

An investigation of the relationship between dimensions of attachment style and marital satisfaction among housewives in 2016

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Abstract

Background: Marital satisfaction is a lofty objective in the realization of a desirable family and acts as a fundamental contributor to the health and development of family members. One of the most important factors influencing marital satisfaction is attachment style. This study aimed to determine the relationship between attachment style and marital satisfaction in housewives.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted on 200 housewives referring to health centers of Birjand in 2016. The participants were selected by stratified cluster sampling method. The data collection instruments consisted of the standardized Marital Satisfaction Questionnaires and Collins and Read's Adult Attachment Style Scale. The data were analyzed in SPSS software (version 19) using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation coefficient, and stepwise regression analysis. The significant level was set at values lower than 0.05.

Results: The anxious attachment style ($R=0.28$) and avoidant attachment style ($R=0.32$) were predictors of marital satisfaction. There was a significant negative correlation between marital satisfaction and anxious attachment style ($r=0.289$), while the correlation between marital satisfaction and avoidant attachment style was significantly positive ($r=0.183$).

Conclusions: As attachment styles are contributory to marital satisfaction, counselors can build on couple therapy approach to have an effective role in modifying attachment styles of the couple and solving their conflicts both before and after marriage.

Keywords: Attachment styles; Marital satisfaction; Housewives

1. Introduction

Family is a highly important social institution whose significance and roles have been considered by religious scholars, sociologists, and psychologists. Family is the core wherein one's identity is formed. It is a place that affects an individual not only through his/her childhood and adolescence but also after marriage in marital life (1).

Stability and solidarity of family life lies with sustainable marital relationship (1, 2). Marital satisfaction is an overall assessment of the marital relationship. In fact, marital satisfaction is a positive and enjoyable attitude that

a couple have of different aspects of their marital relationship (3). Statistics show that marital satisfaction is not easily achieved (2-4), and that any instability in marital satisfaction not only disturbs the internal peace of the couple but also threatens family sustenance and stability. This influences family functioning and adversely affects the child's personality. Therefore, an individual's satisfaction with marriage constitutes his/her satisfaction with the family and his/her overall satisfaction with life (5, 6).

As marital relationship should be based on love, cooperation, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and bilateral sacrifice of the couple, it seems that attachment

style is a major contributor to marital satisfaction – which is shaped in one's childhood and continues to shape thereafter according to the environment wherein one grows (7, 8). Attachment is a mutual emotional bond that can establish security and determine a person's mental health (3, 8-10).

Studies focused on developmental pathology indicate associations between early negative experiences in academic, familial, and adulthood backgrounds, psychological problems, and impaired marital networks (5, 11). In terms of the classic attachment theory, adults with the secure attachment style have a positive feeling to themselves and a positive perception of others, and are more confident and successful in society (12). Adults with dismissive-avoidant attachment style view themselves as self-sufficient and tend to reject vulnerability, claiming that they do not require close relationships and avoid intimacy (13).

Adults with anxious-preoccupied attachment type also tend to have less positive views about themselves. They often doubt their worth as a spouse and often blame themselves for the attachment figure's lack of responsiveness (14).

Research on the relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction indicate that subjects with the secure attachment style have lower levels of marital and interpersonal problems as well as greater happiness than subjects with avoidant and anxious attachment styles (5, 9, 15).

Given the importance of marital satisfaction in family functioning, this study aimed to investigate the association between attachment styles and marital satisfaction among housewives referring to the health centers of Birjand city, eastern Iran. The results can help take preliminary steps towards establishing healthy and constructive marital relationship between spouses. It can contribute to family stability and solidity and help specify attachment styles of people before marriage in order to orient them to secure attachment style. The results can also be contributory to recognize happiness among people and attain further happiness and joy.

2. Methods

This descriptive, analytic study was conducted in 2016 on 200 housewives referring to health centers of Birjand city. Sampling was through stratified sampling method such that the city was first divided into two regions in terms of the sociocultural context and two centers were subsequently selected from each region. From each center, 50 samples were selected by simple randomization method using accidental digit table and lists of visiting people (i.e., households' file numbers). The inclusion criteria consisted of being a housewife, married, literate to read and write. To collect data, the participants completed Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) and Collins and Read's standard Adult Attachment Style Survey through self-report (16-17).

