

# The Dependency Paradox in Close Relationships: Accepting Dependence Promotes Independence

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Using multiple methods, this investigation tested the hypothesis that a close relationship partner's acceptance of dependence when needed (e.g., sensitive responsiveness to distress cues) is associated with less dependence, more autonomous functioning, and more self-sufficiency (as opposed to more dependence) on the part of the supported individual. In two studies, measures of acceptance of dependency needs and independent functioning were obtained through couple member reports, by observing couple members' behaviors during laboratory interactions, by observing responses to experimentally manipulated partner assistance provided during an individual laboratory task, and by following couples over a period of 6 months to examine independent goal striving as a function of prior assessments of dependency acceptance. Results provided converging evidence in support of the proposed hypothesis. Implications of the importance of close relationships for optimal individual functioning are discussed.

*Keywords:* dependence, independence, attachment, close relationships, autonomy

It is generally believed that yielding to expressions of dependence creates more dependence and less self-sufficiency. In fact, in many Western cultures, dependence on others is viewed as a sign of weakness and as something that should be discouraged. This article presents an alternative view of dependence on others based on attachment theory, which emphasizes the importance of forming and maintaining close emotional bonds with particular individuals across the lifespan. According to this view, true independence and self-sufficiency emerge because of an individual's ability to depend on close relationship partners in times of need.

An important aspect of attachment theory is its assertion that healthy dependence on a reliably sensitive and responsive *attachment figure* is important for optimal functioning and well-being from the cradle to the grave (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988). Attachment theory emphasizes the critical importance of relationships across the life span—throughout infancy, adolescence, and adulthood—and asserts that attachment behavior (or reliance on significant others) in certain circumstances should not be discouraged and looked down on but instead should be accepted

as an intrinsic part of human nature and acknowledged for the role it plays in promoting optimal human functioning. Bowlby emphasized the important function of attachment figures in this regard: Attachment figures promote healthy functioning by providing a safe haven to which a relationship partner can retreat for comfort, support, reassurance, assistance, and protection, and by providing a secure base from which a relationship partner can explore the world and strive to meet his or her full potential. In the most healthy, stable partnerships, this can be viewed as a cyclical process in which individuals are able to move out from the attachment figure to learn, explore, and discover when feeling secure and content, and in which individuals are able to move in toward the attachment figure to derive comfort and security when threatened in any way (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2004; Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2002). Bowlby (1988) stated that “this concept of the secure personal base, from which a child, an adolescent, or an adult goes out to explore and to which he returns from time to time, is one [that is] crucial for an understanding of how an emotionally stable person develops and functions *all through his life*” (p. 46).

Evidence for this process has been shown particularly with regard to parent–child relationships (Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Children who are brought up in an affectionate home and have attachment figures who are responsive to their needs (e.g., tuned in to the child's signals and are likely to interpret them correctly and to respond promptly and appropriately; accepting of the child and cooperative in dealing with him or her) are confident and clear about whom to seek out in times of need (e.g., when they are tired, frightened, or sick). This type of attachment figure is usually able, by his or her presence or ready accessibility, to create the conditions that enable the child to feel secure and to resume exploration in a confident way (Bowlby, 1988). Thus, children raised in this type of environment can be seen to make a series of excursions away from the attachment figure, often returning to check in and engage in

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mutually enjoyable contact before making the next excursion. When any type of threat arises (e.g., when frightened, tired, ill, injured, or worried about being separated from the attachment figure), the child's top priority is to regain the presence of the attachment figure, and the child's explorations and organized excursions cease.

In contrast, children who are raised in homes where attachment figures are less sensitive and responsive to their needs (e.g., fail to notice the child's signals; often misinterpret signals when they are noticed and then respond tardily, inappropriately, or not at all; ignore or reject the child; interfere with the child's activities in an arbitrary way) are less confident about receiving care in times of need (Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988). The conditions created by unresponsive attachment figures restrict the child's ability to explore the world in a confident way.

Thus, according to attachment theory, independent exploration behavior is facilitated by relationship partners who provide a secure base from which this behavior can occur. Bowlby (1988) described the concept of a secure base as one in which support providers create the conditions that enable their relationship partners to confidently explore the world. He described it as

a role similar to that of the officer commanding a military base from which an expeditionary force sets out and to which it can retreat, should it meet with a setback. Much of the time the role of the base is a waiting one but it is none the less vital for that. For it is only when the officer commanding the expeditionary force is confident his base is secure that he dare press forward and take risks. (Bowlby, 1988, p. 11)

Attachment theory states that as an individual grows older, his or her life continues to be organized as a series of excursions away from a close relationship partner. However, the excursions become steadily longer in time and space, and the threshold for activation of attachment behavior is raised because adolescents and adults have more complex representational models of themselves, the environment, and the people who are important to them (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1988).

A major proposition of attachment theory is that throughout adult life, the availability of a responsive attachment figure remains the source of a person's feeling secure—and only when a person is feeling secure will he or she be able to explore most effectively, confidently, and autonomously. Bowlby (1988) claimed that “all of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures” (p. 62), and he argued that a secure home base is essential for optimal functioning and mental health.

Thus, important propositions of attachment theory can be summarized as follows: (a) Individuals come into the world predisposed to form strong emotional bonds with particular individuals who care for them (attachment figures). During childhood, bonds are typically with parents who are looked to for protection, comfort, and support; during adolescence and adulthood, important bonds persist but are supplemented by new ones—primarily with romantic partners. (b) These bonds exist and are important because they reduce the risk of the individual coming to harm. In times of adversity, individuals seek proximity to known and trusted others, and they derive a sense of protection, safety, and security by doing so. (c) The way in which attachment figures respond to the

individual's need for close contact in times of adversity is presumed to have an important influence on the individual's personal functioning. If an individual's close relationship partner or attachment figure is known to be accessible, available, and responsive when called on, then he or she will feel secure enough to explore and function autonomously. An attachment figure who is accepting of and responsive to dependency needs serves a protective function with regard to any number of threats that the individual may encounter. Thus, the desire for comfort and support in adversity should not be regarded as unhealthy or childish, unlike what may be implied by the word *dependency* (Bowlby, 1988).

As the above review indicates, an important prediction of attachment theory is that an attachment figure's (or close relationship partner's) acceptance of an individual's dependency needs creates less rather than more dependence. In other words, because dependence on close relationship partners, particularly in times of need, is an intrinsic part of human nature, relationship partners who are sensitive and responsive to this behavior actually serve to promote independence and self-sufficiency, not inhibit it. According to the theory, individuals who are unaccepting of dependence are the ones who tend to encourage anxious dependence in their relationship partners.

Research in the developmental literature has supported this prediction. For example, researchers have shown that by the end of the 1st year, mothers who attended promptly to their crying babies had babies who cried much less than the babies of mothers who let them cry (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Belsky, Rovine, & Taylor, 1984; Bowlby, 1988). Thus, mothers' sensitivity to distress cues in their children seemed to foster less fussiness or neediness in their children. Moreover, researchers examining autonomy and attachment in adolescence have found that adolescent autonomy is most easily established not at the expense of attachment relationships with parents, but against a backdrop of secure attachment relationships (Allen & Land, 1999; Moore, 1987; Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999). Although a major postulate of attachment theory is that its principles apply across the life span, the prediction that an individual's sensitivity to his or her partner's dependency needs facilitates that partner's independent functioning has remained untested in adult relationships.

The current investigation tests the idea that a close relationship partner's acceptance of dependence when needed (e.g., sensitive responsiveness to distress cues) is associated with less dependence, more autonomous functioning, and more self-sufficiency (as opposed to more dependence) on the part of the supported individual. Because romantic partners often serve as attachment figures for one another, this prediction was tested in two studies of couples involved in established romantic relationships. These studies examine the link between acceptance of dependence by one relationship partner and independent functioning of the other relationship partner through multiple methods (i.e., self-report, partner-report, observational, experimental, and longitudinal methods). The couple (not the individual) is the unit of analysis.

## STUDY 1

Study 1 examined this link through a combination of self-report, partner-report, observational, and experimental methods. Measures of acceptance of dependency needs and independent functioning were obtained through couple member reports of general behav-

iors, by observing couple members' behaviors during a laboratory interaction, and by observing responses to experimentally manipulated partner assistance provided during an individual laboratory task. Specific hypotheses tested in Study 1 are as follows:

*Hypothesis 1:* One partner's reports of his or her acceptance of dependence (as operationalized by responsiveness to the other's needs and sensitivity to the other's distress cues) should be associated with reports of the other's independent functioning (as operationalized by the other's perceived independence and self-efficacy, the other's engagement in independent exploration, and the other's perceived ability to achieve independent goals).

*Hypothesis 2:* The link between acceptance of dependence and independent functioning should be observable in couple members' discussions of personal goals for the future. It was predicted that observable indicators of dependency acceptance (e.g., the communication of future availability and sensitive-responsive support provision) would be associated with observable indicators of autonomous functioning (e.g., confident exploration of independent goals).

*Hypothesis 3:* One partner's acceptance of dependence (as previously reported and observed) should predict the other's independent functioning during a subsequent laboratory task. It was expected that individuals whose partners accept their dependence when support is needed would reveal their autonomous functioning and self-sufficiency during a laboratory puzzle activity by desiring less assistance from the relationship partner when solving the puzzle. My prediction was that recipients whose partners accept and support their dependency needs would show evidence of independent exploration during the task by being unreceptive to partner messages that provide unsolicited instrumental support (answers to the puzzle) as indexed by inattentiveness to the messages, lack of response to the messages, and overt rejection of the messages, presumably because they wish to solve the puzzles on their own and therefore do not appreciate partner interference. However, unsolicited emotional support (encouraging the partner without revealing answers) was not expected to have the same effect. It was predicted that greater acceptance of dependence by one partner would be either unassociated with or associated in the opposite direction with attentiveness to and rejection of unsolicited emotional support.

