

A PREDICTIVE MODEL OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

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Abstract: The main goal of the article is to explore the possible predictors of romantic relationship satisfaction. The model includes attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles, and emotional expressivity. The instruments to measure the former three and romantic relationship satisfaction were adapted to the Bulgarian cultural context. A total of 308 subjects were included in the study on a random basis. The data show that the secure attachment style, the emotional deprivation schema, and the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style predict romantic relationship satisfaction. The results create an opportunity for professionals in the field of psychology to use new counselling approaches.

Keywords: predictors; relationship satisfaction; styles; schemas; emotional expressivity; Bulgaria.

Introduction

Intimate relationship lies at the core of human existence. To a large extent, the quality of that relationship defines the quality of one's life. The subjective experiences of closeness and connectedness with the romantic partner give rise to highly valued benefits like mutual trust and validation, empathy, and acceptance.

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In the process of the relationship, when partners experience different preferences, goals, or motives, conflict can arise. How to communicate while resolving disagreements is often identified as an important problem in couples. Managing and resolving conflict is difficult and can be a significant source of stress. Thus, identifying what constitutes effective communication during conflict is critical to help couples resolve problems and sustain their relationships. Even the most satisfying relationship can be put at risk by unresolved conflicts and by the stress associated with them.

Some of the above effects have been investigated in different countries and, to some extent, in the Bulgarian cultural context (Petrov 2011). However, these effects have not been studied in depth among the Bulgarian population. The novelty offered in this work includes new variables, such as early maladaptive schemas and emotional expressivity.

Relationship Satisfaction

In 1947, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as „a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not simply the absence of disease or ailment,“ thus formulating a broad, inclusive, and positive view of health. In 1975, the Organization went one step further by considering that people’s health also incorporates sexual health, defined as „the integration of somatic, ethical, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of the human being including sexuality.“ Likewise, they stated three essential elements for sexual health: (a) the chance to enjoy sexual activity and reproductivity in balance with personal and social ethics; (b) the exercise of sexuality without fears, shame, guilt, myths, or fallacies, i.e. without psychological or social factors that interfere with sexual intercourse; and (c) the performance of a sexual activity free of organic disorders, diseases, or alterations that hinder it. Thus, the WHO considers sexual health an integral part of general health and quality of life, including human rights.

Relationship satisfaction is a broadly studied concept in the field of psychology, but it has not been tested on a Bulgarian sample in the current model combining attachment and conflict resolution styles, as

well as emotional expressivity and early maladaptive schemas. An additional aim of this paper is to compile a battery of practical assessment instruments for the Bulgarian population.

Attachment Styles

Bowlby's attachment theory focuses on the bonds between infants and their caregivers. Nevertheless, as pointed out by adult attachment researchers, Bowlby argues that attachment plays a fundamental role throughout the life cycle, and that attachment behaviour is a characteristic of human beings „from birth to death“ (Bowlby 1979). Consistent with this view, Morris (Morris 1982) claims that, because of the primacy and depth of the early attachment relationship between child and caregiver, this bond will likely serve as a prototype for later intimate relationships. Morris further points out the striking parallels between anxious attachment and poor choice of romantic partners, and dysfunctional marriage. The idea that attachment principles extend beyond childhood and early childhood also receives support from theoretical works focused on the definition and description of attachment relationships. Ainsworth (Ainsworth 1963), for example, proposes criteria for defining attachment relationships throughout life. Specifically, he suggests that attachment relations are a particular type of affective bond, i.e. they are ties of a relatively long duration characterized by the desire to maintain closeness with a partner who is seen as a unique individual, not interchangeable with any other. Compared with other affective ties, the distinct features of attachment are that the individual obtains or seeks closeness in the relationship, and that, if he/she finds it, it awakens feelings of comfort and security in him/her.

Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMS)

In a nutshell, early maladaptive schemas are thought of as always dysfunctional, self-sabotaging patterns of thought and emotion that begin at an early age and are repeated throughout life. According to this definition, maladaptive behaviours are not components of but responses to the schemas. The latter cause the behaviour, but it is not part of them. However, Cid prefers to call them 'Maladaptive Early

Schemas,' defining them as „large and persistent themes made up of memories, emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations that refer to the analysis of oneself and the relationships with others“ (Cid 2009: p. 282). These originate during childhood and are elaborated throughout the individual's life, being significantly dysfunctional. EMS originate from reality-based representations and may initially generate responses adapted to them. Their dysfunction shows up later in life when those perceptions or appreciations are already adjusted to reality. The schemas can have a different degree of severity and rigidity or resistance to change. The severity can be defined by the number of situations that trigger them. The severity and resistance to change depend on the age at which the schemas were generated, on the number of significant figures that generated them, and on the number of situations that influenced them. For example, a schema generated by both parents from the age of four or five and throughout childhood will be more severe and rigid in comparison with one generated by a single parent, or only by a teacher, in a single episode when a person was 12 years old (Young & Klosko 2007).

