ISSN: 2717-3216 Volume 11, Issue 2 (2024) https://www.ijfpjournal.ir/

Journal of Family Psychology

Research Paper

10.22034/ijfp.2025.556366.1124

The Mediating Roles of Self-Disclosure and Positive/Negative Affects in the Relationship between Attachment Styles and Couples' Levels of Adjustment

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Article Info.

Received: 31 August 2024

Revised: 10 November 2024

Accepted: 24 December 2024

Keywords:

couple adjustment, secure attachment, insecure attachment, positive affect, negative affect, self-disclosure

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Abstract

Abstract

Couples' adjustment is recognized as an important factor in the physical and mental well-being of individuals and society. Couples' levels of adjustment are affected by several factors. Self-disclosure as well as positive and negative emotions are important factors in determining couples' levels of adjustment. The main objective of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of self-disclosure and positive/negative affects on the relationship between attachment styles and couples' levels of adjustment. A total of 450 married individuals (i.e., 286 females and 164 males) participated in the present study. They were asked to fill in the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (Rust et al., 1986), the Adult Attachment Inventory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the Marital Self-Disclosure Scale (Besharat, 2018), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988). The results showed that there was a significant positive relationship between secure attachment and couples' adaptation levels. The results also confirmed a significant negative relationship between avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles with couples' levels of adjustment. According to the findings of the present study, secure attachment style had a significant positive relationship with self-disclosure and positive affects. In addition, self-disclosure and positive affects had a significant positive relationship with couples' levels of adjustment. These results were inverse considering the negative affects and couples' levels of adjustment. In other words, there was a significant negative relationship between negative affects and couples' levels of adjustment. It was also showed that, self-disclosure had a mediating role in the relationship between secure attachment style and couples' adaptation levels. However, the mediating role of self-disclosure in the relationship between ambivalent attachment and avoidance with couples' levels of adjustment was not confirmed. It was also found that among the positive and negative affects, only negative affects played a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and couples' levels of adjustment.

Introduction

Couple adjustment corresponds to the capacity for adaptation or the ability to solve problems (Madathil & Benshoff, 2008), manage relationship tasks, and accept different roles based on the developmental tasks of each stage of the life cycle. The quality of couples' emotional relationships has a significant impact on their quality of life, and conversely, emotional relationship disruption, marital problems, and lack of interaction are associated with an increased risk of depression (Rao, 2017) and anxiety (Bajaj, 2017). The nature and quality of an individual's intimate relationships in adulthood are strongly influenced by emotional events in their childhood, especially child-caregiver interactions (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Research evidence has shown that how adults think, feel, and act in emotional relationships is influenced by their attachment styles; a secure attachment style is generally associated with relationship satisfaction and happier and more secure experiences (Schimmenti & Bifulco, 2015). Secure individuals have relationships filled with happiness, trust, and friendship. These individuals are more likely to find themselves lovable, while anxious individuals experience emotional fluctuations, jealousy, and obsessive worry about their partners. The hallmark of the avoidant style is self-reliance and emotional distance. Avoidant individuals hide feelings of insecurity, fear intimacy (Shaver & Hazan, 1987), deny distress, behave more hostilely, and are more sensitive to rejection (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). Studies have shown that secure attachment is associated with more appropriate marital functioning (Beeney et al., 2019) and healthier emotion regulation, and less withdrawal during marital interactions (Brandão et al., 2020). Other research has shown that adult attachment style is significantly correlated with marital cohesion, sexual behavior, partner care, marital adjustment and satisfaction, partner support, conflict management, stability, and relationship termination (Mark et al., 2018). Moreover, individuals with secure and ambivalent attachment are more self-disclosing, and individuals with secure attachment are more flexible in reciprocal self-disclosure compared to individuals with ambivalent and avoidant attachment (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). On the other hand, studies have shown that secure attachment predicts positive emotions and ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles predict negative emotions (Deniz & Işik, 2010). Based on existing research evidence, in the present study, the relationship between attachment styles and couples' adjustment levels is first examined. Then, considering the research findings confirming multiple relationships between attachment styles and couples' levels of adjustment on the one hand, and the relationships of self-disclosure and emotions on couples' adjustment levels and attachment styles, the mediating role of self-disclosure and positive and negative emotions in the relationship between attachment styles and couples' levels of adjustment is also examined.