Unsolicited instrumental support, which provides answers to the puzzle, should yield different effects than unsolicited emotional support, which simply encourages the recipient, because instrumental support in this particular context does not allow the recipient to independently explore the puzzle activity whereas emotional support in this context does (see also Feeney, 2004). This distinction is supported by research in the social support literature indicating that (a) when people feel that they have a high degree of control over their own circumstances and the more advice and guidance they received from their spouses, the less supportive they rated their spouses' behavior during a support interaction (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992); (b) emotional support is uniformly viewed as

positive by spouses, whereas instrumental and informational forms of support are welcome only under certain conditions (Cutrona, 1996); and (c) reactions to spousal support behaviors that are instrumental in nature are determined by the fit between this type of support and the value the recipient places on being functionally independent (Matire, Stephens, Druley, & Wojno, 2002; see also Mikulincer & Florian, 1997).

Attachment theory postulates that the hypothesized link between dependency acceptance and independent functioning should normatively apply to all individuals. That is, individuals whose dependency needs are truly accepted by an attachment figure (or close relationship partner) are likely to feel more confident about going out into the world to engage in independent exploration, knowing that their home base will be awaiting them should difficulties arise, than will individuals whose dependency needs are not accepted by an attachment figure. Thus, the position advanced here is that all individuals are likely to benefit from a relationship partner who shows an acceptance of their dependency needs by being sensitive and responsive to distress cues because this is precisely the type of behavior that underlies attachment security. Although individual difference variables are likely to influence a partner's acceptance of dependency needs (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), it is not anticipated that individual difference variables will moderate the hypothesized link between dependency acceptance and independent functioning. Even insecure individuals, who have reported a low need for achievement and high fear of failure in past research (Elliot & Reis, 2003), are likely to fear failure less and function more autonomously with the support of a relationship partner who provides a secure base by being appropriately accepting of (and sensitive and responsive to) their dependency needs.

However, because attachment style has moderated effects of normative relationship processes in prior research (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002), supplementary analyses examining whether the attachment style scores of either partners or recipients moderate this link are presented. Although the link between dependency acceptance and independent functioning is presumed to exist for all individuals, it is possible that this link may exist more strongly for some individuals than for others. For example, it is possible that some recipients (e.g., those high in attachment-related anxiety) may have more to gain from a partner's dependency acceptance, although everyone should benefit from having a sensitive and responsive home base. In addition, to the extent that insecure partners do not accept dependence as skillfully as secure partners, insecure attachment characteristics of partners could attenuate this effect. Thus, possible moderating effects of both partners' and recipients' attachment styles were examined.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 115 couples recruited from the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area through local newspaper advertisements and posted flyers. One member of the couple was randomly designated to be the person whose acceptance and support of dependence would be assessed (referred to as the "partner"), and the other was

designated as the person whose independent functioning would be assessed as a function of having a partner who accepts and supports his or her need for dependence (referred to as the “recipient” of support). Couples had been romantically involved for an average of 4.3 years: 31% were married, 9% were engaged, and 60% were dating seriously (in a committed relationship for at least 6 months). The mean age of participants was 27.5 years (range = 18–62). Fifty-four females and 61 males were assigned to the recipient role, and 63 females and 52 males were assigned to the partner role. Couples were heterosexual with the exception of two lesbian couples. Of the recipients, 67% were Caucasian, 9.6% were African American, 13.9% were Asian, 1% were Hispanic, and 1% were Native American; 42.6% had a high school education or had received some college credit, 46.1% had a college education, and 9.6% had an advanced professional degree. Of the partners, 60% were Caucasian, 11.3% were African American, 11.3% were Asian, 4.3% were Hispanic, and 2.6% were Native American; 37.8% had a high school education or some college credit, 45.2% had a college education, and 13.9% had an advanced professional degree.

Sample size varies across analyses because of missing data (e.g., because a couple had difficulty reading and speaking English or because of incomplete questionnaire data). Couples were paid \$40 for participating.

### Procedure

Couples visited the laboratory, one couple at a time, as part of a larger study on social support processes in adult relationships; only materials and procedures relevant to the current investigation are described. Both self-report and behavioral measures of the partner’s acceptance of dependence and the recipient’s independent functioning were obtained.

### Self-Report Assessments of Partners’ Acceptance of Dependence and Recipients’ Independent Functioning

*Partners’ acceptance of dependence.* Partners completed two measures assessing the degree to which they are generally accepting of the recipient’s dependency needs. Responsiveness to needs was assessed with a face-valid 4-item scale created for use in this investigation. Partners rated the extent to which they agreed with each item (e.g., “I am responsive to my partner’s needs”) on a 5-point Likert scale ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Sensitivity to distress cues was assessed using the six-item Sensitivity subscale of Kuncce and Shaver’s (1994) Caregiving Questionnaire, which is an established, well-validated measure of the support that relationship partners provide to one another in response to distress. The scale assesses the degree to which individuals are attentive to their relationship partner’s needs for comfort and support (e.g., “I am very attentive to my partner’s nonverbal signals for help and support”). Partners rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a 6-point Likert scale ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The responsiveness to needs and sensitivity to distress cues measures were significantly correlated,  $r(115) = .57, p < .001$ , but were examined in data analyses as two different ways (behavioral vs. attentional) that one might show an acceptance of a partner’s dependence. A goal of Study 1 was to demonstrate that the selected measures of dependency acceptance function similarly as predicted given that

they are different ways of conceptualizing the construct of dependency acceptance.

*Recipients’ independent functioning.* Several self-report assessments of the recipient’s independent functioning were obtained. Recipients completed the Self-Efficacy Scale (Sherer et al., 1982), which served as an index of the degree to which they feel capable of successfully engaging in independent exploration and functioning autonomously. They responded to 23 items assessing their perceived self-efficacy (e.g., “I am a self-reliant person,” “I feel insecure about my ability to do things” [reverse scored];  $\alpha = .90$ ) on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Both recipients and partners provided a report of the recipient’s general engagement in independent exploration (Feeney, 2004). Recipients responded to five items assessing the extent to which they pursue independent goals and the extent to which they are willing to autonomously approach new exploratory opportunities (e.g., “I make great efforts to achieve my personal goals and plans,” “I do not really do things to identify and pursue opportunities that might be personally rewarding for me”;  $\alpha = .77$ ) on a scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). Partners completed the same items, but they were reworded to reflect the recipients’ engagement in independent exploration ( $\alpha = .87$ ). The average of each partner’s ratings was computed for use in data analysis. Partner and recipient reports were moderately correlated,  $r(115) = .45, p < .001$ .

As an index of their perceived ability to achieve independent goals, recipients were asked to list their personal goals for the future (Feeney, 2004). Each recipient was instructed to list goals that were personally relevant to him or her (e.g., developing a new hobby, switching jobs), not those that involve the active participation of both couple members (e.g., having a baby), and then to rate his or her perceived likelihood of achieving each goal on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely to achieve that goal*) to 5 (*almost certain that I’ll achieve that goal*). The average of the recipient’s ratings of his or her goals was used in data analyses.

As a final self-report assessment of recipients’ independent functioning, recipients were asked to rate the extent to which they felt independent (vs. dependent), self-reliant (vs. reliant on others), self-confident (vs. self-doubting), and capable (vs. incapable) on 7-point scales anchored by the two opposing adjectives, mean  $r(115) = .45, p < .001$ .

Although the assessments of independent functioning were expected to be intercorrelated, mean  $r(115) = .35, p < .001$ , they were examined as separate indicators of independent functioning in data analyses as a way of providing convergent validity for the hypothesis under investigation. Another goal of Study 1 was to demonstrate that the selected measures of independent functioning (representing different ways of conceptualizing the construct) are similarly and consistently associated with the assessments of dependency acceptance.

*Attachment style.* Both recipients and partners completed an abbreviated 26-item version of Brennan, Clark, and Shaver’s (1998) Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR), for use in supplementary analyses to test for potential moderating effects of attachment style. The ECR Scale contains two subscales: The Avoidance subscale ( $\alpha = .88$  for recipient ratings;  $\alpha = .87$  for partner ratings) measures the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy as well as the degree to which a

person feels that people can be relied on to be available when needed; the Anxiety subscale ( $\alpha = .88$  for recipient ratings;  $\alpha = .91$  for partner ratings) measures the extent to which a person is worried about being rejected, abandoned, or unloved. Couple members responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) in terms of their general orientation toward close relationships. Items were slightly reworded so that respondents answered in terms of their general orientation toward close relationships instead of their more specific orientation toward romantic relationships.

### *Observed Assessments of Partners' Acceptance of Dependence and Recipients' Independent Functioning*

*Discussion of personal goals activity.* Couple members were seated in a laboratory living room, the recipient was given an index card on which the personal goals that he or she had previously identified were listed, and the couple members were asked to discuss these goals. The interactions were unobtrusively videotaped for 10 min and later coded by two trained, independent observers who were unaware of study hypotheses. To assess interobserver reliability, intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs; McGraw & Wong, 1996) were computed for all coded dimensions. Averages of the two observers' ratings were used in data analysis.

