



# Pathways between attachment and marital satisfaction: The mediating roles of rumination, empathy, and forgiveness



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## ABSTRACT

This study explored a path to marital satisfaction based on attachment theory. For this purpose, a sample of 208 Korean married teachers completed a survey on adult attachment, rumination, empathy, forgiveness, and marital satisfaction. Through structural equation modeling (SEM), a path in which adult attachment leads to marital satisfaction, mediated by dispositional forgiveness, was found. I also found a distinctive path by which anxious and avoidant attachment negatively affect forgiveness and marital satisfaction through excessive rumination and lack of empathy. These results suggest that the most accurate model of the relation between attachment, rumination, empathy, forgiveness, and marital satisfaction involves analyzing direct, indirect, and gender effects. Marriage counselors and therapists can use these results to gain a deeper understanding of the underpinnings of marital life and, ultimately, help reduce the very high divorce rate in Korea.

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## 1. Introduction

The divorce rate of South Korea is 47.4%, which was the third highest rate after the U.S. (51%) and Sweden (48%) among the countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2007. The rate of divorce rate has steadily increased for the past 10 years worldwide, causing a number of problems. Divorce, which can be predicted by marital satisfaction, requires considerable attention due to its effects on the physical and emotional wellbeing of children and partners (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Marriage is a long-term relationship that can be viewed through attachment theory. Attachment refers to the bond formed with primary caregivers in infancy and affects relationships throughout life (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1977). The internal working model formed by attachment is the representation we have about the world around us and ourselves and provides a useful framework to understand the motivation or stimuli that affect our responses and emotions (Lawler-Row, Hyatt-Edwards, Wuensch, & Karremans, 2011). Attachment affects marriage at its foundation: the development of a relationship. Many studies have explored attachment as an explanatory factor in satisfaction with romantic relationships or marriage (Feeney, 1999; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Meyers & Landsberger, 2002; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999).

Forgiveness has been suggested as an important component of marital satisfaction. Forgiveness has recently been recognized as a variable that affects marital satisfaction by resolving conflicts (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; McCullough, 1997; Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006) and is now being used in couples and family therapy (Murray, 2002; Reed & Enright, 2006). Furthermore, some scholars believe that attachment is the strongest predictor of forgiveness because attachment and forgiveness are parallel concepts (Burnette, Taylor, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2007; Burnette, Davis, Green, Worthington, & Bradfield, 2009; Chung, 2013; Lawler-Row, Younger, Piferi, & Jones, 2006). Therefore, attachment theory may help us understand the differences in perceiving others in a positive light and the disposition and ability to forgive though an examination of the characteristics of specific attachment styles (Lawler-Row et al., 2011).

There is a theoretical continuity in attachment styles across the life span (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Adult attachment, which is the representation of relationships with others in adulthood, has two insecure dimensions: anxious and avoidant (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Anxious attachment is characterized by an over-immersion in relationships and fear of rejection or abandonment; people with anxious attachment use ruminative coping strategies when they experience attachment threats or are overwhelmed by negative emotions about relational difficulties (Burnette et al., 2009; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Adults with an avoidant attachment style are uncomfortable with emotional intimacy and are generally

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uncomfortable in a relationship or coping with emotions (Slade, 1999). They exhibit a lack of empathy from suppressing their own emotions and seeking to distance themselves from others to avoid the frustration caused by failures in acquiring support and help from others (Burnette et al., 2009; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). From an evolutionary perspective, the fact that people still tend to respond with retaliation or revenge rather than forgiveness (Burnette et al., 2009; McCullough, 2008), despite increasing evidence of the importance of forgiveness, can be seen as an inadequacy of emotion regulation reflected by attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance).

Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000) pointed out the importance of emotion regulation while reviewing the determinants of marital satisfaction. Emotion regulation in the context of relationships with others requires empathy—being able to infer others' emotional states—which is closely associated with attachment formation in early childhood (Chung, 2012) and has received attention as the proximal determinant of forgiveness and marital satisfaction (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). In addition, rumination—the representative mechanism of negative emotion regulation—contributes to predicting forgiveness in close relationships (Burnette et al., 2007; McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari et al., 2005).