Conflict Resolution Styles

Everyday conflicts are understood as situations in which there are disagreements between at least two individuals, partners, or family members. The most frequent topics that couples usually argue about include finances, caring for children and dependents, housework, lifestyle, leisure time, freedom, family relationships, sexuality, communication, and dissatisfaction in the couple (Luján 2006). Nevertheless, knowing the couple's conflicting issues is just as important as knowing how to manage them (Reboredo, Mazadiego & Villegas 2011). As for the resolution strategies that couples adopt, it is crucial to promote the continuity of the family projection and the well-being of its members. Numerous studies show the correlation between conflicts and marital satisfaction. The frequent use of behaviours based on attacking, making demands, controlling, or rejecting conflict increases marital dissatisfaction and causes a high frequency of criticism, hostility, and actions of harm towards the partner (Birditt et al., 2010). Unresolved conflict and the lack of social and communication skills usually lead

to divorce. Additionally, another line of work shows the impact of interparental conflicts on the development of children, warning of how the use of destructive strategies in parents affects the interaction with their children (Cummings & Davies 2010), leading to greater inconsistency and inefficiency in the educational guidelines, to a decrease in the emotional quality of relationships, and to a low perception of parental support and school adjustment (Musitu, Martínez & Murgui 2006), among other short- and long-term effects.

Emotional Expressivity

Emotions are present in everyone's life, practically in everything we do. We are usually with a friend because we feel comfortable with them, we visit our grandparents because we love them, and we go to the beach at the weekend intending to have a good time. We get angry when things do not work out for us, and we are happy and satisfied when we succeed in what we have set out to do. We are afraid to fly by plane or visit the dentist's office. We feel grieved and hurt when a relative dies, or happy when the person we are attracted to reciprocates. There are days when we can work or study with interest and enthusiasm and others when we only feel lazy or annoyed. These and other everyday situations reveal the influence that emotions exert on our lives.

Emotional expressivity is a variable which has not been widely studied in the context of relationship satisfaction, but it is an important novelty which has the potential to advance its understanding.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this article is to explore relationship satisfaction from the perspective of attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, emotional expressivity, and conflict resolution styles. In order to test these connections, an adaptation of the scales for all variables has been performed. A multiple regression analysis demonstrates the predictive power of the independent variables for the satisfaction of a relationship.

Hypotheses

1. Attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, emotional expressivity, and conflict resolution styles predict relationship satisfaction to a significant degree.

2. The secure attachment style, the emotional deprivation schema, and the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style are the most powerful predictors of relationship satisfaction.

Method and Results

Instruments

Four questionnaires needed to be adapted, namely the Attachment Style Questionnaire – Short Form (Chui & Leung 2016), the Young Schema Questionnaire – Short Form (Young & Brown 2005), the Expressivity Questionnaire (Milusheva 2020) the Conflict Resolution Style Questionnaire (Kurdek 1994), and the Relationship Satisfaction Assessment (Hendrick 1988). Translation from English to Bulgarian was done by two independent psychologists, followed by one back translation to English. All item translations were discussed among the experts who took part in the translations until the final versions were agreed.

The questionnaires were distributed using the online platform Google Forms. The 5-point Likert scale was applied for all items (from „completely untrue for me“ to „completely true for me“). The subjects included in this study were 308 individuals aged 14 to 74 years with a mean age of 38.47 (mode = 28, median = 35, SD = 12.58). There were 79 male (26%) and 229 female (74%) participants. The selection criteria were whether the participants currently are or have been in a romantic relationship, and whether they were 16 years old or older.

