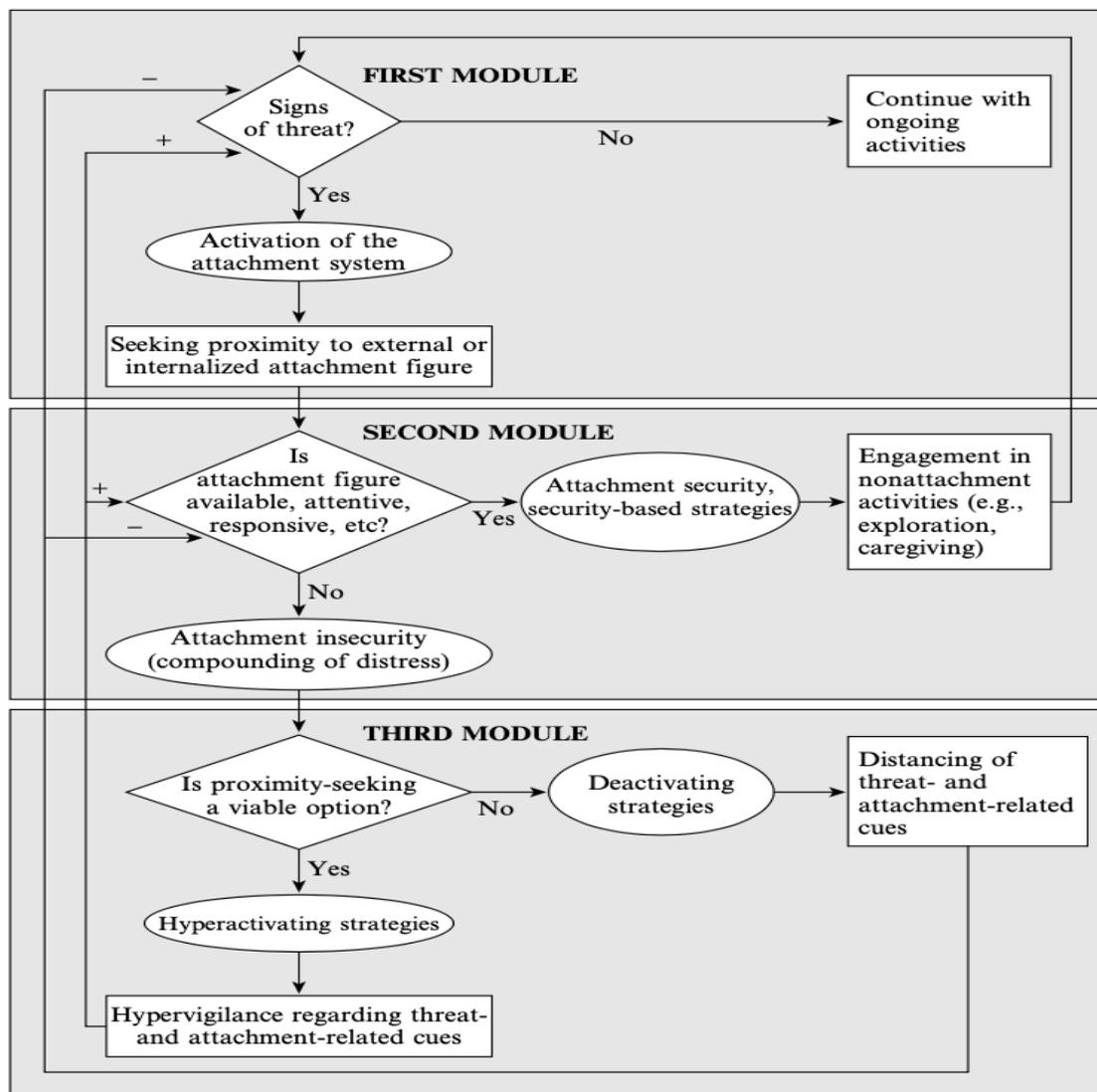
A Model of the Attachment Behavioural System in Adulthood

To explain the activation and dynamics of the attachment behavioural system in adults, psychologists Shaver and Mikulincer (2002) created a model based on a comprehensive assessment of adult attachment studies. The model (see Figure 2) includes three major parts (indicated by the grey boxes in the figure). The first part of the attachment behavioural system oversees being alert to dangerous events and evaluating them based on the situation. The second part surveillances and evaluates the accessibility and attentiveness of attachment figures that may offer help and reprieve, meet attachment needs, and cause changes in attachment security. It can distinguish between securely and insecurely attached individuals. The third part involves checking and judging the efficacy of proximity-seeking as a method for managing attachment insecurity and anguish. This part involves how people use hyperactivating or deactivating strategies to control their emotions. Hyperactivation means that attachment behaviours get more robust; and deactivation implies that the attachment system slows down (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). As a result of repeated hyperactivating or deactivating techniques, the model also incorporates hypothetical excitatory and inhibitory brain circuits (represented as arrows on the left side of the graphic) which influence the surveillance of dangerous events and the accessibility of attachment figures (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003).

Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) model offers a framework that integrates the adult attachment behavioural system, its cognitive operations, response strategies, and dynamics. It also addresses attachment strategy goals and psychological implications. As will be seen, it has been argued that this model can be a framework for understanding the hyperactivation or deactivation strategies, goals, and psychological implications of an insecurely attached adult in a romantic relationship.

Figure 2

A Model of Attachment-System Functioning and Dynamics

Note. A model of attachment-system activation and functioning in adulthood (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002a).

The Attachment Behavioural System of Anxiously Attached Adults in Romantic Relationships

It has been contended that Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) model can help explain the dynamics of the attachment behavioural system in anxiously attached adults. Researchers Malik et al. (2015) have identified that due to anxiously attached peoples' experiences of their attachment figures as unavailable, anxiously attached people can acquire hyperactivating strategies. These strategies can appear as intense requests for connection with attachment figures and dependence on others to provide solace and avoid abandonment (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). Similarly, Ahrens et al. (2012)

found that anxiously attached individuals crave emotional closeness, have low self-esteem, and are overly dependent on others. Hyperactivation of the attachment system entails excitatory brain pathways that heighten awareness of threat-related signals and reduces identifying indicators of attachment figure absence, triggering the attachment system (Bowlby, 1973).