Three behaviors representing the extent to which the partner was accepting of the recipient's dependency needs during the discussion were coded on well-defined 5-point rating scales. These behaviors were (a) communication of future availability (ICC = .75), in which the partner conveyed that he or she would be available to help as needed in the future attainment of the recipient's goals; (b) avoidance of dealing with goal-related problems (ICC = .78), in which the partner exhibited a reluctance (e.g., by changing the topic, acting distracted, withdrawing physically) to discuss or deal with the recipient's goal-related concerns; and (c) sensitive-responsive support provision (ICC = .83), in which the partner demonstrated an active effort to be sensitive and responsive to the partner and his or her goals and goal-related problems throughout the discussion. Two behaviors representing the extent to which the recipient exhibited independent functioning related to his or her goal pursuit were also coded on well-defined 5-point rating scales. These behaviors were (a) confident exploration of goals (ICC = .72), in which the recipient confidently explored avenues for achieving his or her goals and appeared comfortable with his or her autonomous pursuit of goals; and (b) avoidance of independent goal pursuit (ICC = .71), in which the recipient exhibited a reluctance to openly discuss or pursue his or her goals.

*Novel exploration activity.* A subset of the sample ( $n = 47$ ) was used to test the hypothesis that individuals whose partners accept dependency needs will exhibit more independent functioning as indexed by less receptiveness to experimentally manipulated, unsolicited assistance during a laboratory exploration activity. (The remainder of the sample participated in experimental conditions that were relevant to testing other hypotheses reported in Feeney, 2004.) After couple members, who had been placed in separate rooms, were given an opportunity to interact through an instant messaging system, the recipient was asked to try a new computer puzzle activity. The puzzle activity was selected to be enjoyable and solvable—challenging in a pleasurable but not difficult or stressful way. The recipient was told that the partner

could watch the game on his or her computer while waiting in the other room if he or she chose to do so. Then, the experimenter set up the game for the recipient by making the puzzle completely visible on the left of the computer screen and by leaving the instant messenger window (from the previous interaction) visible on the right side of the screen. The recipient was given instructions about how to play the game and was left alone to play for 5 min.

To assess recipients' independent versus dependent exploration, a subset of recipients was randomly assigned to a condition in which they received unsolicited instrumental support (task assistance) through the instant messaging system during the activity. This assistance was ostensibly provided by the partner but was actually delivered by the experimenter, who had taken over the partner's user name. In this condition, recipients received frequent messages that provided the answers to the puzzle or that told the recipient what to do. The experimenter monitored the recipient's progress from the control room and was careful not to give answers to the puzzle that had already been solved. Twelve messages were delivered at 15-s intervals for 3 min (the first message was delivered immediately), and three messages were delivered at 30-s intervals for the remaining 2 min. As a comparison condition, another subset of recipients was randomly assigned to receive unsolicited emotional support during the activity (e.g., "good luck," "☺," "not bad," "nice try," "hard one"). The experimenter monitored the recipient's progress so that an appropriate message was delivered on the basis of what the recipient actually did. Messages were delivered at the same frequency as those for the unsolicited instrumental support condition.

Three indexes of the recipient's independent exploration were obtained: (a) After the activity, recipients rated on a 7-point scale the extent to which they paid attention to the messages that were sent by the partner; (b) the experimenter recorded whether the recipient responded to the support messages that were delivered; and (c) for the subset of recipients who responded to the messages, two independent observers coded the written responses for the degree to which the recipient appeared to be rejecting (vs. accepting) the messages. Overt rejection of the messages was coded as the degree to which the recipient was unreceptive to the partner's assistance by conveying that it was not welcomed or appreciated (e.g., by telling the partner to stop sending messages; ICC = .81). Responses were coded on scales ranging from 1 (*no rejection of the messages at all*) to 5 (*a great deal of rejection of the messages*).

## Results

### *Hypothesis 1: Reported Assessments of Dependency Acceptance and Independent Functioning*

Data analyses were conducted to examine associations between indicators of partners' acceptance of dependence and indicators of recipients' independent functioning. Results strongly supported the hypothesis under investigation. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, partners' reports of their acceptance of the recipients' dependency needs (as indexed by responsiveness to the recipients' needs and sensitivity to the recipients' distress cues) were significantly associated with all indicators of the recipients' independent functioning, including the recipients' perceived self-efficacy; the recipients' engagement in independent exploration (as reported by both the partner and the recipient); the recipients' perceived ability to

Table 1  
Associations Among Partner Acceptance of Dependence and Indicators of Recipient's Independent Functioning (Study 1)

Partner's acceptance of dependence (partner's report)	Recipient's independence			
	Perceived self-efficacy (recipient's report)	Engagement in independent exploration (recipient's report)	Engagement in independent exploration (partner's report)	Perceived ability to achieve independent goals (recipient's report)
Responsiveness to needs	.31**	.33**	.38***	.23*
Sensitivity to distress cues	.36***	.27**	.33**	.26**

Note. N = 115.  
\* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

achieve independent goals; and the recipients' ratings of their independence, self-reliance, self-confidence, and capability.

*Hypothesis 2: Observed Assessments of Dependency Acceptance and Independent Functioning*

The results using self- and partner reports were corroborated through observed measures of partners' acceptance of dependency needs and recipients' independent functioning during a laboratory discussion activity. As shown in Table 3, recipients were more likely to confidently explore their independent goals and less likely to avoid independent goal pursuit when their partners exhibited an acceptance of their dependency needs (by not avoiding the discussion of goal-related concerns and by providing sensitive and responsive support). Recipients were also less likely to avoid independent goal pursuit when their partners communicated future availability to them during the discussion.

*Hypothesis 3: Experimental Assessment of Independent Functioning During Laboratory Activity*

*Primary Analyses*

With regard to the laboratory puzzle activity, the prediction was that recipients whose partners accepted and supported their dependency needs would show evidence of independent exploration during the task. It was predicted that these individuals would be unreceptive to partner messages that provided the answers to the puzzle (as indexed by inattentiveness to the messages, lack of response to the messages, and overt rejection of the messages), presumably because they would wish to solve the puzzles on their

own. However, unsolicited emotional support was not expected to have the same effect.

Analyses were conducted in which associations between indicators of partners' acceptance of dependency needs (as observed and reported previously) and indicators of recipients' independent exploration during the puzzle task were computed for each experimental condition. To test whether the correlations between indicators of dependency acceptance and indicators of independent exploration differed significantly between experimental conditions, each Pearson correlation coefficient was converted to its corresponding Fisher's Z and a z statistic was computed to test for the difference between correlations. As shown in Table 4, the overall pattern of results supported predictions: Reported acceptance of dependence was associated with less recipient attentiveness and less recipient responsiveness to support messages that provided unsolicited instrumental support (answers to the puzzle) but not to support messages that provided unsolicited emotional support. In addition, partners' observed acceptance of dependence was associated with less recipient attentiveness to, and more overt rejection of, support messages that provided unsolicited instrumental support but not support messages that provided unsolicited emotional support. The expected pattern did not emerge for partners' reported acceptance of dependence predicting overt rejection of messages or for partners' observed acceptance of dependence predicting responsiveness to the messages.

Table 3  
Associations Among Observed Partner Acceptance of Dependence and Observed Indicators of Independent Functioning During Goal Discussion (Study 1)

Partner's acceptance of dependence (observed behavior)	Recipient's independence (observed behavior)	
	Confident exploration of goals	Avoidance of independent goal pursuit
Communication of future availability	-.01	-.19*
Avoidance of dealing with problems	-.29**	.34***
Sensitive-responsive support provision	.29**	-.35**

Note. N = 108.  
\* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

Table 2  
Associations Among Partner Acceptance of Dependence and Indicators of Recipient's Independent Functioning (Study 1)

Partner's acceptance of dependence (partner's report)	Recipient's reported independence			
	Independent	Self-reliant	Self-confident	Capable
Responsiveness to needs	.36***	.34**	.41***	.47***
Sensitivity to distress cues	.33**	.19*	.37***	.36***

Note. N = 108.  
\* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

Table 4  
*Associations Among Partner Acceptance of Dependence and Indicators of Recipient's Independence Functioning During Exploration Activity (Study 1)*

Partner's acceptance of dependence	Attentiveness to support messages				Response to messages				Overt rejection of messages						
	<i>r</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>Z'</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>Z'</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>Z'</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>Z'</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>Z'</i>	<i>z</i>
Reported															
Responsiveness to needs	-.45*	-.49*	.26	.27	-.57*	-.65*	.15	.15	-.26	-.27	-.15	.15	-.15	.15	-0.30
Sensitivity to distress cues	-.36*	-.38*	-.03	.03	-.46*	-.50*	.34	.35	-.14	-.14	.04	.04	.04	.04	-0.45
Observed															
Communication of future availability	-.36*	-.38*	.07	.07	-.05	-.05	.39*	.41*	.62**	.73**	-.17	-.17	-.17	-.17	2.25*
Avoidance of dealing with problems	.12	.12	.33	.34	.00	.00	.17	.17	-.41*	-.44*	.32	.33	.32	.33	1.93*
Sensitive-responsive support provision	-.40*	-.42*	-.12	-.12	-.09	-.09	-.11	-.11	.78***	1.05***	-.18	-.18	-.18	-.18	3.08***

*Note.* Pearson correlation coefficients and the associated Fisher's *Z*'s are displayed above. The *z* statistic provides a test of the difference between correlations; significance is based on critical value of *z*, one-tailed.