Table 1. *Distribution of the Subjects According to Age, Gender, and Education*

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Age	Under 25	5	32	37
	26–35	36	84	120
	36–45	20	45	65
	46–55	7	39	46
	Above 55	11	29	40
Education	Primary			3
	Secondary			41
	Bachelor			68
	Master			173
	Doctor			23
Total				308

Psychometric Characteristics of the Scales

Psychometric Characteristics of the Attachment Style Questionnaire – Short Form (Chui & Leung 2016)

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal reliability of the scale for the Bulgarian sample. The current investigation results demonstrate the instrument's high reliability in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context. The α score for the whole questionnaire is .62. The lowest subscale, Secure Attachment Style, shows .43 in terms of reliability, while the highest, Avoidant Attachment Style, tops at .84 (Table 2). The other two subscales, Preoccupied and Dismissing attachment styles, show respective reliability of .84 and .66.

Table 2. Cronbach Alpha of the Attachment Style Scales

Attachment Scales	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach α	Cronbach α of the original scale
Secure	3	4.0639	.64562	.427	.77
Avoidant	5	2.4526	.85843	.843	.87
Preoccupied	3	6.9708	2.81153	.780	.81
Dismissing	4	3.3945	.77904	.664	.71
Total	15	2.9997	.42809	.618	.79

Psychometric Characteristics of the Young Schema Questionnaire – Short Version (Young & Brown 2005)

Young’s questionnaire on early maladaptive schemas is widely used worldwide and adapted for many different cultures. The Bulgarian version has also been validated and adapted for practitioners’ use. After intensive email correspondence, an explicit permission to use the adapted Bulgarian version was not achieved. A free-to-use English test was applied for the current investigation and with fixed time limits. The items were translated and processed by language experts in Bulgarian following the standards of double translation to Bulgarian and back to English.

Table 3. Cronbach Alpha of the Early Maladaptive Schema Scales

Early Maladaptive Schemas	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach α	Cronbach α of the original scale
Emotional deprivation	5	1.7305	1.00590	.854	.88
Abandonment	5	2.4864	1.10348	.825	.87
Defectiveness	5	1.6156	.75078	.796	.91
Emotional Inhibition	5	2.0312	1.01574	.863	.87
Enmeshment	5	1.7857	.81552	.737	.78

Subjugation	5	2.3156	.89101	.763	.82
Entitlement	5	2.9682	.85748	.585	.67
Total	35	2.1242	0.9167	.907	.82

Psychometric Characteristics of the Expressivity Questionnaire (Milusheva 2020)

The Expressivity Questionnaire was originally developed at the University of Berkeley. It was adapted and the Bulgarian version was offered freely by Zhenya Milusheva. It was the only instrument out of the five used in the investigation, which was granted for direct use by the Bulgarian author who adapted it. The values obtained in the study show high reliability of the scales in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context (Table 4).

Table 4. Cronbach Alpha of the Emotional Expressivity Scales

Scales	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach α	Cronbach α of the original scales		
					1	2	3
Positive Emotional Expressivity	4	5.8125	1.0363	.728	.71	.65	.68
Negative Emotional Expressivity	6	5.3382	1.0579	.676	.72	.68	.68
Impulsive Emotional Expressivity	6	3.9594	1.0687	.680	.73	.78	.82
BEQ	16	5.0367	1.0543	.735	.88	.85	.85

Psychometric Characteristics of the Conflict Resolution Style Questionnaire (Kurdek 1994)

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to define the internal consistency of the Conflict Resolution Style Questionnaire. The results given show a high degree of reliability of the instrument. The

operation was necessary as the items were cross-checked after translation between two independent English and Bulgarian experts.

Table 5. *Cronbach Alpha of the Conflict Resolution Style Scales*

Conflict Resolution Styles	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach α	Cronbach α of the original scale
Conflict Engagement	4	2.3945	.84979	.754	.82
Positive Problem Solving	4	3.8263	.64874	.621	.68
Problem Withdrawal	4	2.4667	.88986	.754	.66
Problem Compliance	4	2.4610	.63338	.760	.80
Total	16	2,7871	.7553	.671	.74

Psychometric Characteristics of the Relationship Satisfaction Assessment (Hendrick 1988)

Hendrick’s questionnaire is the only unifactorial instrument in the study. It is represented by seven items on a single scale, all measuring general relationship satisfaction on the basis of common characteristics such as physical attraction, emotional satisfaction, and fulfillment of needs.

Table 6. *Cronbach Alpha of the Relationship Satisfaction Scale*

RSA	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach α	Cronbach α of the original scale
Total	7	3.8785	.88931	.91	.92

Results

We used a multiple regression analysis encompassing the attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles

and emotional expressivity as independent variables, and romantic relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. Three significant predictors were found. These are the secure attachment style, the emotional deprivation schema, and the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style. They alone predict 35.8% of the variance of relationship satisfaction. The secure attachment style predicts relationship satisfaction in a positive direction ($B=.130$), but the effect is weak. Emotional deprivation and problem withdrawal foresee the satisfaction in a negative way. The emotional deprivation beta is very strong ($B=-.642$), while the problem withdrawal style has a respective beta of $-.181$.