Consequently, minor threat-related cues are quickly noticed, the attachment system is persistently aroused, psychological anguish associated with the absence of attachment figures is enhanced and worries about one's capability to get comfort and a feeling of safety are amplified. Johnson and Whiffen (2003) stated that these excitatory pathways are responsible for numerous psychological correlations of anxious attachment; for example, becoming distressed and hostile towards their partners and fearing that the minor issue may harm their romantic relationship. The hyperactivation of the attachment behavioural system is framed by some researchers as causing anxiously attached adults when experiencing minor issues in a relationship to seek closeness; for example, as a defensive tactic against anticipated abandonment. Hence, Johnson and Whiffen (2003) consider this model as offering an explanation towards and understanding of the dynamics and psychological implications for anxiously attached adults.

A benefit of Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) model for some researchers is its application to the context of anxious attachment in adult romantic relationships. Johnson and Whiffen (2003) used this model to argue that when anxiously attached adults sense potential threats, they lack confidence that their partners would be attentive, accessible, and accommodating to their requirements. Such concerns keep their anxiety and attachment behavioural systems activated, causing them to employ hyperactive strategies centred on emotion wherein they stay alert for potential indicators of abandonment and contemplate their worst possible outcome. In support of this narrative, anxiously attached people have been found to be intensely focused on their partners (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Also, studies have contended that insecurely attached adults were more dependent, demanding, and withdrawn; criticised their partner's lack of responsiveness; and expected their partner to reject them (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Additionally, Simpson et al. (1996) and Fletcher et al. (2019) identified that when an anxiously attached person addresses minor (though not insignificant) issues with their partner they are often distressed, hostile, and scathing towards their partner, fearing that the problem may damage the relationship. To conclude, some researchers claim Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) model offers plausible insight into the dynamics and psychological implications caused by the hyperactivation of the attachment behavioural system in anxiously attached adults in romantic relationships.

The Attachment Behavioural System of Avoidantly Attached Adults in Romantic Relationships

Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) model can also help explain and understand the dynamics of the attachment behavioural system in avoidantly attached adults. By adopting deactivation strategies, avoidantly attached people can isolate themselves from triggers and situations that set off their attachment system; leaving them to cope with suffering independently (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). Deactivation strategies have been interpreted as resulting from the belief that proximity-seeking is unlikely to reduce unhappiness. These techniques entail inhibitory pathways that repress threatening and attachment-associated thoughts, feelings, and memories. Johnson and Whiffen (2003) considered these inhibitory pathways as being additionally strengthened by adopting a position of independence that reduces reliance on others and the recognition of one's flaws or inadequacies. Johnson and Whiffen suggested that these inhibitory pathways could cause psychological symptoms in avoidantly attached people. The notion that an avoidant attachment style seemingly encompasses the deactivation of the attachment system can lead to avoidantly attached people secluding themselves as a defensive tactic against anticipated pain and maintaining separateness by becoming defensive, contemptuous, and stonewalling (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Thus, some researchers interpret Shaver and Mikulincer's model as a possible explanation towards understanding the dynamics and psychological implications for anxiously attached adults.

A potential benefit of Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) model is its application to the context of avoidant attachment in adult romantic relationships. When avoidantly attached people feel threatened they can seem physiologically upset but are often not cognitively aware of it (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Some authors interpret avoidantly attached people's behaviour as a consequence of their attachment system being deactivated; avoidantly attached people might maintain separateness by becoming distant and self-reliant (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and can block and restrain their emotions by ignoring, minimising, or redirecting their focus away from their partner (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2007; Fraley et al., 2000a; Simpson et al., 1996). To summarise, some researchers claim Shaver and Mikulincer's model offers plausible insight into the dynamics and psychological implications caused by the deactivation of the attachment behavioural system in avoidantly attached adults in romantic relationships. Shaver and Mikulincer's model may help explain the dynamics and psychological implications of insecure attachment in adults in romantic relationships. However, the categorisation/framing of the model leads me to be concerned about possibly pigeonholing people as one attachment style, as characteristics of more than one attachment style can be exhibited in different people (Umemura, 2018). Further, peoples' attachment styles can change (Cozzarelli et al., 2003; Davila et al., 1997).

Links Between Insecure Attachment, Narcissistic Vulnerability, and Self-esteem in Adult Romantic Relationships

Despite theoretical variations among authors, the term narcissism is now commonly employed in relation to self-esteem to describe a facet of personality (i.e., ego organisation) that can take on healthy and pathological forms (Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Kernberg, 1985; Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Moore & Fine, 1990; Sandler et al., 1991). Narcissism is associated with the intrapsychic self (Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Kernberg, 1985; Kohut & Wolf, 1978). A person who has a solid internal intrapsychic structure can (a) soothe and comfort by internally regulating their self-esteem (Baker & Baker, 1987; Patton & Robbins, 1982); (b) maintain goals and connections; and (c) place high value on themselves and others close to them (i.e., there is an even distribution of self-esteem and other-esteem) (Blanck & Blanck, 1979; Moore & Fine, 1990). However, what happens if the self-structure is less structured? In that case, positive self-valuation and esteem management rely more on others' behaviour that supports the self; providing valuing, confirming, or comforting functions (Baker & Baker, 1987; Patton & Robbins, 1982). When a person has a more fragile self-structure sustaining an internal sense of comfort and self-esteem can be challenging. Hence, they are more susceptible to feeling wounded (i.e., more narcissistically vulnerable) (Pistole, 1995).

Narcissistic vulnerability is an introverted form of narcissism and people who experience it are characterised as being sensitive to criticism, having low self-esteem, and feeling insecure (Pincus & Roche, 2011). Narcissistic vulnerability can manifest as feelings of suicidal ideation, anger, aggression, helplessness, emptiness, low self-esteem, shame, and avoidance of social interactions (Akhtar, 2003; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Pincus et al., 2009; Ronningstam, 2005). Based on some psychology literature, I examined and noted that Pistole (1995) denoted that people in a romantic relationship with an insecure attachment style are more likely to experience narcissistic vulnerability than people with a secure attachment style. Also, it is claimed that insecurely attached people exhibit various techniques for managing self-esteem in romantic relationships. I will now explain how anxious and avoidant attachment styles in romantic relationships are claimed to exhibit different mechanisms for dealing with narcissistic vulnerability and low self-esteem.

Anxious Attachment Linked to Merging

Pistole (1995) asserted that an anxious attachment style could be framed as a defensive strategy against narcissistic vulnerability. This is exhibited when anxiously attached people use merging (psychologically connecting with someone which provides feelings of safety and solace) (Schuman, 2017) with their partner (whom they idealise); the partner then becomes an extension of themselves. Their partner also becomes a self-object when individuals look to others such as their partner to help

them meet their self-esteem and relational needs, which maintains a positive and stable sense of self (Lichtenberg, 1983)—helping the anxiously attached person mitigate against narcissistic vulnerability (Pistole, 1995). The merging between romantic partners reminded me of the following lines from a poem "Merging love creates a state with no barriers… You feel you are sharing in everything, you are part of everything, melted with everything. Your heart is open and melting like butter" (Almaas, 2000, p. 161). There is no you and I, only we; we cannot see where the other ends and I begin, no boundaries, no differentiation between the two.

