Attachment styles and marital adjustment of Turkish married individuals

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of adult attachment styles and gender in predicting marital adjustment of married individuals. Measures of adult attachment and marital adjustment were administered to 204 (134 female, 70 male) married people. Using multiple linear regression analysis, it was found that avoidance and gender were significant predictors of marital adjustment. The findings were discussed in the light of literature.

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1. Introduction

The association between adult attachment and different aspects of marital relationships has been the topic of an impressive body of research. Studies have consistently showed that individual differences in self-reported adult attachment are related to the functioning and the quality of marital relationships (Feeney, 1999; for an overview Fuller & Fincham, 1995; Gallo & Smith, 2001).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed the adult attachment theory based on the principles of Bowlby and Ainsworth’s attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1969) to explain how early attachment relationships between children and their primary caregiver lead to individual differences in psychological (cognitive/affective) and social dimensions of and expectations about adult romantic relationships. Based on Ainsworth’s typology, Hazan and Shaver developed a simple three category of forced choice self-report measure of attachment style to classify individuals into the three mutually exclusive adult attachment styles; secure, anxious (or anxious/ambivalent) and avoidant. Since the development of this original forced-choice measure of attachment styles, many attempts have been made to improve the measurement of adult attachment styles among which a two-dimensional, continues measures of attachment style has been accepted as the most influential line of studies (e.g. Bartholomew, 1990; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Brennan et al. (1998) analyzed sixty attachment subscales and found two factors of avoidance and anxiety. These two dimensions underlying adult attachment were also labeled as model of self (or attachment anxiety) and model of other (or attachment avoidance). Anxiety is defined as
the extent to which individuals worry that others may not be available or could abandon them and avoidance is defined as the extent to which individuals desire limited intimacy and prefer to remain psychologically and emotionally independent (Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002). In the present study, attachment was conceptualized as having anxiety and avoidance dimensions and measured by Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) since these dimensions were found to be more accurate and valid than the categorical measures (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

Despite the variety of measures employed, studies provided a consistent support for the importance of caregivers’ behavior in the development of working models and effects of working models on later relationships. For example, Collins (1996) investigated whether adults with different attachment styles explain and interpret dating relationship events in ways consistent with their beliefs and expectations about themselves and others. She found that secure adults provided more positive explanations; indicate confidence in their relationship and in their partner’s love. On the other hand, insecure individuals reflected more negative interpretations, viewed their partner’s behavior more negatively and reported more emotional distress. In marriage, securely attached individuals tend to report higher levels of marital satisfaction than either avoidant or ambivalently attached individuals (Fuller & Fincham, 1995). The results of more recent studies also yielded consistent findings that secure attachment style was positively associated with marital satisfaction (Banse, 2004; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001). All these studies seemed to suggest that attachment style of the individuals play a critical role in marital relationships.

In addition to literature findings associated with the relationship between adult attachment style and marital adjustment, gender could be discussed in terms of its relationship with the marital adjustment as well. Studies show that gender is one of the significant variables of marital adjustment/satisfaction with contradictory findings. For instance, the role of gender in explaining the marital satisfaction of married individuals was found to be insignificant in Kallampally, Oakes, Lyons, Greer, and Gillepie’s (2007) cross-cultural study whereas Berg, Trost, Schneider, and Allison (2001) found significant relationship between gender and relationship satisfaction.

Our aim in the present study was to examine the relationship between adult attachment and marital adjustment of married individuals. More specifically, present study investigated how well anxiety and avoidance attachment dimensions and gender predicted the marital adjustment of married individuals.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 204 (134 female, 70 male) married individuals who volunteered to participate in the study. They were recruited from Ankara, the capital of Turkey through a convenient sampling procedure. Women’s ages ranged from 22 to 59 with a mean of 35.9 (SD = 7.00). Men’s ages ranged from 25 to 61 with a mean of 38.9 (SD = 8.48). The percentages of educational level of women were 7.5 percent high schools, 78.4 percent universities, and 14.2 percent postgraduates. For men, percentages of educational level were 5.7 percent high schools, 84.3 percent universities, and 10 percent postgraduates. The number of children both for men and women ranged from no children to three children with a median of two for women and one for men. Length of marriage for women ranged from two to 396 months with a mean of 128.1 (SD = 95.92) and for men ranged from six to 396 months with a mean of 130.0 (SD = 102.41).

2.2. Measures

Demographic variables. Participants provided information on their background. All respondents indicated their sex, age, educational level, number of children, and length of marriage on a Demographic Data Sheet.

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). It is a 32-item instrument developed by Spanier (1976) to assess the quality of the relationship as perceived by married or cohabiting couples. The instrument measures four aspects of the relationship; dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and affection expression. The DAS is a Likert-style questionnaire with 5- to 7-point response formats. It also includes two items which answered as “yes or no”. The majority of items use a 6-point format, with options scored from 0 to 5, and ranging from either always agree to
always disagree or all the time to never. The DAS is presented as a scale that could be used either by utilizing the total score or by using the subscales separately as a measure of marital adjustment. The reliability coefficients were reported as .96 for the entire scale, and ranging from .73 to .94 for the subscales. Related to criterion validity, the correlation between the DAS and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was reported as .86 among married couples (Spanier, 1976).

In Turkey, the translation, reliability and validity studies of the DAS were carried out by Fışiloğlu and Demir (2000). The reliability scores of subscales of the Turkish version of the DAS were as follows: Dyadic satisfaction: .83; Dyadic cohesion: .75; Dyadic consensus: .75; Affectional expression: .80. Cronbach alpha coefficient for entire scale and split-half reliability coefficient was found .92 and .86, respectively. The DAS was found positively correlated with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test ($r = .82$). In the present study, the total scores of DAS were used and the Cronbach alpha coefficient for entire scale was found as .83.