The MSQ is developed by Salehy Fadardy and includes 49 items on four scales including attraction (12 items), understanding (12 items), attitude (13 items), and investment (12 items). The answers are scored on 4-point Likert scale from 1=disagree to 4=strongly agree. The scale was tested on 142 married men and women in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad by Salehy Fadardy (16). After collecting the data, the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed by Cronbach's alpha as an indicator of internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha for marital satisfaction was 0.88 in total and 0.64 for attraction, 0.64 for understanding, 0.67 for attitude, and 0.65 for investment scales.

In the present study, Collins and Read's Adult Attachment Style Scale was used to evaluate attachment styles. The scale was developed in 1990 by Collins and Read and was subsequently revised by them in 1996. Attachment theory is the theoretical foundation of this test. The scale examines the way an individual assesses his/her communication skills and style of intimate relationship. It contains 18 items where the respondents express their agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale consists of three subscales: *Depend* (D) measures the extent to which an individual takes confidence in and relies on others, *Close* (C) measures the extent to which an individual is intimate with and emotionally close to others, and *Anxiety* subscale (A) measures the extent to which an individual is worried about being rejected or abandoned by others. Each subscale contains 6 items. The test-retest reliability coefficient of this scale for each of the three subscales of Close, Depend, and Anxiety are reported as 0.68, 0.71 and 0.52, respectively. In Iran, the reliability of the scale using test-retest in terms of correlation between

two runs on a sample size of 100 subjects within one month indicated no significant difference between the two administrations for A, D and C subscales in RASS. The reliability coefficient was 0.95 (18).

The data were analyzed in SPSS software (version 19) using descriptive statistical tests and one-way ANOVA, stepwise regression, and Pearson correlation coefficient. The significant level was set at $P < 0.05$.

3. Results

The sample in this study included 200 housewives referring to health centers of Birjand in 2016. Their mean age was 30.81 ± 7.21 and their spouses' mean age was 34.24 ± 7.18 years. The mean age of marriage was 21.13 ± 3.51 and mean duration of married life was 9.25 ± 6.87 years. The overall attachment mean score was

3.04 ± 0.34 and the wives' overall marital satisfaction score was 3.12 ± 0.5 (Table 1).

The relationship between demographic characteristics and the total score and scores of dimensions of attachment styles are depicted in Table 2.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of variables under study

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Range of variations
Overall score of attachment style	3.04	0.34	1-5
Overall score of marital satisfaction	3.12	0.5	1-4
Secure attachment style	3.20	0.48	1-5
Avoidant attachment style	3.13	0.5	1-5
Anxious attachment style	2.81	0.88	1-5

Table 2. The association between demographic characteristics and dimensions of attachment styles