Research has identified that high degrees of idealising a partner, extreme ways of showing love (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), hypervigilance to separation, increased anguish when separating (Mikulincer et al., 1990), and attention to distress are characteristics of anxious attachment in romantic relationships (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Elson (1987) suggested these traits point to a focus on the partner that exceeds what is necessary for interdependence and closeness, believing that neither of these is well accomplished for anxiously attached people in romantic relationships. Merging with their partner is also indicated, albeit subtly, through language. One study discovered that those anxiously attached participants were likelier to use couple references ('we' vs. 'I') while describing their relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990). We (merging) versus I (two individuals), was acknowledged only in the event of problems (i.e., incongruence between self and partner). This links to the poem I previously referenced which spoke about merging love; the merging language can be interpreted as lacking differentiation and separateness, whilst in connection the merging is a loss of self and defends against separateness. Like the melting butter, it is both soothing and problematic for long-term romantic relationships as there is a lack of capacity for differentiation. Other research also posited that merging is possibly linked to other characteristics of anxious attachment, such as emotional dependency, a desire for commitment (Feeney & Noller, 1990), and a reliance on others for sustaining a positive self-regard (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In my clinical work, I have discovered that anxiously attached women use merging language 'we' when discussing their romantic relationship more readily and frequently than other attachment styles. I am often curious about clients' use of language in revealing their desire for more oneness or separateness with their partner who may sacrifice their sense of self or needs for the relationship.

In the framing of anxious attachment as a defensive strategy, some research denoted that lower self-esteem is linked to anxious attachment (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990), with one study revealing that people with low self-esteem engage in interpersonal activity to boost their self-affect (Baumgardner et al., 1989). The behaviour of anxiously attached people could be interpreted as being motivated by self-interests; from Newcomb's (1981) perspective, there seems to be an overwhelming desire for anxiously attached people to be in a relationship, no matter the prospective partner, to achieve emotional security. In brief, framing anxious attachment as a

defensive strategy against narcissistic vulnerability in a romantic relationship seems supported by various literature.

Avoidant Attachment Linked to Distancing

Researchers, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and Hazan and Shaver (1987), asserted that for the avoidant attachment style, narcissistic vulnerability is controlled by maintaining a distance from the partner to avoid closeness and intimacy. Avoidantly attached people in relationships are framed as being characterised by lower levels of reliance on others, dismissing the significance of attachment with others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and disregarding distress (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Trying to ward off or reject an experience (e.g., overwhelming feelings) is interpreted as an avoidantly attached person exhibiting narcissistic vulnerability. Nevertheless, concerning the dynamics of attachment, the avoidantly attached person needs their partner's assistance in controlling the self. Whilst the avoidant person's behaviours are a defense strategy, the self-structure is still considered vulnerable since self-regard is founded on the capability to briefly endure negative emotions to acquire control over frightening or challenging situations (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). Some authors regarded the functioning of anger in partnerships as indicating a narcissistic vulnerability in an avoidant attachment style. Kernis et al. (1989) stated that threats to one's self-esteem which is interpersonal in nature frequently trigger anger and hostility. The hostility seen in those with avoidant attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Kobak & Sceery, 1988) can be viewed as revealing a self-protective mechanism that either (a) works to counteract anxiety and negative self-evaluations or (b) restores a sense of pride in oneself and maintains a sense of well-being (Solomon, 1989).

Additionally, several researchers interpret particular preferences of avoidantly attached persons as a form of self-protection. For instance, an avoidantly attached person's particular preference for friendship over romantic love, passion, commitment, or fulfilment in a relationship (Feeney & Noller, 1990, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Levy & Davis, 1988), is considered a core trait of avoidantly attached people who have an aversion to closeness and intimacy. Defensive strategies may provide a sense of security by increasing the distance between partners. Protecting a vulnerable self from becoming emotionally overwhelmed could allow one to cut off or never be 'touched' by discerned criticism or overwhelming emotions (Pistole, 1995). Whilst watching a television series, I noticed that a participant seemingly had an avoidantly attached style and was seen by others as self-sabotaging their romantic relationship by stonewalling their partner. However, I recalled this idea of protecting the vulnerable self and their behaviour as a form of self-protection. Humans have a strong desire for safety and connection although, if the connection (due to an insecure attachment history) feels unsafe, self-protection will take over. Though insecurely attached people can have a strong desire for safety, self-protection can be harmful to romantic relationships because it can prevent self-

exposure, leading to love, connection, vulnerability, and potentially being profoundly wounded. Ultimately, it can be a tightrope walk for insecurely attached people to adapt to how much they move towards self-protection and self-exposure (Parker, 2018).

Some authors perceived avoidantly attached persons' dismissive, distancing behaviour to parry their fear of intimacy, rejection, and overwhelming emotions (Bartholomew, 1990). Also, by dismissing the other they are separating themselves emotionally from their partner; avoidantly attached people are protecting themselves against having their façade exposed, self-esteem preserved, and inconceivable emotions experienced. There is a notion that individuals who are avoidantly attached may view others as dangerous (Kinston, 1987); as if the closer the partners get or the more potent the emotions, the more the person is scared that their "fragile sense of self" may crumble (Modell, 1986, p. 299) or be swallowed up (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). The literature reviewed in this chapter has changed my understanding and view of insecurely attached adults and narcissism concerning how and why they may interact in such ways with their partners. The merging or distancing is possibly a form of self-protection. Whereas I previously viewed the avoidantly attached person's distancing as cold and dismissive, and I now feel more empathy for them.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed how insecure attachment and its implications for adult romantic relationships have been understood through empirical quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical psychology literature findings. Romantic love is posited as an attachment process similar to the attachment process between an infant-caregiver. In the empirical quantitative and qualitative psychology literature, variations in attachment styles are thought to be partly due to people's relationships with their primary attachment figures and their 'internal working models' which are believed to develop in the infant-caregiver relationships and have implications on adult romantic relationships. For instance, due to their experiences of insecure attachment with their primary caregivers, avoidantly attached adults can view others, such as their partners, as untrustworthy and unreliable; and believe that relationships threaten their sense of control. Thus, they can struggle with intimacy, dependency, and forming intimate connections.