† *p* < .10. \* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

### Follow-Up Analyses

Recipients whose partners are accepting of their dependency needs were expected to be less receptive to instrumental task assistance during the laboratory exploration activity because they would prefer to complete the activity on their own (i.e., more independently). Although this underlying motivation was inferred from the recipients' behavior during the activity, follow-up analyses were conducted in an effort to provide empirical support for this motivational inference. Although no direct assessment of this preference was included in the study design, upon completion of the exploratory activity, recipients were asked to report their feelings of self-efficacy during the activity (as indexed by ratings of how capable and effective they felt;  $\alpha = .78$ ) on 7-point Likert scales, and they were asked to report the degree to which they perceived their partners' messages to be interfering and meddlesome on a 5-point Likert scale. Ratings of perceived self-efficacy and partner intrusiveness were uncorrelated,  $r(68) = .08, ns$ . Therefore, follow-up analyses were conducted to examine whether recipients whose partners were accepting of dependence were less receptive to messages offering instrumental assistance during the laboratory exploration activity, at least partially because they felt more capable of completing the activity on their own and because they viewed their partners' messages as interfering.

For the significant links between dependency acceptance and lack of receptiveness to messages (in the unsolicited instrumental support condition) displayed in Table 4, multiple regression analyses were conducted in accordance with procedures described by Baron and Kenny (1986) to determine whether these associations were mediated by recipients' feelings of self-efficacy and perceptions of partner interference during the activity.<sup>1</sup> First, a regression analysis was conducted in which the two mediating variables (perceived self-efficacy and perceived partner intrusiveness) were entered simultaneously with partners' sensitivity to the recipients' distress cues (a measure of dependency acceptance) predicting recipients' attentiveness to partner messages during the puzzle activity. Results indicated that both mediating variables were strong predictors of recipients' attentiveness to messages ( $B = -1.12, \beta = -.70, SE = .24, p < .001$ , for perceived self-efficacy;  $B = -1.11, \beta = -.65, SE = .24, p < .001$ , for perceived partner intrusiveness), and the link between partner dependency acceptance (i.e., sensitivity to distress cues) and attentiveness to messages was reduced to nonsignificance with the mediators included in the model ( $B = 0.09, \beta = -.04, SE = .30, ns$ ; Sobel  $z = -2.09, p < .05$ ).

Next, a regression analysis was conducted in which the two mediating variables (perceived self-efficacy and perceived partner intrusiveness) were entered simultaneously with partners' responsiveness to the recipients' needs (the other reported indicator of dependency acceptance) predicting recipients' attentiveness to partner messages during the puzzle activity. Again, results indicated that both mediating variables were significant predictors of recipients' attentiveness to messages ( $B = -0.89, \beta = -.56, SE = .34, p < .05$ , for perceived self-efficacy;  $B = -0.75, \beta = -.50, SE = .31, p < .05$ , for perceived partner intrusiveness), and the link between partner dependency acceptance (i.e., responsiveness to needs) and attentiveness to messages was reduced to nonsignificance with the mediators included in the model ( $B = -1.05, \beta = -.25, SE = .86, ns$ ; Sobel  $z = -1.97, p < .05$ ).

Similar mediational effects were obtained with the observational measures of partners' dependency acceptance. For communication of future availability, both mediating variables were significant predictors of attentiveness ( $B = -0.95, \beta = -.60, SE = .28, p < .01$ , for perceived self-efficacy;  $B = -0.67, \beta = -.41, SE = .31, p < .05$ , for perceived partner intrusiveness), and the link between partner dependency acceptance (i.e., responsiveness to needs) and attentiveness to messages was reduced to nonsignificance with the mediators in the model ( $B = -0.62, \beta = -.23, SE = .49, ns$ ; Sobel  $z = -2.01, p < .05$ ). For the sensitive-responsive support provision, both mediating variables were significant predictors of attentiveness ( $B = -0.94, \beta = -.60, SE = .29, p < .01$ , for perceived self-efficacy;  $B = -0.76, \beta = -.46, SE = .31, p < .05$ , for perceived partner intrusiveness), and the link between partner dependency acceptance (i.e., responsiveness to needs) and attentiveness to messages was reduced to nonsignificance with the mediators in the model ( $B = -0.20, \beta = -.12, SE = .30, ns$ ; Sobel  $z = -1.98, p < .05$ ).

Similar mediational effects were not obtained for the links between reported dependency acceptance and recipients' responsiveness to messages. Dependency acceptance remained a significant predictor of responding to messages for both reported indexes of dependency acceptance ( $B = -0.27, \beta = -.51, SE = .09, p < .01$ , for sensitivity to distress cues;  $B = -0.59, \beta = -.44, SE = .25, p < .05$ , for responsiveness to needs). Mediational analyses were not conducted for associations between observed dependency acceptance and overt rejection of messages because of sample size constraints.

### Supplementary Analyses: Moderating Effects of Attachment Style

Although the association between dependency acceptance and independent functioning was theoretically presumed to exist for all individuals, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test for any potential moderating effects of attachment style on the links described above. For each analysis, main effect variables (dependency acceptance and attachment style) were entered on the first step of the equation predicting each indicator of the recipients' independent functioning, and interaction variables (between dependency acceptance and attachment style) were entered on the second step of the equation. Analyses were conducted for each assessment of the partners' dependency acceptance (responsiveness to needs and sensitivity to distress cues) and for partners' and recipients' attachment style as potential moderators.

Out of 88 tested interactions between dependency acceptance and attachment style, only 6 were statistically significant. Five of these interactions were between measures of partners' dependency acceptance and partners' attachment anxiety, and 1 was between partners' dependency acceptance and recipients' attachment anxiety, predicting reports of the recipients' independent functioning. Taken together, results indicated that partners' dependency acceptance was more strongly associated with recipients' independence when partners were low in attachment anxiety than when partners were high in attachment anxiety (and in one instance when recip-

<sup>1</sup> Because of the small sample size, these follow-up mediational analyses should be interpreted with caution.

ients were low in attachment anxiety than when they were high in attachment anxiety). Thus, a high level of attachment anxiety, particularly in partners, appears to attenuate a few of the associations between dependency acceptance and independent functioning. However, no other interactions were statistically significant, and the interactions that did emerge were not consistent across assessments of dependency acceptance nor across reports of the recipients' independent functioning. Thus, these analyses are not detailed further.<sup>2</sup>

## STUDY 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to replicate the results of Study 1 and then extend them by providing a more rigorous longitudinal test of the hypothesis under investigation, specifically that acceptance of a partner's dependency needs at one point in time predicts changes in that person's independent functioning 6 months later. This was accomplished through a combination of self-report, partner-report, observational, and longitudinal methods. As in Study 1, measures of acceptance of dependency needs and independent functioning were obtained through couple member reports of general behaviors and through observations of couple members' behaviors during a laboratory interaction. Study 2 extends the prior study, however, by following married couples over a period of 6 months to examine links between partner acceptance of dependency needs (as reported and observed) at Time 1 and indicators of independent functioning and independent goal striving at Time 2. Specific hypotheses tested in Study 2 were as follows:

*Hypothesis 1:* Results of Study 1 will be replicated. Specifically, reports of the partner's acceptance of dependence will be associated with reports of the recipient's independent functioning, and observable indicators of the partner's dependency acceptance (e.g., communication of future availability and sensitive-responsive support provision during couple members' discussions of a specific personal goal for the future) will be associated with observable indicators of the recipient's autonomous functioning (e.g., confident exploration of a specific independent goal). Whereas only partner reports of their own dependency acceptance were obtained in Study 1, reports of partners' dependency acceptance were obtained from both couple members in Study 2.

*Hypothesis 2:* Partners' acceptance of dependence (as reported by both couple members and as observed) at Time 1 will predict increases in the recipients' independent functioning 6 months later at Time 2 (controlling for the recipients' independent functioning at Time 1). Because it was presumed that dependency acceptance leads to changes in independent functioning and not vice versa, it was also predicted that a major alternative hypothesis will be discounted. That is, results were not expected to support the reverse hypothesis that recipients' independent functioning at Time 1 predicts increases in the partners' acceptance of dependence at Time 2 (because individuals who are inherently better at achieving their personal goals might have partners who are more accepting of their dependence precisely because they are easier to support and care for). The validity of the hypothesis under investigation rests on the demonstration that acceptance of

dependency needs predicts changes in independent functioning over time while ruling out the hypothesis that initially independent, autonomous recipients motivate their partners to provide more and better support.

*Hypothesis 3:* Partners' acceptance of dependence at Time 1 (also the time at which an important, independent goal was identified by the recipient as one that he or she would like to accomplish over the next 6 months) will predict the accomplishment of the specific goal 6 months later at Time 2.