Variables	Attachment styles				
	Secure (Mean±SD)	Anxious (Mean±SD)	Avoidant (Mean±SD)	Total attachment (Mean±SD)	
Education level	Basic Learning as Adult	$3.05 \pm 1.05^{ab*}$	2.5 ± 0.76	3.05 ± 0.67	2.87 ± 0.42
	Primary	2.97 ± 0.39^a	2.61 ± 1	3.05 ± 0.58	2.88 ± 0.42
	Secondary	3.23 ± 0.43^{ab}	2.89 ± 0.84	3.08 ± 0.71	3.07 ± 0.30
	High school dropout	3.16 ± 0.56^{ab}	2.70 ± 1.04	3.27 ± 0.50	3.04 ± 0.32
	High school diploma	3.16 ± 0.43^{ab}	2.93 ± 0.76	3.09 ± 0.42	3.06 ± 0.34
	Associate	3.22 ± 0.61^{ab}	3.05 ± 0.95	3.17 ± 0.55	3.14 ± 0.33
	Bachelor	3.44 ± 0.41^b	2.82 ± 0.84	3.13 ± 0.44	3.13 ± 0.26
	Master and above	3.47 ± 0.46^{ab}	1.75 ± 0.61	3.4 ± 0.41	2.90 ± 0.14
	Level of significance	$P=0.01$	$P=0.05$	$P=0.5$	$P=0.06$
Husband's educational level	Basic Learning as Adult	-	-	-	-
	Primary	2.93 ± 0.44^a	2.67 ± 0.84	2.96 ± 0.72	2.85 ± 0.41
	Secondary	3.18 ± 0.33^{ab}	2.98 ± 0.88	3.16 ± 0.46	3.11 ± 0.32
	High school dropout	3.24 ± 0.39^{ab}	2.58 ± 0.90	3.08 ± 0.33	2.97 ± 0.26
	High school diploma	3.14 ± 0.47^{ab}	2.93 ± 0.95	3.15 ± 0.50	3.07 ± 0.34
	Associate	3.47 ± 0.45^b	2.40 ± 0.84	3 ± 0.40	2.95 ± 0.46
	Bachelor	3.25 ± 0.55^{ab}	2.85 ± 0.81	3.21 ± 0.52	3.10 ± 0.28
	Master and above	3.54 ± 0.54^b	2.53 ± 0.57	2.93 ± 0.44	3.08 ± 0.26
	Level of significance	$P=0.07$	$P=0.2$	$P=0.08$	$P=0.6$
Husband's occupation	Unemployed	2.89 ± 0.58	3.20 ± 0.85	2.83 ± 0.70	2.97 ± 0.44
	Retiree	3.33 ± 0.66	2.97 ± 0.36	3.70 ± 0.55	3.33 ± 0.26
	Worker	3.09 ± 0.44	$3.01 \pm 0.1.03$	3.10 ± 0.51	3.07 ± 0.36
	Employee	3.31 ± 0.54	2.84 ± 0.83	3.12 ± 0.35	3.09 ± 0.28
	Self-employed	3.20 ± 0.41	2.61 ± 0.8	3.15 ± 0.56	2.99 ± 0.36
	Level of significance	$P=0.05$	$P=0.08$	$P=0.08$	$P=0.17$
Income (1000 tomans)	< 300	2.95 ± 0.49^a	3.29 ± 0.99	2.89 ± 0.51	3.04 ± 0.42
	300-700	3.20 ± 0.42^{ab}	2.67 ± 0.80	3.16 ± 0.50	3.04 ± 0.29
	700-1,000	3.16 ± 0.51^{ab}	2.75 ± 0.95	3.14 ± 0.57	3.02 ± 0.40
	> 1,000	3.33 ± 0.47^b	2.75 ± 0.80	3.16 ± 0.40	3.08 ± 0.28
	Level of significance	$P=0.01$	$P=0.08$	$P=0.1$	$P=0.7$

a and b are indices showing results of post-hoc Tukey test. Similar indices for each variable indicates that individuals are in the same category in terms of that characteristic.

Table 3. Correlation between attachment styles and marital satisfaction

Attachment styles	Satisfaction	Marital satisfaction dimensions			
		Attraction	Understanding	Attitude	Investment
Secure	0.079	0.058	0.057	0.100	0.069
Avoidant	0.183 **	0.158 *	0.141*	0.200**	0.121
Anxious	-0.289	-0.349	-0.254	-0.318	-0.046

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $P \leq 0.001$ **Table 4.** Stepwise regression analysis to predict marital satisfaction according to attachment styles

Statistical index Source	Regression coefficient	Standard error	β	T	Level of significance
Anxious	0.28	0.03	-0.268	-3.91	0.001
Avoidant	0.32	0.06	0.144	2.10	0.03

Post-hoc Tukey test showed a significant difference between secure attachment style mean score among respondents with primary and bachelor educational degrees ($P=0.02$). However, there was no significant differences between other academic groups.

There were significant differences between the secure attachment style mean scores of respondents whose spouses had primary education and those whose husbands had associate degrees ($P=0.03$) and between respondents whose spouses had primary education and those whose husbands had a master's degree or above ($P=0.02$). Income was effective on the secure attachment style where there was a significant difference between those with incomes below 300.000 and those with an income above 1.000.000 tomans ($P=0.01$).

Pearson correlation coefficient showed a significant negative correlation between anxious attachment style and duration of marriage ($r = -0.145$) and a positive and significant relationship between secure attachment style and marriage duration ($r=0.180$) at the significant level of 0.05. However, there were no statistically significant associations between attachment styles and age, age of spouse, and number of children.