Researchers have created a model which explains the activation, dynamics, goals, and psychological implications of the attachment behavioural system in adults. Within the context of romantic relationships, the model suggests that an avoidantly attached adult deactivates their attachment behavioural system; the implication is that they can become defensive and stonewall their partner. The model proposes that an anxiously attached adult engages in the hyperactivation of

their attachment behavioural system with the implication that anxiously attached people seek closeness with their partner.

The empirical and theoretical psychology literature alleges that insecurely attached people are more susceptible to narcissism and they employ defensive strategies to combat it. Anxiously attached people use merging with their idealised partner to boost their feelings of value. The literature suggests that avoidantly attached people manage their narcissistic vulnerability by keeping their partner at a distance to avoid closeness and intense or negative feelings.

In the following chapter I move from a broader focus on adult insecure attachment in romantic relationships and its implications to a narrower focus on the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships, as per the research question.

Chapter 4: Findings
Implications of Insecure Attachment in Adult Women in Romantic Relationships

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of the second part of my literature review. I have identified empirical quantitative and qualitative psychology literature that examined the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships.

As noted in Chapter 1, romantic relationships encompass many facets, of which sexual activity can be, and is, understood as one of the possible defining features. Consequently, sexual functioning was one of the areas that interested me in this review. While reading and immersed in the hermeneutic circle, I noted that sexual functioning and dynamics became a key theme in response to the research question.

The Sexual Functioning of Insecurely Attached Women Linked to Low Levels of Sexual Satisfaction, Arousal, and Intimacy

Sexual functioning refers to an individual's capacity to progress through the phases of sexual desire, arousal, and orgasm, along with their level of contentment with the frequency and outcome of both solo and shared sexual activities (Fielder, 2013). This view can be argued as a normative perspective on sexual functioning as people who are asexual could be pathologised by this definition.

A dominant theme I discovered when engaging with the empirical psychology literature is that sexual functioning has been framed as having negative implications for insecurely attached women. Birnbaum (2007) claimed that insecure attachment in women can negatively affect the quality of sexual functioning (orgasmic responsivity, sexual arousal, intimacy during sexual intercourse) in romantic relationships. An avoidant attachment style is posited as being associated with less orgasmic responsivity and sexual arousal, the assumption that sexual engagement strengthens the emotional connection with their partner (Birnbaum, 2007), less lubrication and satisfaction, more pain and erotophobia (Dunkley et al., 2016; Tracy et al., 2003)—a phobia related to the fear of sex or sexual intimacy (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). However, other researchers have not found a link between avoidant attachment and orgasm impairment (Birnbaum, 2007; Costa & Brody, 2011; Granot et al., 2011).

Similar to avoidantly attached women, Dunkley et al. (2016), claimed that anxiously attached women have lower sexual satisfaction (Birnbaum, 2007; Brassard et al., 2013; Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Little et al., 2010; Woo & Brotto, 2008), arousal, and capability to orgasm (Dunkley et al., 2016). Birnbaum (2007) claimed that anxious attachment was linked to negative cognition (self-reported thoughts) and emotions, adversely affecting elements of a woman's sexual behaviour.

Birnbaum (2007) also posited that because of the hyperactivation of their attachment behavioural system, the sexual behaviours of an anxiously attached person might reflect their efforts to meet unmet attachment-related needs for security and love. Birnbaum perceived the findings to reveal that anxiously attached women have long-term relationship concerns that may manifest in the sexual realm as negative affect and cognitive barriers to sensual pleasure (e.g., preoccupation with pleasing the partner and disruptive judgemental thinking) and these women are prone to suffer negative feelings such as shame, guilt, and apathy.

In reading Birnbaum's (2007) work, she states that anxiously attached women engage in the "inappropriate use of sex" (p. 31), which she says is using sex to achieve emotional intimacy, validation, reassurance, induce caregiving behaviours, and alleviate a partner's wrath. Cooper et al. (2006), Davis et al. (2004), and Schachner and Shaver (2004) have found these to be possible motivations for insecurely attached people when engaging in sex. Birnbaum's choice of language might frame her findings via a gender lens that holds certain gendered attitudes about women's sexual desires and behaviours. Gendered attitudes can endorse sexual double standards and beliefs on the proper conduct for both men and women (Deaux & Major, 1987). Social norms influence people's perceptions of what constitutes appropriate male and female sexual behaviour, resulting in a double standard that gives men greater sexual freedom than women (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). The literature appears to cast the sexuality of women in relation to their anxious attachment history in ways that problematise their behaviours and desires. Furthermore, the framing of insecurely attached women's subjectivity could be attributed to a lack of a nuanced understanding and likely perpetuate a harmful image of anxiously attached women's sexual motives.

Furthermore, Birnbaum (2007) stated that when such "endless needs" (p. 31) are still not met, highly anxiously attached women may become frustrated and alienated from sexual activity and their partner. This framing of anxiously attached women's needs as 'unfulfilled, insatiable' may contribute to the stereotype of women as too much or too needy. It could be argued that Birnbaum's use of language and perspective constructs anxiously attached women's motivations for participating in sexual activity and their feelings of frustration as negative, framing such women as problematic when feelings are neither positive nor negative but complex. It can be deemed that pathologising such women for their needs for gratification could lead to harmful biases towards women. Reading the literature brought to mind the idea that we live in a culture of gratification; a pursuit of unending pleasures, titillation, and sexual stimulation. Indeed, many people believe that the culture of gratification is the only way to be human. This is highly influenced by images of salacious bodies and mindless violence constantly broadcast on television, in movies and in music (West, 2004). While seeking intimacy and pleasure is innately human, it is insatiable in its nature and, arguably, always an unmet need that lives in all of us.

In summary, the literature claims that the sexual functioning of insecurely attached adult women in romantic relationships is linked to low levels of sexual satisfaction, arousal, and intimacy. Some researchers' framing and use of language (Birnbaum, 2007; Dunkley et al., 2016) could lead to pathologising insecurely attached women's sexual behaviour.

Faking Orgasm, A Preoccupation with the Other

One of the six domains of the female sexual functioning inventory is orgasm (Rosen et al., 2000). I became particularly interested in the phenomena of women faking orgasms. Many women decide to fake orgasms (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), with research suggesting that almost two-thirds of women have faked an orgasm with their partners (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010). Research by Láng et al. (2018) appears to have identified a link between the interpersonal behaviour of faking orgasm and women with a history of insecure attachment.