As in Study 1, it was not predicted that individual differences would moderate the hypothesized link between dependency acceptance and independent functioning, because attachment theory postulates that this dynamic is normative and should apply to all individuals (i.e., having a partner who provides an adequate safe haven in times of need and a secure base for exploration should promote independent functioning for everyone). However, because a few moderation effects were obtained in Study 1, supplementary analyses examining potentially moderating effects of partners' and recipients' attachment style were conducted in Study 2 as well.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 165 married couples recruited from the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area through local newspaper advertisements. Again, 1 member of the couple was randomly designated to be the person whose acceptance and support of dependence would be assessed (referred to as the "partner"), and the other was designated as the person whose independent functioning would be assessed as a function of having a partner who accepts and supports his or her need for dependence (referred to as the "recipient" of support). Couples had been married for an average of 10.2 years, and all were heterosexual. The mean age of participants was 39.1 years (range = 18–81). Seventy-eight women and 87 men were assigned to the recipient role, and 87 women and 78 men were assigned to the partner role. Of the recipients, 74.7% were Caucasian, 15.1% were African American, 1.2% were Asian, 2.4%

<sup>2</sup> A series of three-way interactions between partner attachment, recipient attachment, and dependency acceptance to predict independent functioning was also tested, and no significant interactions emerged. Additional analyses were conducted to test for gender and relationship length effects on all study variables. With regard to gender effects, results indicated that women ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) were more likely than men ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) to report that they are sensitive to their partners' needs,  $t(80) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and men ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 2.21$ ) were more likely than women ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ) to ignore their partner's messages during the laboratory exploration activity,  $t(80) = -2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ . In addition, female recipients ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) were higher in attachment anxiety than male recipients ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $t(114) = 3.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and male partners ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) were higher in attachment avoidance than female partners ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(113) = -2.15$ ,  $p < .05$ . With regard to relationship length, there was a significant negative association between relationship length and recipients' attachment anxiety,  $r(58) = -.27$ ,  $p < .05$ . No other significant effects emerged. Results of reported analyses did not change when gender and relationship length were included in analyses as control variables.

were Hispanic, 2.4% were Native American, and 4.2% were of unspecified ethnicity; 38.6% had a high school education or had received some college credit, 44.6% had a college education, and 12.7% had an advanced professional degree. Of the partners, 76.4% were Caucasian, 17.6% were African American, 1.8% were Asian, 2.4% were Hispanic, 0.6% were Native American, and 1.2% were of unspecified ethnicity; 39.2% had a high school education or had received some college credit, 43.9% had a college education, and 12.0% had an advanced professional degree. The initial sample included the 165 participants who completed both the survey and observational phases of the investigation (Time 1). Sample size decreased in the analyses involving data from the 6-month (Time 2) follow-up because of participant attrition. Couples were paid \$120 for participating in all phases of the investigation.

### *Procedure*

Each couple visited the laboratory twice and then completed a 6-month follow-up survey as part of a larger study on social support processes in adult relationships. Only materials and procedures relevant to the current investigation are described. As in Study 1, both self-report and behavioral measures of the partner's acceptance of dependence and the recipient's independent functioning were obtained.

#### *Time 1 Self-Report Assessments of Partners' Acceptance of Dependence and Recipients' Independent Functioning*

*Partners' acceptance of dependence.* Both recipients and partners completed three measures of the degree to which partners are generally accepting of the recipients' dependency needs. Both couple members completed the same measure of sensitivity to distress cues as described in Study 1; partners responded in terms of their own sensitivity ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and recipients responded in terms of their partners' sensitivity ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Both couple members also completed an expanded 10-item version of the measure of responsiveness to needs described in Study 1; partners responded in terms of their own responsiveness ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and recipients responded in terms of their partners' responsiveness ( $\alpha = .92$ ). In addition, partners completed a 5-item measure designed for this investigation to assess their beliefs about dependence on close relationship partners (e.g., "Dependence on another person is a sign of weakness"); partners rated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 7-point scale ( $\alpha = .76$ ). Recipients also rated the extent to which 10 adjectives reflecting an acceptance of dependence described how their spouse generally is (e.g., sensitive, comforting, sympathetic, accepting); each adjective was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all descriptive of my spouse*) to 5 (*extremely descriptive of my spouse*) ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Because Study 1 demonstrated that the reported indexes of dependency acceptance functioned similarly, composite indexes (for each couple member's report) were computed for use in data analyses in Study 2. A composite index of the recipients' reports of partners' acceptance of dependence was computed by standardizing and averaging the three recipient report measures, mean  $r(165) = .70$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and a composite index of partners' reports of their own acceptance of dependence was

computed by standardizing and averaging the three partner report measures, mean  $r(165) = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Recipients' and partners' reports were significantly correlated,  $r(165) = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not identical; therefore, they were examined separately in data analyses.

*Recipients' independent functioning.* Several self-report assessments of the recipients' independent functioning were obtained. Recipients completed the same measures of perceived self-efficacy ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and perceived ability to achieve independent goals as described in Study 1 (except the goals that recipients were asked to identify were ones that they could reasonably accomplish or make progress toward accomplishing within the next 6 months). Both recipients and partners reported the recipient's general engagement in independent exploration by using the same measures described in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .79$  for recipient report;  $\alpha = .85$  for partner report). Although the assessments of independent functioning were moderately intercorrelated, mean  $r(165) = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ , they were not redundant and were examined separately in data analyses as a way of providing convergent validity for the hypothesis under investigation.

For use in the following sessions, recipients were asked to identify one personal goal that they would most like to accomplish or make progress toward accomplishing within the next 6 months. Recipients were asked to select a goal that (a) was most important to them, (b) was personal to them and could be accomplished independently of the spouse, and (c) could reasonably be accomplished within the next 6 months.

*Attachment style.* Both recipients and partners completed the same abbreviated 26-item version of Brennan et al.'s (1998) ECR Scale as described in Study 1 (avoidance,  $\alpha = .87$  for recipient ratings and  $\alpha = .89$  for partner ratings; anxiety,  $\alpha = .89$  for recipient ratings and  $\alpha = .91$  for partner ratings), for use in supplementary analyses to test for potential moderating effects of attachment style.

#### *Time 1 Observed Assessments of Partners' Acceptance of Dependence and Recipients' Independent Functioning*

To ensure that completion of the measures described above would not influence couples' interaction behavior, each couple was asked to return to the laboratory approximately 1 week later for an observational session. As in Study 1, couple members were seated in a laboratory living room, the recipient was given an index card on which the personal goal that he or she had previously identified was listed, and the couple members were asked to discuss this goal. The interactions were unobtrusively videotaped for 10 min and later coded by two trained, independent observers who were unaware of study hypotheses. To assess interobserver reliability, ICCs (McGraw & Wong, 1996) were computed for all coded dimensions. Averages of the two observers' ratings were used in data analyses.

The same three behaviors representing the extent to which the partner was accepting of the recipient's dependency needs during the discussion were coded as in Study 1. These behaviors were (a) communication of future availability (ICC = .71), (b) avoidance of dealing with goal-related problems (ICC = .89), and (c) sensitive-responsive support provision (ICC = .80). A composite index of observed acceptance of dependence was computed by averaging the three ratings (with avoidance re-

verse coded), mean  $r(108) = .39, p < .001$ . This composite index was used in most data analyses (a) because Study 1 demonstrated that the three observed measures of dependency acceptance function similarly (despite being different ways of conceptualizing dependency acceptance), and (b) to simplify data analyses given that three reporters' perspectives on partners' dependency acceptance (i.e., partner reports, recipient reports, and observer ratings) were used in this investigation and more complex longitudinal change analyses were conducted. The same two behaviors representing the extent to which the recipient exhibited independent functioning related to his or her goal pursuit were also coded as in Study 1. These behaviors were (a) confident exploration of goals ( $ICC = .84$ ) and (b) avoidance of independent goal pursuit ( $ICC = .86$ ).

As additional assessments of the recipients' independent functioning, immediately after the goal discussion the following self-report assessments were obtained: (a) Recipients rated their perceived ability to achieve the goal (2 items;  $\alpha = .83$ ), (b) recipients rated their willingness to pursue the goal independently (2 items;  $\alpha = .81$ ), and (c) partners reported the recipients' independent functioning during the discussion by rating the extent to which four adjectives reflecting independence described their spouse during the time they were discussing the goal (e.g., independent, confident); each adjective was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all descriptive of my spouse*) to 5 (*extremely descriptive of my spouse*) ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

*Time 2 Follow-Up Assessments of Recipients' Independent Functioning*

Approximately 6 months after the observational session, couples were mailed a follow-up survey that included assessments of the recipients' independent functioning in general and an assessment of the recipients' accomplishment of the goal they had identified 6 months earlier.

*General assessments of independent functioning.* Recipients completed the same measure of perceived self-efficacy as at Time 1 ( $\alpha = .93$ ), and both recipients and partners reported the recipient's general engagement in independent exploration as they had at Time 1 ( $\alpha = .80$  for recipient report;  $\alpha = .87$  for partner report).

*Goal-specific assessment of independent functioning.* Recipients reported whether they had accomplished the personal goal that they had identified at Time 1 as being the most important goal they hoped to accomplish over the next 6 months.

*Time 2 Follow-Up Assessment of Partners' Dependency Acceptance*

For use in analyses to test the alternative hypothesis that initial levels of recipients' independent functioning would predict changes in their partners' dependency acceptance, a follow-up assessment of the partners' dependency acceptance was obtained. Recipients completed the same 10-item measure of responsiveness to needs that they completed at Time 1 ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Given its strong predictive validity in Study 1 and its strong association with other indexes of dependency acceptance (reported above), this measure

was selected as the assessment of dependency acceptance to repeat at the follow-up.