Both rumination and lack of empathy have been shown to cause a variety of relational problems and obstruct pro-social behavior and motivation (Chung, 2013; Hoffman, 1981; McCullough et al., 1998); hence, direct and indirect associations of rumination and lack of empathy with forgiveness and marital satisfaction can be inferred. Therefore, this study explored the associations between attachment, rumination, empathy, forgiveness, and marital satisfaction based on attachment theory in a sample of married Korean adults. I postulated that the relationship between insecure attachment and reduced forgiveness would affect the satisfaction of married adults through excessive rumination and lack of empathy. In addition, I verified the model invariance across gender for the hypothesized model.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

The marital satisfaction of a dual-income couple is challenged by role conflicts and time constraints, and there are many dual-income couples in the occupational cluster of teachers in South Korea (Kim, 2001); therefore, this study surveyed married teachers in the Joongbu region. A public announcement of the study was made by the Graduate School of Education, which networks with each school in the area. Of the 280 questionnaires distributed, 222 were returned with informed consent for participation in the survey. There were 208 completed questionnaires (142 women and 66 men), which represented a 74.29% usable response rate. The participants were aged from 27 to 62 years old ( $M = 41.24$ ,  $SD = 7.56$ ), were in their first marriage, and had been married for three months to 45 years ( $M = 13.57$  years,  $SD = 8.87$ ). The participants' educational background included graduates of two-year colleges (3.8%), graduates of four-year universities (55.3%), and master's degree recipients (40.9%). The teachers taught in kindergartens (12.5%), elementary schools (37.5%), middle schools (27.4%), high schools (16.3%), and special schools (6.3%).

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Attachment

The 36-item Experience in Close Relationship Scale (ECR<sup>1</sup>; Brennan et al., 1998), translated into Korean, was used to measure

anxious and avoidant attachment. The ECR consists of an 18-item scale that measures attachment anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned") and an 18-item scale that measures attachment avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down"). Responses are given on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The ECR has been validated with a Korean undergraduate sample; the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .89 for the anxiety subscale and .90 for the avoidant subscale (Moon, 2007). Cronbach's alpha coefficients in this study were .89 for the anxiety subscale and .88 for the avoidance subscale.

#### 2.2.2. Forgiveness

The Korean translation of the 10-item Trait Forgivingness Scale (TFS; Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005) was used to measure forgivingness. Sample items include "I can usually forgive and forget an insult," and "I am a forgiving person." Participants rate their agreement with each item ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The TFS had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .79 in a sample of Korean undergraduates (Chung, 2013). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .73.

#### 2.2.3. Rumination

One of the nine subscales, "focus on thoughts/rumination," of a Korean translation of the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ; Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2002) was used to measure rumination. Generally, rumination, or excessive focus on thoughts, refers to thinking about the feelings and thoughts associated with a negative event. There are four items on the selected subscale (e.g., "I want to understand why I feel the way I do about what I have experienced" and "I am preoccupied with what I think and feel about what I have experienced"). Participants rated each statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). In two samples of Korean undergraduates, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .68 (Kim, 2004) and .71 (Jeon & Hong, 2012). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .70.

#### 2.2.4. Empathy

The Korean translation of the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES; Mehrabian, 2000) was used to measure empathy. Sample items include "Unhappy movie endings haunt me for hours afterward," and "I cannot feel much sorrow for those who are responsible for their own misery." Participants rate their agreement with each item on a nine-point rating scale from  $-4$  (*disagree very strongly*) to 4 (*agree very strongly*). Confirmatory factor analysis of the 27-item Korean-BEES supported a five-factor structure (emotional involvement, emotional contagion, appreciation of the feelings of unfamiliar others, imaginary empathy, and empathic concern). This scale was validated in a sample of Korean undergraduates; the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .89 in that study (Chung, 2012) and .88 in the current study.

#### 2.2.5. Marital satisfaction

The version of the 6-item Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983) adapted for the Korean language and culture was used to assess marital satisfaction. Sample items include, "We have a good marriage," and "My relationship with my partner is very stable." Participants answer the first five items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The sixth item, degree of happiness in marriage, is answered on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely low*) to 10 (*extremely high*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in a sample of Korean couples was .96 and .97 for husbands and wives, respectively (Chang, 2001). For the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .96.

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used: ECR, Experience in Close Relationship Scale; TFS, Trait Forgivingness Scale; CERQ, Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire; BEES, Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale; QMI, Quality of Marriage Index

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