From a psychological perspective, Láng et al. (2018) claimed that insecurely attached women are more likely to fake orgasms and doing so assists with the emotional regulation of "negative, shameful feelings" (p. 278) related to sexual health and inadequate sexual responses. Women with an avoidant attachment were found to fake an orgasm when receiving oral sex and during sexual intercourse to cease sexual encounters quickly (Láng et al., 2018). Ceasing or minimising intimate encounters is deemed by the literature as consistent with the behaviour of an avoidantly attached person, and considered a deactivation strategy of their attachment behavioural system (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). These ideas possibly imply that a woman with a history of avoidant attachment is more likely to engage in sexual behaviours, such as faking an orgasm, to minimise the intensity of their intimate interactions with their partner (Brassard et al., 2007). I wondered if an avoidantly attached woman may feel they can better manage their emotions when they put on a show of pleasure to please their partner, minimising or avoiding vulnerability or connection to their partner.

In reading the ideas presented in the literature I wondered why these women are engaging in sexual activity if they wanted it to cease quickly? It is implied that avoidantly attached individuals who engage in sexual activity do so to comply with peer norms. Concerned with self-enhancement and how others perceive them (Tracy et al., 2003), by engaging in sexual activity they would have something to contribute (Schachner & Shaver, 2004). By putting on a show for their partner and, in some sense, their peers, they are keeping others at arm's length and managing their feelings of vulnerability and intimacy which they fear. I also wonder if faking an orgasm is the 'lesser of two evils' per se for an avoidantly attached woman. If they disclose to their partner that they did not orgasm that could lead to a conversation that likely requires them to be more emotionally vulnerable and open with their partner and might trigger memories of experiences where intimacy evoked feelings of

not good enough, missing out, or loss; thus, faking stops that happening. Additionally, their internal working model anticipates people being dismissive, unreliable, and unresponsive due to a history of unmet needs.

Anxiously attached women were found to fake an orgasm when receiving oral sex to improve their arousal (Láng et al., 2018) with claims that if a woman believes her internal state is more pleasurable and herself more sexually aroused, she may be more likely to experience an orgasm (Barnett et al., 2019). The notion of 'fake it till you make it' rings loud here. Anxiously attached women were also found to fake orgasms during sexual intercourse because they were apprehensive of their partner's feelings and self-esteem (Láng et al., 2018), which is consistent with the overall hyperactivating strategy of anxious attachment to keep close contact with attachment figures, such as their partner (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). These findings suggest that compliance and people-pleasing known stereotypical aspects of the feminine gender role (Brown, 1986) are a factor for anxiously attached women.

Faking orgasm is framed in this study as a way of relating to the other because the act of faking orgasm is connected to managing both one's emotions and the partner's feelings. This may have links to the defenses mentioned previously, which insecurely attached people may employ to manage their narcissistic vulnerability. Anxiously attached people may merge with their idealised partner; thus, faking their orgasm and disregarding their feelings in favour of their partner. Avoidantly attached people, however, fake their orgasms, cease sexual activity, avoid closeness and strong or unpleasant emotions, and keep their partner at a distance. These strategies may also help avoidantly attached women avoid abandonment and manage intimacy with their partners and peers. This reminds me of the saying "men fake relationships to have orgasms and women fake orgasms to have relationships" (Rusafu, n.d.), which possibly underpins gendered stereotypes about sexual activity and explains why women may fake orgasms to maintain relationships with partners or peers and thereby minimise their own sexual needs. I concluded that insecurely attached women hold onto the attachment figure and romantic relationship at the expense of relating. They may avoid deep intimate relationships out of fear that these important relationships may not withstand them being themselves.

Insecurely attached people may find it difficult to express their needs due to painful experiences of not being met by their primary attachment figures which they carry into their romantic relationships. Additionally, it can be contended that they could be disconnected from their bodies and prioritising their pleasure (Richters, 2009), which may be related to women's sexual pleasure historically not being regarded as necessary (Jung, 2000) and social conditioning regarding the female orgasm being elusive.

When reading the literature on women faking orgasm and ideas about women's sexual pleasure, I recalled a discussion by Esther Perel on women's sexual arousal in which she said,

> Sexual arousal for women is massively narcissistic, it is the opposite of caring for others, and in order for a woman to be turned on, she needs to be able to think about her needs and be attuned to what she feels and likes. (Talks at Google, 2016)

I relate this to my ideas on anxiously attached women likely wanting to preserve their romantic relationships (Láng et al., 2018); hence, they may disregard their sexual needs and prioritise their partner's feelings to avoid abandonment and pain. Avoidantly attached women could be deemed possibly more disconnected from their sexual needs and need for others because of their painful attachment history; making it uncomfortable and frightening to be intimate with their partner.

In conclusion, the literature claims that insecurely attached women are more likely to fake orgasm, and their motivations for faking orgasm are linked to aiding the emotional regulation of their feelings. These findings evoke ideas related to insecurely attached women's preoccupation with the other, possibly resulting from their attachment histories, gender roles, and disconnection from their authentic selves, needs, and bodies.

The Sexual Dynamics of Insecurely Attached Women Linked to the Excessive Use of Sex and Gender/Power

Another theme I found in the empirical psychology literature was the sexual dynamics of insecurely attached Iranian women in romantic relationships. In particular, in my engagement with the literature I noted that the sexual dynamics of insecurely attached women were linked to the excessive use of sex and intrapersonal/interpersonal, gender/power, passivity/submissive, and the Madonna-whore concept which I will discuss.

Sharif et al. (2017) claimed that insecure attachment, particularly anxious attachment and interpersonal dependency, which refers to attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours revolving around the need for close relationships with valued others (Hirschfeld et al., 1977), are linked to influencing the sexual dynamics of women in romantic relationships. For instance, evidence of a preoccupation with sexual thoughts, low tolerance for interruptions during sex, emotional distress during sex, and passivity/submissive behaviours during sex.

From their evidence, Sharif et al. (2017) contended that married insecurely attached Iranian women used sexual activity as a "device" (p. 235) to accomplish numerous goals in their romantic relationships. It seems to me that these women's preference for engaging in sexual activity may be because it requires less effort and is less time-consuming. Therefore, it could be easier for them to have sex rather than further develop interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, such as communication skills; taking responsibility for one's happiness; and awareness of how to self-soothe through positive

self-talk, exercise, and engaging with friends and family. The authors argued that the preference for anxiously attached women with high interpersonal dependency to use sex to accomplish goals could lead to an extreme dependency on sex for confronting various facets of a romantic relationship. Although these women may regard their use of sex to accomplish goals as positive, their behaviour can have negative implications. As such, the "excessive use of sex" (Sharif et al., 2017, p. 235) by the wives puts physical and psychological pressure on the husbands who withdraw and become defensive. Sharif et al. (2017) argued that in Iranian culture, Iranian men see the excessive use of sex by women as decreasing a women's worth and dignity by disqualifying sex which is traditionally regarded as a means of creating genuine intimacy, expressing love, care, and as a sacred joy in the marriage.