Method

The research design was correlational and structural equation modeling. The statistical population included all married individuals active in cyberspace. The research sample included 450 volunteers who participated in the present study by completing an online questionnaire (i.e., convenience sampling method). The instruments to collect data were the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (Rust et al., 1986), the Adult Attachment Inventory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the Marital Self-Disclosure Scale (Besharat, 2018), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988).

Findings

In Table 1, the mean, standard deviation, and characteristics of the score distribution for each variable are reported. The skewness and kurtosis indices were in the range of 1 to -1, indicating that the distributions of the research variables were normal.

Table 1. Central tendency and dispersion indices of attachment styles, self-disclosure, positive and negative emotions, and dyadic adjustment

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Secure attachment style	13.99	3.67	25	5	.170	.05
Avoidant attachment style	12.96	3.86	24	5	.13	-.31
Ambivalent attachment style	12.46	3.94	25	5	.42	-.08
Self-disclosure	38.54	10.80	60	12	-.38	-.25
Positive emotions	35.30	7.04	50	10	.43	-.18
Negative emotions	24.47	8.15	50	10	.43	-.41
Dyadic adjustment	26.35	17.38	79	0	.82	.11

To examine the relationship between attachment styles, self-disclosure, positive and negative emotions, and couples' levels of adjustment, Pearson's correlation test was used. It is important to note that the GRIMS questionnaire indicates the presence of marital problems; a higher score on this scale indicates a lower level of couple adjustment. The results of the Pearson correlation ($P < 0.01$, $r = -0.178$) showed that secure attachment style had a significant negative relationship with couple problems. The relationship between avoidant attachment style and marital problems ($P < 0.01$, $r = 0.168$) was positive and significant. Moreover, the relationship between ambivalent attachment style and marital problems ($P < 0.01$, $r = 0.256$) was positive and significant. The results of the Pearson correlation coefficients showed that the relationship between the two variables of self-disclosure and marital problems was significant ($P < 0.01$, $r = -0.531$). The results of Pearson correlation coefficients showed that the relationship between the two variables of positive emotions and marital problems was significant ($P < 0.01$, $r = -0.264$). In addition, the relationship between the two variables of negative emotions and couple adjustment is significant ($P < 0.01$, $r = 0.304$). The conceptual model was developed in such a way that secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles were considered exogenous variables, self-disclosure, and positive and negative emotions were considered mediating variables, and couple adjustment levels were considered endogenous variables. To test the fit of the assumed models to the data and to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effect coefficients, the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) method was used. The path model fit indices are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Model-fit indices

Model	RMSEA	SRMR	GFI	CFI	X^2/df	df	P	Chi^2
Modified	.094	.040	.923	.963	4.99	6	.000	29.99

The direct effect coefficients of secure attachment style ($P < 0.05$, $\beta = 0.129$) on self-disclosure were positive and significant. Avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles had no direct effect on self-disclosure. The direct effect coefficients of secure attachment style ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = 0.167$) on positive emotions were positive and

significant. Furthermore, the direct effect coefficients of ambivalent attachment style ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = -0.144$) on positive emotions were negative and significant. The direct effect coefficients of secure attachment style ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = 0.137$) on negative emotions were positive and significant. In addition, the direct effect coefficients of avoidant attachment style ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = 0.182$) on negative emotions were positive and significant. The direct effect coefficients of ambivalent attachment style ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = 0.427$) on negative emotions were positive and significant. The direct effect coefficients of secure attachment style ($P < 0.05$, $\beta = -0.107$) on marital problems were negative and significant. Avoidant attachment style had no direct effect on marital problems. The direct effect coefficients of ambivalent attachment style ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = 0.125$) on marital problems were positive and significant. Positive emotions had no direct effect on marital problems. The direct effect coefficients of negative affect ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = 0.166$) on marital problems were positive and significant. Finally, the direct effect coefficients of self-disclosure ($P < 0.01$, $\beta = -0.474$) on marital problems were negative and significant.