Results

*Hypothesis 1: Concurrent Assessments of Dependency Acceptance and Independent Functioning as a Replication of Study 1*

First, as a replication of Study 1, data analyses were conducted to examine associations between indicators of partners' acceptance of dependence and indicators of recipients' independent functioning at Time 1. Consistent with Study 1, results provided support for the hypothesis under investigation. Both recipient and partner reports of the partners' acceptance of the recipients' dependency needs were significantly associated with all indicators of the recipients' independent functioning, including the recipients' perceived self-efficacy ( $r[165] = .22, p < .01$ , for recipients' report of partners' dependency acceptance;  $r[165] = .21, p < .01$ , for partners' report of own dependency acceptance), the recipients' engagement in independent exploration as reported by recipients ( $r[165] = .22, p < .01$ , for recipients' report of partners' dependency acceptance;  $r[165] = .17, p < .05$ , for partners' report of own dependency acceptance), the recipients' engagement in independent exploration as reported by partners ( $r[165] = .17, p < .05$ , for recipients' report of partners' dependency acceptance;  $r[165] = .40, p < .001$ , for partners' report of own dependency acceptance), and the recipients' perceived ability to achieve independent goals ( $r[165] = .24, p < .001$ , for recipients' report of partners' dependency acceptance;  $r[165] = .23, p < .01$ , for partners' report of own dependency acceptance).

The results using the observed measures of partners' acceptance of dependency needs and recipients' independent functioning during a laboratory discussion activity also corroborated the results of Study 1. As shown in Table 5, recipients were more likely to confidently explore their independent goals and less likely to avoid independent goal pursuit when their partners accepted their dependency needs (by not avoiding the discussion of goal-related concerns and by providing sensitive and responsive support). Recip-

Table 5  
*Time 1 Associations Among Observed Partner Acceptance of Dependence and Observed Indicators of Independent Functioning During Goal Discussion (Study 2)*

Partner's acceptance of dependence (observed behavior)	Recipient's independence (observed behavior)	
	Confident exploration of goals	Avoidance of independent goal pursuit
Communication of future availability	.10	-.16*
Avoidance of dealing with problems	-.18*	.34***
Sensitive-responsive support provision	.27***	-.31***

Note.  $N = 165$ .  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

ients were also less likely to avoid independent goal pursuit when their partners communicated future availability to them during the discussion.

Results also indicated that all three assessments of partners' acceptance of dependence (partners' reports, recipients' reports, and observed acceptance behaviors during the discussion) predicted reported indicators of the recipients' independent functioning with regard to the goal discussed, including (a) recipients' reports of their perceived ability to achieve their specific goal, (b) recipients' reports of their willingness to pursue their goal independently, and (c) partners' description of their spouse as independent during the goal discussion (see Table 6).

### *Hypothesis 2: Dependency Acceptance Predicting Change in Independence Over Time*

#### *Data-Analytic Strategy*

Standard procedures outlined by Cohen and Cohen (1983) were used to test hypotheses regarding the prediction of changes in recipients' independent functioning over time from partners' acceptance of dependency needs. Specifically, hierarchical multiple regression procedures were used to examine predictors of regressed change. For each index of independent functioning obtained at both Time 1 and Time 2 (i.e., for recipients' perceived self-efficacy and for recipients' engagement in independent exploration), a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted predicting the follow-up assessments of independent functioning. On the first step of each equation, the Time 1 assessment of independent functioning was entered as a control variable in the prediction of the Time 2 assessment. The Time 1 assessment was expected to predict a substantial portion of variance in the follow-up (Time 2) assessment. However, it was expected that additional variance in the Time 2 assessment would not be accounted for by the Time 1 assessment. This additional variance represents the change in independent functioning from Time 1 to Time 2. To test the hypothesis that partners' acceptance of recipients' dependency needs influences this change in independent functioning over time by predicting above and beyond the Time 1 assessment, an index of the partners' dependency acceptance was entered on a subsequent step (on Step 2). First, a series of analyses was conducted predicting changes in recipient independence at

Time 2 from recipient reports of partner acceptance of dependence at Time 1. Then, analyses were conducted predicting changes in recipient independence at Time 2 from partner reports of their own acceptance of dependence at Time 1. Finally, analyses were conducted using the observed index of partners' dependency acceptance.

#### *Is There Evidence That Recipients' Reports of Their Partners' Dependency Acceptance Predict Changes in the Recipients' Independent Functioning Over Time?*

In regression analyses predicting follow-up (Time 2) assessments of recipients' independent functioning, the Time 1 assessments of independent functioning were entered first, followed by the recipients' Time 1 reports of their partners' dependency acceptance on the second step. As shown in Table 7, results indicated that Time 1 reports of recipients' independent functioning (i.e., recipients' perceived self-efficacy, recipients' reports of their own engagement in independent exploration, and partner reports of the recipients' independent exploration) were strong predictors of these assessments of the recipients' independent functioning 6 months later (see Step 1 for each dependent measure). As expected, recipients' reports of their partners' dependency acceptance also predicted change in the recipients' independent functioning over time (by predicting above and beyond the immediate ratings; see Step 2). As shown in the Step 2 data in Table 7, results revealed that partners' acceptance of recipients' dependency needs (as reported by recipients at Time 1) predicted increases in the recipients' perceived self-efficacy and engagement in independent exploration (as reported by the recipient) when assessed again 6 months later. Although dependency acceptance significantly predicted partners' follow-up reports of the recipients' engagement in independent exploration, it did not significantly predict changes in partners' reports of the recipients' engagement in independent exploration.

#### *Is There Evidence That Partners' Reports of Their Own Dependency Acceptance Predict Changes in the Recipients' Independent Functioning Over Time?*

Next, regression analyses were conducted predicting follow-up assessments of recipients' independent functioning from the part-

Table 6  
*Time 1 Associations Among Partner Acceptance of Dependence and Indicators of Recipient's Independent Goal Striving (Study 2)*

Partner's acceptance of dependence	Indicators of recipient's independent goal striving		
	Perceived ability to achieve goal (recipients' report)	Willing to pursue goal independently (recipients' report)	Description of spouse as independent during goal discussion (partner's report)
Recipients' report	.26***	.16*	.20*
Partners' report	.22**	.22**	.20*
Observed acceptance	.17*	.16*	.39***

Note.  $N = 165$ .

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 7  
*Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Changes in Support-Recipient Independence at Time 2 from Recipient Reports of Partner Acceptance of Dependence at Time 1 (Study 2)*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>sr</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	Total <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
T2 perceived self-efficacy (recipient report)							
Step 1						.57***	.57***
T1 perceived self-efficacy	0.85***	.75***	.07	.75***	.57		
Step 2						.02*	.59***
T1 perceived self-efficacy	0.82***	.73***	.07	.75***	.51		
T1 dependency acceptance	0.14*	.13*	.06	.30***	.02		
T2 engagement in independent exploration (recipient report)							
Step 1						.33***	.33***
T1 independent exploration	0.52***	.57***	.07	.57***	.33		
Step 2						.03*	.36***
T1 independent exploration	0.49***	.53***	.07	.57***	.27		
T1 dependency acceptance	0.18*	.18*	.08	.27**	.03		
T2 engagement in independent exploration (partner report)							
Step 1						.59***	.59***
T1 independent exploration	0.75***	.77***	.06	.77***	.59		
Step 2						.00	.59***
T1 independent exploration	0.74***	.76***	.06	.77***	.56		
T1 dependency acceptance	0.07	.05	.09	.23**	.00		

Note. *N* = 129. T = time.  
 \* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

ners' reports of their own dependency acceptance at Time 1. As shown in Table 8, Time 1 assessments of the recipients' independent functioning were significant predictors of these same assessments 6 months later at Time 2 (see Step 1 for each dependent

measure). Consistent with the results for recipient reports of the partners' dependency acceptance, partner reports of their own dependency acceptance at Time 1 predicted increases in the recipients' perceived self-efficacy and recipients' engagement in inde-

Table 8  
*Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Changes in Support-Recipient Independence at Time 2 from Partner Reports of Own Acceptance of Dependence at Time 1 (Study 2)*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>sr</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	Total <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
T2 perceived self-efficacy (recipient report)							
Step 1						.60***	.60***
T1 perceived self-efficacy	0.88***	.78***	.07	.75***	.60		
Step 2						.02*	.62***
T1 perceived self-efficacy	0.85***	.75***	.07	.75***	.54		
T1 dependency acceptance	0.11*	.13*	.05	.30***	.01		
T2 engagement in independent exploration (recipient report)							
Step 1						.34***	.34***
T1 independent exploration	0.54***	.59***	.08	.57***	.34		
Step 2						.03*	.37***
T1 independent exploration	0.52***	.56***	.08	.57***	.31		
T1 dependency acceptance	0.13*	.16*	.07	.18*	.02		
T2 engagement in independent exploration (partner report)							
Step 1						.64***	.64***
T1 independent exploration	0.79***	.80***	.06	.77***	.63		
Step 2						.00	.64***
T1 independent exploration	0.78***	.78***	.07	.77***	.49		
T1 dependency acceptance	0.04	.04	.07	.38***	.00		

Note. *N* = 129. T = time.  
 \* *p* < .05. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

pendent exploration (as reported by the recipient) 6 months later (see Step 2 data). Again, although dependency acceptance at Time 1 significantly predicted the partners' follow-up reports of the recipients' engagement in independent exploration, it did not significantly predict changes in partners' reports of the recipients' engagement in independent exploration.

*Is There Evidence That Observed Dependency Acceptance During a Prior Goal Discussion Predicts Changes in the Recipients' Independent Functioning Over Time?*

Next, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted predicting follow-up assessments of recipients' independent functioning from observations of the partners' dependency acceptance at Time 1. Although observed acceptance of dependence at Time 1 significantly predicted partners' reports of recipients' engagement in independent exploration at Time 2 ( $B = 0.38, \beta = .24, SE = .15, p < .05$ ), observed dependency acceptance did not significantly predict recipients' reports of engagement in independent exploration at Time 2 ( $B = -0.03, \beta = -.02, SE = .12, ns$ ), recipients' perceived self-efficacy at Time 2 ( $B = -0.08, \beta = -.07, SE = .15, ns$ ), or changes in independent functioning over time ( $B = -0.05, \beta = -.04, SE = .08, ns$ , for perceived self-efficacy;  $B = -0.06, \beta = -.06, SE = .10, ns$ , for recipients' reports of their own engagement in independent exploration; and  $B = 0.05, \beta = .03, SE = .11, ns$ , for partners' reports of recipients' engagement in independent exploration).