The incorporation of the cultural context in the findings by Sharif et al. (2017) generates a distinct form of knowledge and sociocultural perspective to comprehend the experiences of these women. The literature evoked my thoughts regarding gender and power dynamics between men and women and the implicit cultural and gender stereotypes associated with sex and power (Désert & Leyens, 2006; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Kaufman & Pulerwitz, 2019). The assertiveness or aggressive behaviour of women initiating sex brought to mind the Western psychoanalytic concept of the Madonna-whore complex (Freud, 1905) wherein women are either regarded by heterosexual men as a Madonna for whom they have no sexual desire or a whore for whom they feel sexual desire whilst demeaning her and treating her like an object of sex.

Sharif et al. (2017) noted that during sexual activity the husbands expected their wives to be submissive, which the wives likely became; the researchers interpreted the reason the women became submissive is to minimise the threat of abandonment. Possibly the authors are addressing the subjective experiences of Iranian women who seemingly deviate from the cultural gender stereotype of submissiveness and passivity in their interactions with their husbands. Power relations can be used to examine wives' assertive/dominant behaviour towards their husbands. Husbands may have felt threatened by their wives' power or dominance, placing the husbands in a passive/submissive role in the sexual dynamic.

From a Western paradigm, this brings to mind the concept of women's sexual autonomy, defined as the right to safeguard and uphold informed choice regarding a person's body, sexual orientation, and sexual experience (Day, 1996), as there is the notion held by some people that women do not desire sexual activity, initiate sex, or have sexual autonomy but are instead the sexual objects of men's desire (Xiao et al., 2019). Bartky (1990) contends that women are often seen by society at large as sexual objects and viewed primarily as sexual objects of male desire.

Objectification theory asserts that women may not be regarded as sexually autonomous but as sexual objects (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Smolak & Murnen, 2011).

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) claims that there are two primary ways in which sexual objectification of women is likely connected to mental health problems in women (e.g., eating disorders, depression, and dysfunctional sexuality). The first route is direct and overt and includes instances of sexual objectification. The internalisation of sexual objectification experiences or self-objectification by women constitutes the second indirect and subtle route. Objectification theory can aid in interpreting the evidence put forward by Sharif et al. (2017), giving further meaning to the context of such women's experiences. I interpreted these findings as revealing the negative implications of sociocultural beliefs and gender biases on women who are insecurely attached and highly dependent in romantic relationships. Additionally, social categories, including ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, can interact to create systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination; and the intersectionality of a client's identity informs their lived experiences in these contexts (Proctor et al., 2017).

During my engagement with the literature, I often felt that anxiously attached women were depicted as unsatisfied, obsessive, controlling, manipulative, insatiable, unfulfilled, emotionally unstable, and histrionic (Birnbaum, 2007; Dunkley et al., 2016; Sharif et al., 2017). These feelings were, in part, due to the wording used; for example, 'inappropriate, excessive, endless needs, unfulfilled, insatiable', which might contribute towards pathologising anxiously attached women as problematic, framing their need for intimacy and their feelings of frustration as negative. Additionally, avoidantly attached women were depicted as afraid, abnormal, impersonal, uncommitted, cold, and selfish (Birnbaum, 2007; Dunkley et al., 2016; Tracy et al., 2003). I have noted that the framing of the literature and its findings may reveal biases and social discourses and lack a nuanced understanding or sociocultural consideration (Birnbaum, 2007; Dunkley et al., 2016). This could result from some of the literature being from Western cultures and researchers. At times the 'evidence' troubled me because it may position the 'problem' as residing with the insecurely attached women; thus, revealing a limitation or bias that underpins specific kinds of research. Further, such evidence may foreground the need for more non-western, qualitative, sociological, psychodynamic or psychoanalytically informed research that could capture a more nuanced understanding of the findings and the subjective experience of insecurely attached women in romantic relationships.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined my findings from empirical quantitative and qualitative psychology literature on the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships, focusing on sexual behaviour, sexual functioning, and sexual dynamics including faking orgasm. Sexual functioning and insecure attachment in women are claimed to be negatively linked to lower levels of

sexual satisfaction and intimacy, and reductions in arousal and capability to orgasm. Additionally, it is alleged that insecurely attached women are more likely to fake orgasms to mitigate their negative emotions. It is contended that avoidantly attached women fake orgasms to seemingly end sexual activity quickly and anxiously attached women fake orgasms during oral sex to possibly increase their arousal and during sexual intercourse to protect their partner's self-esteem. My interpretation of the findings regarding insecurely attached women's motivation for faking orgasm is partially due to such women's preoccupation with the other, attachment histories, a disconnection from themselves, and their needs and arousal not being a priority.

In addition, there are links between anxious attachment, interpersonal dependency, and the sexual dynamics of married Iranian women wherein such women are more prone to utilising sexual activity to accomplish goals in their relationship, forgoing the development and use of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. My interpretation of the literature brought to mind ideas related to intrapersonal/interpersonal, gender/power, passivity/submissive, and the Madonna-whore complex. Rather than focusing on developing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills like communication; taking ownership of one's happiness; and knowing how to self-soothe through positive self-talk, exercise, and engaging with friends and family, it may be easier for these women to have sex. Due to cultural expectations, I wondered if women were perceived as exhibiting behaviour that contradicts the female gender stereotype of being submissive and passive. The assertive/dominant behaviour of the women towards their husbands during sexual activity may be perceived by the husbands as threatening their power, making the husbands the passive/submissive ones in the sexual dynamic.

Furthermore, Iranian women's 'excessive use of sex' is claimed to put psychological and physical pressure on their partners. The authors stated that "excessive use of sex" by women is culturally viewed as diminishing women's self-worth. For me, this notion is linked to women's sexual autonomy which is a woman's right to safeguard and uphold informed choices regarding their body, sexual orientation, and sexual experience. However, some people believe that women do not desire sexual activity, initiate sex, or have sexual autonomy but are instead men's sexual objects. Furthermore, the Madonna-whore complex contends that the women's partners can only see women as either the Madonna or a whore.