Experiences in Close Relationship (ECR). This self-report measure of attachment style developed by Brennan et al. (1998) are constructed on the basis of the two major dimensions; anxiety and avoidance, consisting 36 items, 18 items for each dimension. Each item is rated on a seven-point Likert scale. In the original study, Cronbach alpha coefficients were reported as .94 for the avoidance dimension and .91 for the anxiety dimension. The ECR was also used to categorize participants into the four attachment styles. Participants in the “secure” category are expected to be scored low on both anxiety and avoidance dimensions. The “fearful individuals” have high scores on both anxiety and avoidance. The “dismissing individuals” show the highest avoidance and low anxiety. The “preoccupied individuals” are expected to be scored the highest on anxiety and lowest on avoidance.

The reliability and validity of the Turkish version of ECR were examined by Sümer (2006). Sümer reported that items related to the avoidance dimension had .90 and anxiety dimension had .86 alpha coefficients. Sümer also found that two-dimensional structure of ECR was more predictive than four attachment styles of ECR in Turkish culture. In the present study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients were found as .85 for the avoidance dimension and .82 for the anxiety dimension.

2.3. Procedure

After receiving the individuals’ consent, the researchers administered the scales to the participants individually in their work and home settings. Before administration, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and the anonymity and the confidentiality were guaranteed. Each administration was completed in one session lasting approximately 30-35 minutes.

2.4. Analysis of Data

Before analyzing the data, data screening procedures for the present data were completed to assess the applicability of the multiple regression analysis. For that reason, initially, its underlying assumptions (outlier tests, normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and multicollinearity) were checked. In addition, correlation coefficients were computed between each predictors and criterion variable. After checking all assumptions and meeting the requirements, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess how well anxiety and avoidance attachment dimensions and gender predict the marital adjustment of married individuals. Gender was treated as a dichotomous variable. All statistical analyses were performed with utilizing SPSS 15.0 for Windows.

3. Results

The correlation coefficients between the criterion variable and predictors were presented in Table 1. As seen in the table, there were significant correlations: individuals who had higher avoidance and anxiety scores reported lower marital adjustment scores ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$; $r = -.15$, $p < .05$). Anxiety attachment scores were found to be positively related to the individuals’ avoidance scores ($r = .17$, $p < .01$). Gender was positively associated with marital adjustment and avoidance scores ($r = .13$, $p < .05$; $r = .17$, $p < .01$).
Table 1.
Correlations among Variables and Predictors of Marital Adjustment

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<td>2. Avoidance</td>
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<td>3. Anxiety</td>
<td>-.15***</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<td>4. Gender (male)</td>
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Note: *p < .001, **p < .01, ***p < .05, N = 204

The results of regression analysis indicated that multiple linear regression coefficient was significant ($R = .43$, $R^2 = .18$, $F(3, 200) = 15.00$, $p < .001$) (see Table 1). The multiple correlation coefficient between the linear combination of three predictors and marital adjustment was .43. These three predictors explained 18 percent of the variation in marital adjustment. Semi-partial coefficients, defined as the proportion of variance uniquely explained by the predictor variables, for “avoidance”, “anxiety”, and “gender” were .15, .01, and .04 respectively. The “avoidance” and “gender” significantly contributed to the explained variance in marital adjustment. According to the table, for one unit increase in avoidance scores, marital adjustment scores decrease by .39 units. Also, males had higher marital adjustment scores than females.

4. Discussion

The current study is specifically designed to investigate the association between adult attachment style and the marital adjustment of married individuals. Results indicate that married individuals with lower avoidance scores tend to believe that they have higher perceived marital adjustment. This finding replicates the previous studies pointing to the association between attachment and marital satisfaction. In these studies, it has been well-documented that securely attached people (comfort with closeness and low anxiety over relationship) reported greater marital satisfaction (Banse, 2004; Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006; Feeney, 1994, 1999) and greater family cohesion and adaptability (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999). When the contributions of both attachment dimensions to relationship were evaluated, Noftle and Shaver (2006) found that avoidance was negatively correlated with, and the strongest predictor of relationship quality. In another study, Feeney (1994) reported that spouses’ anxiety was negatively, wives’ comfort (contrasts avoidant attachment) was positively related with satisfaction.

Results indicated that males to be higher marital adjusted than females. Similar with the traditional gender roles in marital relationship of Asian Indian Americans discussed in the cross-cultural study of Kallampally et. al. (2007), Turkish gender roles also reflect the collectivist/traditional aspects of a marital relationship, and this might have a contribution to explain higher scores of male participants in marital satisfaction in the present study. This is because males might gain benefits of a traditional marriage relationship (Cheung, 2005), which is less flexible in discussing the equality between the spouses, and talking about needs and expectations; and limiting emotional expression. As Hamamcı (2005) argued that females are more likely to show self-disclosure and closeness in a marriage relationship than do males according to traditional Turkish gender roles, results of the present study might come to suggest that females are more likely to experience marital dissatisfaction when they have avoidant attachment style.

These results may give some clues about the characteristics of married clients for helping professionals. For instance, counselors/therapists might help married individuals who experience conflicts with partners or struggling in their marital relationship by exploring their attachment styles and preparing a treatment plan which takes these factors into account. This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, generalizability of the findings is limited and majority of the participants is female and has a bachelor’s degree. Secondly, the findings of this study are based on self-reports of the individuals, in further studies the spouses’ self-reports could be included and made some comparisons among the spouses’ self-reports. This also reduces response tendencies (e.g., consistency bias, social desirability). Lastly, longitudinal studies are necessary to understand more fully how attachment might bring about a change in marital adjustment.

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References