*Is There Evidence for the Alternative Hypothesis That Recipients' Independent Functioning Predicts Changes in Partners' Acceptance of the Recipients' Dependency Needs Over Time?*

Next, a series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted to test the reverse hypothesis: that individuals who are initially more independent and better at achieving their personal goals might have partners who become more accepting of their dependence over time because they are easier to support and care for. In this analysis, a follow-up (Time 2) assessment of partners' depen-

dependency acceptance (reported by recipients) served as the dependent variable. The Time 1 assessment of partners' dependency acceptance was entered on the first step of the equation, followed by the index of the recipients' independent functioning on the second step. Results provided no support for this reverse hypothesis. In all analyses, Time 1 reports of the partners' dependency acceptance (entered on Step 1) were strong predictors of this same assessment 6 months later ( $B = 0.72, \beta = .60, SE = .10, p < .001$ ). However, recipients' perceived self-efficacy at Time 1 (entered on Step 2) did not predict changes in their partners' dependency acceptance over time ( $B = -0.01, \beta = -.01, SE = .08, ns$ ), nor did recipients' reports of their engagement in independent exploration ( $B = -0.05, \beta = -.06, SE = .07, ns$ ) or partners' reports of recipients' engagement in independent exploration ( $B = 0.00, \beta = -.01, SE = .05, ns$ ).

*Hypothesis 3: Dependency Acceptance at Time 1 Predicting Specific Goal Accomplishment at Time 2*

To investigate the goal-specific assessment of the recipients' independent functioning at Time 2, analyses of variance were conducted examining whether the recipients who accomplished the personal goal they had identified 6 months earlier differed from those who did not accomplish their goal with regard to their partners' prior acceptance of their dependency needs. As shown in Table 9, recipients who had reported accomplishing their goal at Time 2 had relationship partners who were more accepting of their dependency needs 6 months earlier at Time 1 (as reported by both spouses and as observed in a prior discussion regarding this specific goal, although the effect for partner report was a marginal trend). Regression analyses in which Time 1 dependency acceptance was entered as a predictor of Time 2 goal accomplishment corroborated these effects ( $B = 0.11, \beta = .20, SE = .05, p < .05$ , for recipient reports of dependency acceptance predicting goal accomplishment;  $B = 0.10, \beta = .20, SE = .06, p < .10$ , for partner reports of dependency acceptance predicting goal accomplishment; and  $B = 0.14, \beta = .20, SE = .07, p < .05$ , for observed dependency acceptance predicting goal accomplishment).

Table 9  
*Analyses of Variances Examining Recipient's Personal Goal Accomplishment at Time 2 as a Function of Partner's Acceptance of Dependence at Time 1 (Study 2)*

Partner's acceptance of dependence	Was goal accomplished over 6-month period?				$\eta^2$	$F$	$df$
	No		Yes				
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			
Report <sup>a</sup>							
Recipients'	-0.19	0.99	0.17	0.74	.04	4.69	(1, 111) <sup>*</sup>
Partners'	-0.15	1.01	0.23	0.82	.04	3.22	(1, 111) <sup>†</sup>
Observed acceptance <sup>b</sup>	-0.05	0.83	0.24	0.59	.04	4.31	(1, 105) <sup>*</sup>

*Note.* Means are standardized values based on the composite acceptance of dependence variables used in data analyses.

<sup>a</sup> For recipients and partners,  $n = 57$  No reports and  $n = 54$  Yes reports. <sup>b</sup> For observed acceptance,  $n = 54$  No reports and  $n = 51$  Yes reports.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . <sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ .

### Supplementary Analyses: Moderating Effects of Attachment Style

Although the association between dependency acceptance and independent functioning is theoretically presumed to exist for all individuals, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test for any potential moderating effects of attachment style in the links described above (as in Study 1). For each analysis, main effect variables (dependency acceptance and attachment style) were entered on the first step of the equation to predict each indicator of the recipients' independent functioning and interaction variables (between dependency acceptance and attachment style) were entered on the second step of the equation. Analyses were conducted for each assessment of the partners' dependency acceptance (recipients' report, partners' report, and observed) and for partners' and recipients' attachment style as potential moderators. Specific to this study were analyses examining whether the attachment style of either partners or recipients moderated the established link between partner acceptance of dependence at Time 1 and changes in the recipients' independent functioning over time.

Results indicated that out of 122 tested interactions, only 7 were statistically significant. Four of these interactions were between indexes of partners' dependency acceptance and recipients' attachment avoidance, which predicted indexes of the recipients' independent functioning. Taken together, these interactions revealed that dependency acceptance was positively associated with the recipients' independent functioning when recipients were low in avoidance, but not when they were high in avoidance. Two additional interactions were between indexes of partners' dependency acceptance and partners' attachment avoidance, which predicted indexes of the recipients' independent functioning. One of these interactions indicated that partners' dependency acceptance strongly and positively predicted increases in recipients' self-efficacy when partners were low in avoidance (when partners were more secure), but not when partners were high in avoidance, perhaps because avoidant partners are not truly accepting of others' dependency needs. The other interaction indicated that observed dependency acceptance at Time 1 predicted goal accomplishment at Time 2 when partners were low in avoidance, but not when partners were high in avoidance. A final interaction was between partner anxiety and partner dependency acceptance, which predicted changes in recipient reports of engagement in independent exploration. Specifically, partner dependency acceptance predicted increases in recipients' independent exploration when partners were high in anxiety, but not when partners were low in anxiety. No other moderating effects of attachment emerged, and again the interactions that did emerge were not consistent across recipient, partner, and observer assessments of dependency acceptance, nor across reports of the recipients' independent functioning. Therefore, these analyses are not detailed further.<sup>3</sup>

## DISCUSSION

In two studies using multiple methods, this investigation provided support for the hypothesis that an acceptance of dependency needs by one relationship partner is linked to higher levels of autonomous functioning by the other relationship partner. Although an important postulate of attachment theory, this prediction had been untested in adult relationships. This prediction was tested

in Study 1 using a combination of self-report, partner-report, observational, and experimental methods. Study 2 both replicated these methods and extended them by following couples over a period of 6 months in order to examine changes in one person's independent functioning over time as a function of the partner's earlier acceptance of dependency needs.

Results of both studies provided strong converging evidence for the hypothesized link between acceptance of dependency needs and autonomous functioning. Both couple members' reports of the partners' acceptance of dependency needs were associated with general indicators of the others' independent functioning (e.g., the recipients' perceived self-efficacy, perceived ability to achieve independent goals, engagement in independent exploration) as reported by both couple members. In addition, in both studies, actual behaviors indicating an acceptance of dependency needs and independent functioning were examined in the context of couples discussing one couple member's independent goal strivings. Partner behaviors representing an acceptance of dependency needs (communicating future availability, lack of avoidance of dealing with problems, and sensitive-responsive support provision) were associated with recipient behaviors representing independent functioning and/or goal striving (confident exploration of goals, lack of avoidance of independent goal pursuit) during the discussion.

Study 1 added to these findings by showing that prior assessments of the partners' acceptance of dependency needs were associated with indicators of independent exploration during a laboratory puzzle task. Greater acceptance of dependence by one partner (as reported and observed during an earlier phase of the study) was associated with less attentiveness to and more rejection of unsolicited instrumental support (i.e., answers to the puzzle) from the partner, presumably because the recipient preferred to solve the puzzle on his or her own. However, greater acceptance of dependence was not associated with attentiveness to partner messages or to rejection of unsolicited support when the support was emotional (encouraging without revealing answers). Study 2 added to these findings by providing a unique test of the dependency-acceptance/autonomous-functioning hypothesis by following couples over a period of 6 months to examine changes in one couple member's independent functioning and goal striving as a function of the other's acceptance of dependency needs. Both partner and recipient reports of partners' dependency acceptance at Time 1

<sup>3</sup> A series of three-way interactions between partner attachment, recipient attachment, and dependency acceptance predicting independent functioning was conducted, and no significant interactions emerged. Additional analyses were conducted to test for gender and relationship length effects on all study variables. With regard to gender effects, female partners ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) reported more sensitivity to distress cues than did male partners ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(166) = 2.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and there was a nonsignificant trend for women ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) to be more likely to accomplish their 6-month goal than men ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ),  $t(117) = 0.78$ ,  $p < .10$ . In addition, men ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ , for recipients;  $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ , for partners) were higher than women ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ , for recipients;  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ , for partners) in attachment avoidance:  $t(185) = -3.73$ ,  $p < .001$ , for recipients;  $t(185) = -3.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , for partners. No other significant effects emerged, and results of reported analyses did not change when gender and relationship length were included as control variables.

predicted increases in the recipients' independent functioning 6 months later. In addition, both reported and observed assessments of partners' acceptance of dependence at one time point predicted a goal-specific indicator of the recipients' independent functioning 6 months later. Specifically, individuals whose partners were more accepting of dependence were more likely to have accomplished the independent goal they identified 6 months earlier.