During my engagement with the literature, I felt that specific framing and words used could contribute to pathologising insecurely attached women. Further, I felt that more non-western, qualitative, psychodynamic or psychoanalytic research focusing on women's experiences is needed and would be an important field of research. In the subsequent chapter, I review the findings and reflect on the implications for the public, the field of psychotherapy, and those working in the health sector of Aotearoa New Zealand. The limitations of this research will be outlined, and I offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss my hermeneutic literature review findings from empirical quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical literature within psychology; and how they address the research question: "What are the implications of insecure attachment in adult women in romantic relationships?". I also consider the broader implications of the findings for mental health practitioners and the public. Finally, I reflect on the strengths and limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future research.

The findings show that some authors regard romantic love as a form of attachment, based on the understanding that adults in romantic relationships display the same behaviour and attachment styles identified in their infant-caregiver relationship with their partners. This notion aligns with existing literature claiming that the bond between a caregiver and an infant will have long-lasting effects on the child's current and future relationships (Main et al., 1985). Through my engagement with the literature, I came to see that romantic relationships can be viewed as an attachment process which suggests that they provide individuals with a 'second chance'. Romantic relationships may offer a chance for adults to develop a more secure attachment and a reworking of their internal models of attachment.

In my reading of the literature I also discovered the adult attachment behavioural model which has expanded my understating of the concept of the attachment behavioural system as it explains the dynamics and psychological implications of attachment in adults. The model facilitated my comprehension of the deactivation or hyperactivation of the attachment behavioural system, specifically in individuals with an insecure attachment as it encapsulates the behavioural and psychological patterns that adults with insecure attachment styles employ to avoid experiencing negative emotions and experiences such as pain, abandonment, intimacy, and vulnerability.

My engagement with the literature revealed that individuals with insecure attachment styles might exhibit a greater tendency towards narcissistic tendencies and lower levels of self-esteem in comparison to those with secure attachment styles. This tendency, in turn, can impact their romantic relationships, as individuals with insecure attachment styles may resort to defense mechanisms to counteract these tendencies. For instance, those anxiously attached merge with their idealised partner and avoidantly attached people manage their narcissistic vulnerability by keeping their partner at a distance, avoiding closeness and strong or unpleasant emotions. This finding aligns with previous literature which asserts that insecure attachment is a strong predictor for negatively impacting romantic relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002) and the quality of romantic relationships (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Cann et al., 2008; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1999; Simpson, 1990). Consequently, my perspective has been broadened to elicit empathetic sentiments

towards individuals exhibiting avoidant attachment styles, as I have acquired a greater awareness of their profound apprehension towards intimacy and vulnerability. At the start of the dissertation, my understanding and empathy towards individuals with anxious attachment styles was not equivalent to those with avoidant attachment styles, possibly due to personal experience. However, through the review of relevant literature, I have established a newfound connection with the interpersonal experiences of avoidantly attached individuals which have broadened my perspective and deepened my theoretical understanding, thereby enriching my clinical work.

These literature findings have influenced my position as a psychotherapist when working with insecurely attached women and their likely greater susceptibility to narcissistic tendencies and low self-esteem. This research has also helped me to distinguish between a client's need for security and their possible narcissistic use of their partner to regulate their emotions and avoid harm.

Upon reviewing the literature, a prevalent theme emerged indicating that insecure attachment among women was linked with negative implications for sexual behaviour, functioning, and dynamics. More specifically, the literature highlighted a connection between insecure attachment in women and lower levels of sexual satisfaction, decreased sexual arousal, and lower levels of orgasmic capacity. Moreover, anxiously attached women with interpersonal dependency, in their sexual dynamics with their partner, are more seemingly likely to experience confusing sexual cognitions (narrow thoughts and beliefs), sexual preoccupation, intrusive thoughts during sex, low tolerance for interruptions or reductions in sexual activity, and emotional distress during sex.

I found it intriguing that some literature implied that insecurely attached women were more likely than securely attached women to fake orgasms, and do so, for instance, to manage complicated feelings. The findings in question align with previous research on the negative impact of attachment styles on sexual behaviour (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). More specifically, anxiously attached women are claimed to fake orgasms during oral sex to possibly increase their arousal and during sexual intercourse to safeguard their partner's self-esteem. Avoidantly attached women supposedly fake orgasms to end sexual activity quickly. I view these findings through a relational framework that pertains to the intrapersonal and interpersonal encounters of women with insecure attachment styles in the context of sexual interactions with their partners. Previous research has implied that a person's adult attachment style predicts patterns of interpersonal relationships between adults in romantic relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Fraley & Spieker, 2003; Fraley et al., 2000b; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

I noted in reading the literature that the phenomenon of women faking orgasm is generally positioned as a problem and responsibility residing with insecurely attached women; however, there seems to be an absence of consideration regarding the external contributing factors, such as the gender of the partner. For instance, in the study by Láng et al. (2018) almost 79% of the participants

were exclusively heterosexual women having sex with men and heterosexual women have been found to have fewer orgasms than men, lesbians (Garcia et al., 2014), and bisexual people (Eschler, 2004). I contend that the gender of the person with whom the insecurely attached woman is faking orgasms is a crucial factor in the discourse on insecurely attached heterosexual women faking orgasms, as there is a widely recognised orgasm gap between cisgender men and women (Mahar et al., 2020). Mintz (2018) attributes the orgasm gap to people's lack of cultural awareness concerning female sexual anatomy. Thus, the problem and responsibility are not solely with heterosexual, insecurely attached women who are more likely to fake orgasms but with the men and individuals that partake in sexual activity with them.

As I reflected on my overall sense of the literature reviewed, the two words that came to mind are push and pull—avoidantly attached women pushing away their partner, a sense of 'too much'; and anxiously attached women pulling their partner towards them, a sense of 'not enough'. This is evident in their defense mechanisms which look different on the surface; yet, at their core, they have the same goal: to mitigate pain. During this research process, I sometimes experienced an inner conflict between pushing myself away from the literature as it could be overwhelming, it was too much to read and interpret; and, simultaneously, a pull towards the literature as I felt a lack of sufficient reading, reflection, and examination. My experience resembles the experiences of insecurely attached women with their partners.

I began this journey with a passion for this topic, feeling as though I were at the dawn of a new day and at numerous times it has felt like a long, never-ending day. I have tumbled around in the hermeneutic process, sometimes descending into chaos, wanting to give up, though my passion for this topic has helped me keep my footing and eyes focused on the upcoming dusk. A dusk that I have both longed for and dreaded is now near, the tumbling, pushing and pulling have subsided, and I am ready for my passion concerning women's issues to take me towards a new journey.