In theory, when having a secure attachment style, one would freely explore the world and all of its manifestations. As a result, relationship satisfaction would logically be greater, since such individuals connect with others easily, openly and sincerely, having no anxious or avoidant behaviours to hinder the bond. The opposite is true when analyzing emotional deprivation and problem withdrawal. Being emotionally deprived, one would give less love and tenderness and would express feelings in an inhibited way. This, together with problem withdrawal, would create dissatisfaction in the partner. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. *Multiple Regression Model for Relationship Satisfaction*

Variables	B	T	Collinearity	Sig.
Secure Attachment Style	.130	2.705	1.102	.007
Emotional Deprivation	-.642	-10.061	1.115	.000
Problem Withdrawal	-.181	-3.549	1.051	.000
Adj.R ²	.358			

Discussion and Conclusion

Attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles, and emotional expressivity were tested as predictors of relationship satisfaction. Three significant predictors were found. The specific significant variables which play a predictive role are the secure attachment style, the early maladaptive schema of emotional deprivation, and the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style. They explain 35.8% of the variance of relationship satisfaction. The other two variables – emotional deprivation and problem withdrawal – show a negative effect (respectively $B = -.642$ and $B = -.181$). It could be concluded that these three variables are important in explaining satisfaction in couples. Being emotionally deprived would lead to a lower tendency to show love and tenderness, and one would be hesitant to satisfy these basic romantic needs. Withdrawing from a problem would be another issue when it comes to satisfaction, as it would hinder any probable agreements when a conflict occurs. The opposite is true for the secure attachment style as it adds to the general satisfaction ($B = .130$). Individuals with such an attachment style are open to discover and benefit from open communication and contact with the partner. As expected and hypothesized beforehand, the independent variables play a moderate role as predictors of relationship satisfaction. It could be theoretically justified that secure attachment plays a significant role, because when individuals form such a style, they freely explore the world and connect with others with ease. From an early age, these individuals show readiness to form a particular autonomy and detach from the parents. That allows them to create new experiences. At an older age, such grown-ups have a better chance to form a romantic relationship. Even more, they connect to a level with less perceived anxiety and avoidance, which leads to better chances of a perceived satisfaction from the relationship. The latter implies that such individuals show affection, unconditional love, and acceptance. These factors contribute to the general physical, mental, and sexual satisfaction as a whole.

On the other hand, the emotional deprivation schema plays an important role in the prediction of relationship satisfaction as well, al-

though the direction in which it contributes is negative (-.642). Being emotionally deprived to a certain level creates obstacles as it hinders important psychological experiences, such as showing unconditioned love and affection. In return, such individuals are rigid and distanced, demonstrating fear of emotional commitment. That makes some of the most central needs unfulfilled and comes as a risky predictive factor for the longitude of a relationship as a whole.

Finally, the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style contributes to a lesser extent to relationship satisfaction and in a negative way (-.181). When withdrawing, an individual practically offsets opportunities to clarify relationship tension, which might lead to a greater frequency of arguments in the dyad. No healthy relationship could be constructed in a manner where the partners withdraw from looking in the same direction and avoid specific adjustments through the course of their relationship.

Limitations of the Study

There is no scientific work in the field of psychology without limitations. The same is true for the present one. To start with, data collection hides some risks. Self-reports rely on reflexivity and subjective evaluation of the respondents.

The period in which this study was carried out was stressful for everybody due to the COVID-19 crisis and restrictions. In such challenging times, people might have explicitly been emotional or at least different from their usual selves. A possible replication of the study would be helpful to check the stability of the patterns observed, which is considered an exciting perspective for future work.

Conclusion

The academic benefit of this work is focused on broadening the understandings of interpersonal processes between individuals in couples. It might be useful to extend the investigation to further analyses that encompass cultural differences and longitudinal design in order to investigate how the present findings change over time. The predictive model presented in the article aimed at distinguishing the

specific variables which predict relationship satisfaction. The secure attachment style, the emotional deprivation schema, and the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style were statistically demonstrated as important factors for relationship satisfaction. These findings can contribute to a better understanding of internal dynamics in romantic relationships and give insights for psychotherapists who work with couples.

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