The results of these studies collectively provide strong empirical support for the paradoxical hypothesis that accepting dependency promotes independence. That is, the results provide converging and convincing evidence for attachment theory's proposition that the acceptance of and responsiveness to a close other's attachment needs enables that person to explore the world confidently and independently. The major strength of this investigation lies in the numerous and varied ways the same hypothesis was tested and supported in two different studies. The consistency of the self-report, partner-report, and observational data lends credence to the proposition advanced. It is also noteworthy that partners' acceptance behaviors that were observed in one isolated discussion context were powerful enough to predict recipients' behaviors during a subsequent laboratory activity (Study 1) and over a period of 6 months (Study 2). This work showing that prior support behaviors have long-term implications for the recipients' functioning builds on prior work that has examined only immediate, short-term consequences of specific types of support provision in close relationships (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2004). It is also noteworthy that support for this dependency-acceptance/autonomous-functioning hypothesis emerged in samples of couples who were involved in well-established relationships, indicating that even partners who have been together for many years continue to exert an important influence on one another's personal functioning.

Although the data presented are correlational, confidence in the proposed direction of this effect is boosted by (a) longitudinal evidence demonstrating that initial assessments of a partner's acceptance of dependence significantly predicts changes in the recipient's independent functioning over a period of 6 months, (b) a lack of evidence for the alternative hypothesis that initial assessments of recipients' independent functioning may predict changes in partners' dependency acceptance, (c) longitudinal evidence that dependency acceptance predicts the accomplishment of a personal goal over a period of 6 months, and (d) experimental evidence indicating that people whose partners are accepting of their dependency needs exhibit independent functioning during a laboratory exploration activity (by being less receptive and attentive to task assistance). Nonetheless, future research is needed to establish the causal direction between dependency acceptance and independent functioning more conclusively by directly manipulating dependency acceptance in experimental studies and by consistently ruling out alternative causal models. The most obvious alternative model was tested in Study 2, and results provided no evidence in support of this alternative. However, given that the follow-up measures of dependency acceptance were limited in this investigation, these results should be replicated in other studies that involve equally rigorous assessments of dependency acceptance at both time periods. Studies that experimentally manipulate initial levels of independent functioning also are important for testing this alternative hypothesis more directly and for pinning down all existing causal connections between dependency acceptance and independent functioning.

Results exploring potential moderating effects of partner and recipient attachment style revealed very few significant effects in light of the large number of interactions tested. Moreover, the interactions that did emerge were not consistent (a) across recipient, partner, and observer assessments of dependency acceptance; (b) across reports of the recipients' independent functioning; or (c) across studies. This is consistent with attachment theory's postulate that the link between an attachment figure's dependency acceptance and the recipient's independent functioning is a normative process that should apply to all individuals. The few moderating effects that emerged in Study 1 involved interactions with attachment anxiety and revealed that the link between partners' dependency acceptance and recipients' independent functioning exists most strongly when partners (and in one instance, recipients) are low in anxiety. One interpretation of these findings is that highly anxious partners not only may accept others' dependency needs but may sometimes promote overdependence and restrict others' independent exploration in their efforts to keep partners close to them to meet their own attachment needs. This interpretation is consistent with research indicating that anxious adults tend to be compulsive and intrusive oversuppliers of care (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001; Kunce & Shaver, 1994) and often provide support that is neither needed nor desired. The measures of dependency acceptance used in the current investigation were not designed to assess extreme levels of dependency acceptance (e.g., the encouragement of dependency in the absence of need); however, this will be an important avenue to explore in future research.

The few moderating effects that emerged in Study 2 generally involved recipients' and partners' attachment avoidance. These interactions revealed that the link between partners' dependency acceptance and recipients' independent functioning exists most strongly when recipients (in some analyses) and partners (in other analyses) are low in avoidance. Perhaps attachment avoidance (on the part of either the partner or the recipient) interferes with recipients' ability to completely trust and rely on their partners' availability and acceptance of dependency needs. Indeed, partners who are high in attachment avoidance may not be truly accepting of others' dependency needs, and recipients who are high in attachment avoidance may not allow themselves to rely on their partner's support, given avoidant individuals' characteristic discomfort with intimacy and dependence on others. These interaction effects suggest that the dependency-acceptance/independent-functioning link may be attenuated when partners are not appropriately accepting of dependence and when recipients do not trust the partner's acceptance of their dependency needs. Of course, because these interactions were not stable or consistent within or between studies, they should be interpreted with caution until replicated in future research.

The major hypothesis advanced in this investigation, however, received consistent and convergent support both within and between studies. Taken together, the results of this investigation have a number of important implications. First, although it is paradoxical that the acceptance of dependency needs may promote autonomous functioning, this idea is consistent with other theorizing regarding the power of "positive dependence" in relationships, also referred to as "mature dependence" and "healthy dependence," which incorporates the human need for connection with others as a component of healthy functioning (Bornstein, 2005; Bornstein & Languirand, 2003; Solomon, 1994). Consistent with attachment theoretical propositions,

those writings also refute the widely held societal belief that dependence on others in adulthood is childish and unhealthy (see Bornstein [2005], Sutton [2001], and Fine & Glendinning [2005] for elaborations of societal messages that argue against dependence as a fundamental component of the human condition; see also Rasmussen [2005] for views on the “dependent prototype”). Although it is probably the case that too much dependency in relationships (e.g., overdependence involving seeking help in the absence of need or threat) can be unhealthy, the current research suggests that too little dependency in relationships may be equally unhealthy and disadvantageous. The results of the current investigation provide useful information regarding the importance of accepting and responding to the dependency needs of close relationship partners. This research suggests that one way to assist a relationship partner in reaching his or her full potential as the most capable, autonomously functioning individual he or she can be involves demonstrating an availability and accessibility when the individual feels threatened and when he or she is in need of comfort and support. The consideration of the concept of overdependence (either initiated by the individual and/or encouraged by his or her relationship partner) and its consequences for individuals and for relationships will be an important topic for future research.

Second, the results of this investigation support a major underlying tenet of attachment theory that has remained untested in adult relationships. This theory asserts that attachment dynamics are important and influential from the cradle to the grave; however, empirical evidence for many of the core theoretical assumptions regarding normative relationship dynamics in adulthood has been scarce as most adult attachment research has focused solely on identifying attachment style differences in personal and relationship functioning. Since Bowlby's (1969/1982, 1973, 1988) theoretical contribution, very little empirical work or theoretical elaboration has been advanced regarding the interworkings of attachment, exploration, and caregiving in adulthood. This investigation was intended to contribute to the literature in this regard.

Third, this research speaks to the importance of incorporating the function of intimate relationships into existing theories of human agency, such as self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2004), resource-control theory (Hawley, 1999), and action-control theory (Little, 1998; Little, Hawley, Heinrich, & Marsland, 2002). Self-determination theory already highlights the importance of social-contextual conditions that facilitate rather than undermine self-motivational processes, and consistent with attachment theory, it considers both autonomy and relatedness to be innate psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b). The results of the current investigation suggest that a detailed account of the function of intimate relationships in fostering intrinsic motivation and human agency would be a useful elaboration and extension of the theory.

The critical reader might be thinking the following: If being an independently and autonomously functioning individual requires the individual to have at his or her disposal a relationship partner who is accepting of his or her dependency needs, then that is not true independence. However, the position being advanced here (based on attachment theory) is that relationships are critical in the lives of human beings and that everyone needs to be able to depend on specific others in certain circumstances to be optimally functioning individuals—and the degree to which this need is accepted by a significant relationship partner reduces the frequency of this need. In this sense, a complete self-reliance in the absence of a

secure base to which to retreat when needed would not allow the most optimal functioning. The results of the current investigation demonstrate that adults who have relationship partners who are accepting of their dependency needs are more self-efficacious and less needy than adults who have relationship partners who are less accepting of dependency needs. These results are consistent with the research showing that children exhibit more independent exploratory behavior when they are raised in environments that are supportive of dependency needs (e.g., Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988) and with research showing that adolescents most easily transition into autonomously functioning individuals in the context of secure attachment relationships with their parents, not at the expense of them (Allen & Land, 1999; Moore, 1987; Noom et al., 1999).

This leads to the question of why individuals who have close relationship partners who are accepting of their dependency needs would be more self-efficacious and less needy than individuals who have relationship partners who are less accepting of dependency needs. Why is it that accepting dependence fosters independence instead of dependence? Attachment theory suggests that individuals function best when they have a secure base from which they can grow and explore as individuals—that a secure base gives individuals the confidence and courage they need to make independent excursions. It is easy for people to take risks, accept challenges, and try new things when they know that someone is available to comfort and assist them if things go wrong. A child or adult who feels confident in the availability and accessibility of his or her secure base does not have to cling to that base to the extent that one who lacks such confidence might. Bowlby (1988), the pioneer of attachment theory, claimed that “to remain within easy access of a familiar individual known to be willing and able to come to our aid in an emergency is clearly a good insurance policy—whatever our age” (p. 27). As implied in this quote, individuals who have no confidence in the availability and accessibility of the significant people in their lives in the event of an emergency should be less likely to take risks and forge new territory than individuals who are assured of their significant other's availability and accessibility. Just as an individual who is driving a car without an insurance policy may be reluctant to drive long distances or take unnecessary risks because there will be a heavy price to pay if something were to go wrong, so too might an individual be reluctant to take many (or any) independent excursions away from a relationship partner who does not provide good coverage in the case of an emergency. In this sense, the ready availability and accessibility of a relationship partner is necessary for a person to be an optimally functioning individual.

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