Implications of the Research

For Mental Health Practitioners

Romantic relationships remain one of therapy seeker's most significant presenting issues (Greenspan & Kulish, 1985). The current study can validate and verify relational issues mental health practitioners witness in their clinical work with insecurely attached women. It can help mental health practitioners working with women in romantic relationships to contextualise and make sense of some of the struggles of insecurely attached people. Therapists can facilitate clients' psychoeducation concerning the implications of insecure attachment and its impact on interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics.

For Clients

There is an increasing desire to understand oneself, and attachment style, and seek support and therapeutic help if needed. Many people who seek therapy do so because they are experiencing significant distress in their romantic relationships. This research will help clients by increasing their awareness of their attachment styles—knowledge that can enhance their comprehension of how their attachment style impacts their interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics.

Those in relationships with insecurely attached women, or those who identify as a woman with an insecure attachment style, may find this dissertation a source of comfort and optimism that they are not alone in their experiences in romantic relationships. Such experiences may include stonewalling, keeping their partner at a distance, avoiding closeness and strong or unpleasant emotions, demanding attention from their partner, merging with their partner, confusing or intrusive sexual thoughts during sex, preoccupation with sexual thoughts, and emotional distress during sex. Additional experiences include low levels of sexual satisfaction, arousal, and faking orgasm.

Research Strengths

The aim was to investigate a phenomenon encompassing diverse realities regarding the implications of insecure attachment among adult women in romantic relationships; thus, a qualitative methodology was determined as fitting for this research endeavour. The utilisation of the hermeneutic methodology facilitated the interpretation and comprehension of the findings from a personal perspective, given its acknowledgement of the subjective nature of reality and the absence of conclusive solutions or a singular reality (Davies & Fisher, 2018). Muran (2019) emphasised the importance of comprehending phenomena and seeking diverse sources of research and reflection. The phenomenon can be investigated in detail and depth providing rich insight into subjective experiences (Tenny et al., 2022).

The literature review method has permitted sufficient freedom to consider, select, and interpret the writings on this phenomenon to relate to existing understandings and encourage additional thought about practice. The concept of the hermeneutic circle assisted me in attending to the relationships between the whole circle (women's insecure attachment in adult romantic relationships—the subject of my research) and the pieces (adult attachment literature and texts from different fields). At each repetition of the hermeneutic circle, my understanding of the whole and the individual components altered.

Using the qualitative interpretive paradigm facilitated my ability to fully engage in both therapist and researcher roles. My perspective on adult women's insecure attachment in romantic relationships has expanded. It is the outcome of the 'conversation' between the texts as mediated by

my interpretation of the literature. Combined with elements of methodology, my standing as a researcher, my education, and my life experience have enabled me to interpret the literature through a novel subjective prism that can be considered one of the study's strengths.

Research Limitations

This dissertation was conducted using a hermeneutic literature review. As with any research methodology, it has inherent constraints due to adopting a particular philosophical perspective. It can be challenging to generalise data using a hermeneutic interpretive methodology because of its subjectivity and interpretive positioning. Other researchers' interpretations, will be based on their perspectives and may prevent their generalisation of my interpretations. There are limitations to every researcher's interpretations as their observations and conclusions are influenced by their knowledge and experience (Choy, 2014).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the researcher's subjectivity is crucial to hermeneutics and is, consequently, inextricable from the findings. Different findings might have been discovered if this study had been conducted using a different methodology. Also, apart from the Iranian study, the researchers of the literature used in the current study are primarily from Western cultures; therefore, this hermeneutic review lacks literature from researchers from non-western, including Māori, Pasifika, and other indigenous communities. There is a particular socio-cultural context in some of the literature examined which may have a bearing on the understanding of attachment and, therefore, cultural critiques of attachment.

In addition, the scope of this study is limited in terms of sexual and gender minorities as the literature includes predominantly cis-gendered heterosexual women. Every research paradigm and methodology is characterised by specific parameters restricting examining research topics. An alternative approach would yield different findings, such as conducting a survey or interviewing women with insecure attachment styles regarding their experiences in romantic relationships.

Due to limitations and the scope of the research, the research question was limited to a specific field of interest. The current study investigates the implications of insecure attachment in the romantic relationships of adult women. The clinical nature of my work pertains to individuals. Therefore, the findings may differ when explored with couples.

Future Research

During this research, I identified potential areas for further investigation; most literature came from Western psychological research. Non-Western, sociological, psychodynamic or psychoanalytic research could offer a more diverse examination of this topic. Also, the participants in the reported

studies were predominantly heterosexual cis-gendered. It would be interesting and important to know more about insecure attachment in romantic relationships for people in the LGBTQIA+ community. Future research incorporating a more diverse sample could explore similarities and nuanced differences.

Moreover, cross-cultural research on insecure attachment from Māori and Pasifika perspectives could examine the effects of insecure attachment on women in romantic relationships, as there was no culturally diverse literature on this phenomenon, except for the Iranian study. Further research in this area could assist clients from these cultures to feel heard, safe, and understood. Mental health practitioners may benefit from research from different worldviews to better understand individualistic versus collectivist cultures and adult attachment theory. More psychoanalytic and psychodynamic research using questionnaires and interviews is needed to gain valuable insight into women's experiences and understanding of this phenomenon and its implications for mental health practitioners to improve empathy and understanding of this population.

These recommendations for additional research aim to improve the knowledge of those working with insecurely attached women in romantic relationships and for the betterment of insecurely attached women.

Conclusion

This literature review utilises a hermeneutic approach to examine how the literature frames and understands the impact of insecure attachment in adult women's romantic relationships. The findings have revealed that romantic love is perceived as an attachment process. The adult attachment behavioural model describes how people with insecure attachment styles avoid pain, abandonment, intimacy, and vulnerability by deactivating or hyperactivating their attachment behavioural system. Due to their increased susceptibility to narcissism and lower self-esteem, insecurely attached people employ defense mechanisms to mitigate their experiences. Insecure attachment in women negatively affects sexual behaviour, functioning, and dynamics.

My dissertation topic was generated by my life experiences, passion, interest, clinical experiences working with women insecurely attached in romantic relationships. Engaging in the hermeneutic process of literature has facilitated the development of my thinking, and my practice as a psychotherapist has expanded. Research on insecure attachment in women and its impact on romantic relationships is important due to its prevalence among women. Therefore, it necessitates greater understanding, support, and awareness.

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