Conclusion

Individuals with a secure attachment style cope with distress by acknowledging it and referring to others for material and emotional support; they modulate negative emotions in problem-solving (Mikulincer et al., 1990). Secure individuals have relationships filled with happiness, trust, and friendship; they are more likely to perceive themselves as lovable (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). Researchers have shown that adults with a secure attachment style can maintain their emotional and physical balance when their romantic partner is distressed to reduce their partner's distress (Butner et al., 2007). They are more likely to have self-advocacy and identity stability, thereby reducing maladaptive habits such as triangulation. They tend to have more harmonious, effective, and supportive relationships with others; therefore, they are likely to have more support in their relationships. Finally, considering these factors, individuals with secure attachments are likely to use effective strategies to express their needs and moderate conflict with others, thereby reducing the amount of conflict.

On the other hand, self-disclosure is the ability of individuals to reveal information about themselves to others to establish close and intimate relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973). It plays an important role in developing intimacy between partners (Masaviru, 2016). Self-disclosure allows individuals to experience a sense of emotional intimacy with others by sharing meaningful aspects of the self (Farber, 2013). Furthermore, if both partners self-disclose, the intimacy created will help them overcome their conflicts. Accordingly, disclosure can likely increase the desire and opportunity of the parties to resolve conflicts by creating a sense of intimacy, closeness, and recognition of the needs and emotions, increasing the desire and opportunity for explicit interaction focused on couple problems, and increasing the levels of adjustment. Moreover, self-disclosure provides an opportunity for individuals to recognize and validate their opinions, attitudes, and beliefs (Farber, 2013). Thus, if the disclosure is done at an optimal level, it may lead to the recognition of the individuals' needs, and subsequent receptive feelings of approval or empathy, which leads to increased levels of adjustment.

In addition, people with more positive emotions experience fewer negative emotions than those with less positive emotions, which may help them resolve relationship conflicts more effectively (Simpson et al., 2006). Positive affect, as an evolved adjustment, can expand individuals' ability to think and act (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). More importantly, this expansion can increase an individual's social resources and skills, which leads to better outcomes such as developing close relationships in life. Furthermore, adults with higher positive affect retain positive information more actively; that is, high positive affect reflects a protective bias (Xu et al., 2015).

Thus, adults with higher positive affect are less sensitive to rejection, evaluate their partner's behaviors more positively (Orth et al., 2008), and are more likely to feel satisfied with their relationship.

Regarding the role of the mediating variables confirmed in this study, according to attachment theory, attachment styles explain individual differences in the ability to acquire skills related to self-disclosure. For example, secure individuals have greater self-disclosure capabilities; in contrast, individuals who score high in avoidant and anxious attachment view themselves as unworthy and others as unacceptable. Behaviorally, these individuals may be at greater risk for interpersonal issues related to self-disclosure and therefore have less opportunity to develop and practice self-disclosure skills (Bradford et al., 2002). The pattern of self-disclosure in individuals with secure attachment can be explained by their emphasis on intimacy and closeness in interpersonal relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Since the interactional goals of these individuals are to create intimacy and emotional closeness to others (Shaver & Hazan, 1988), they are prone to self-disclosure to others and to respond to the self-disclosure of others. The internal working models and interactional goals of individuals with secure attachment also lead to responsiveness to self-disclosure. Regarding the mediating role of positive and negative emotions, insecurely attached individuals generally have a negative view of themselves and the world (Bowlby, 1982), score higher in neuroticism (Blackwell et al, 2017), and are prone to negative affect (Panfile & Laible, 2012). Neuroticism is the tendency to experience negative affect (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Negative affect plays a mediating role in the relationship with ambivalent attachment style. The symptoms of individuals with ambivalent and anxious attachment styles may be due to an excessive focus on others and negative social cues (Lopez, 1995), which increase negative affect, anxiety, and depression.

Acknowledgements

The researchers appreciate all participants of the study.

Conflict of interest

This article is taken from the Master's thesis in Clinical Psychology, University of Tehran, and there is no conflict of interest.

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