Additionally, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to evaluate the relationship between attachment style and marital satisfaction. There was a significant negative correlation between marital satisfaction and anxious attachment style ($r=0.289$) and a significant positive

correlation between marital satisfaction and avoidant attachment style ($r=0.183$). There were significant positive associations between avoidant attachment style and attraction and understanding constructs at the significant level of 0.001 and attitude construct at 0.05 level. There were negative associations between anxious attachment style and attraction, understanding, and attitude constructs at the significant level of 0.05 (Table 3).

Stepwise regression analysis showed that the anxious attachment style ($R=0.28$) and avoidant attachment style ($R=0.32$) were predictors of marital satisfaction, whereas the secure attachment style was discarded from the regression equation as it did not have enough predictive power (Table 4).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to determine the relationship between attachment styles and marital satisfaction in housewives who referred to health centers of Birjand.

The results showed that the anxious and avoidant attachment styles were predictors of marital satisfaction and that the anxious attachment style was of a stronger predictive power. This is in line with findings of Fahimi's study where the anxious attachment style had the strongest predictive power for marital satisfaction (5). Nonetheless, the secure attachment style was not a proper predictor of marital satisfaction, a finding which is in line with results of Pour Rahimi and Shaker's study (19). This finding

highlights the importance of early relationships in establishing manners of communication in adulthood. In other words, the attachment style of an individual is formed in childhood and is predictive of his/her future relationships.

In the present study, there was a significantly negative correlation between anxious attachment style and marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with research findings from Mohammadi et al. (3), Tabatabai (2), Banse (20), Shiver et al. (21), Rajaei (22), and Lopez (23). Anxious attachment refers to an individual's sense of fear from being abandoned by others. It is known that the less an individual's anxiety, the greater his/her marital satisfaction (8). People with high levels of anxious attachment style are in doubt about their self-evaluation and afraid that their partners may abandon them. They have less positive views about themselves, and are skeptical of their value as a partner in romantic relationships. In other words, this attachment style is associated with self-activation patterns in different relations. That is, individuals with this style tend to present a weak communication pattern and are worried of being unloved or abandoned. People following this style have a positive evaluation of others and devote significant importance to approval by others. They tend to be worried that their partner may fail to like them or continue to live with them. These people tend to have a poor communication model and are worried that their partner may not like them or leave them.

To explain this finding, it should further be added that people with anxious attachment style provoke excessive psychological trouble for their spouse, somehow limiting the freedom and autonomy of the spouse because of control and permanent adhesion they exert onto the spouse. It is because such people have anxiety and the sense of constant abandonment as well as intense interest and a constant sense of unfaithfulness on the part of the partner. Tolerance of the behavior and characteristics of the ambivalent spouse rises problems for the partner leading to cold relationship and marital dissatisfaction in the long run (3, 5, 19, 24).

In the present study, there was a significant positive correlation between avoidant attachment style and marital satisfaction. This is not consistent with the results of Lopez (23), Ahmadi (25), Khojasteh Mehr (24), and Mohammadi's (3) studies. In the avoidant attachment style, the individual strictly avoids close and intimate

relationships, and subconsciously dismisses the relationship as soon as s/he feels that the relationship is getting intimate.

This finding can be justified given the differences between men and women in terms of emotions and interpersonal relationships. Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests a general difference between men and women in that women put greater importance in interpersonal emotions and relationships. While attachment and autonomy are desirable objectives for both genders in the adult life, the social norms motivate attachment in women and autonomy in men. Therefore, in women with avoidant attachment style, emotions and interests reduce the intensity of difference coming from their husbands' attachment style and is less detrimental to marital satisfaction. However, in men with avoidant attachment style, a combination of masculine features and characteristics of the avoidant attachment style creates a greater distance between the couple and decreases marital satisfaction (15, 22).

Given the fact that attachment styles are predictive of marital satisfaction, one can propose educational projects for mothers across the country with regard to manners of appropriate interaction with children. Also, preventive and therapeutic measures should be developed and applied in the context of attachment theory. Finally, it is better during counseling sessions before marriage to assess the couples' attachment styles and evaluation of life to help the couple with correct choices of life partner and improve marital satisfaction.

5. Conclusion

According to the results of this study, the preliminary developmental experiences of people in families play a fundamental role in the formation of attachment styles, intimate relationships and the way to cope with marital issues. These need further attention. Besides, counselors can build modification of attachment styles in matching spouses and solving matrimonial problems between couples.

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