



Why am I unsatisfied? Adult attachment style, gendered irrational relationship beliefs, and young adult romantic relationship satisfaction[☆]

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Abstract

Are individual differences in adult attachment styles (secure, anxious-ambivalent, or avoidant) associated with differential adherence to relationship-specific irrational beliefs? Does endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs relate to actual relationship dissatisfaction? These questions were explored with a sample of 118 male and female college students. Results indicated that insecure individuals (anxious-ambivalent or avoidant) endorsed significantly more relationship-specific irrational beliefs than those with a secure adult attachment style. Gendered patterns of endorsement of specific irrational beliefs cluster were also observed. Further, both an insecure adult attachment style and stronger adherence to relationship-specific irrational beliefs were related to diminished relationship satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Numerous researchers have explored the correlates of adult attachment style and their association with the maintenance or dissolution of romantic relationships. Bowlby (1969) began this exploration of attachment, and Hazan and Shaver (1987) expanded its bounds when they conceptualized romantic love as an attachment process. Attachment theory provides a framework for conceptualizing how both healthy and unhealthy forms of love originate as reasonable adaptations to early social experiences. These patterns endure into adulthood, serving as templates for relating romantically in either a secure or insecure fashion.

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Similarly, a separate body of literature has emerged, one that explores how irrational beliefs influence the way in which people relate interpersonally. Cognitive theory posits that the endorsement of certain irrational expectations about what makes relationships functional and healthy strongly affects an individual's ability to adjust within a relationship. The cognitive approach to marital adjustment and therapy has received increasing attention (Dryden & Ellis, 1988; Epstein 1986; Moller & van Zyl, 1991) since Ellis (1962) emphasized the role of irrational expectations in distressed marital relationships.

Are individual differences in adult attachment style related to the differential endorsement of irrational relationship beliefs? How are these patterns associated with men's and women's levels of satisfaction in romantic relationships? This study examines the relations among these constructs and explores gendered patterns of association.

1.1. Attachment style

Bowlby's (1969) seminal work introduced the basic premise of attachment theory: the quality of attachment relationships stems from interactions between infants and their caregivers, especially the degree to which they can rely on attachment figures as sources of security and support. The unique relationship with an attachment figure furnishes a template, providing the infant with a framework within which otherwise fragmented information about self and world can be organized into a structured whole (Guidano, 1988).

Accordingly, there are consequences of an insecure attachment for the child's emerging self-concept and developing view of the social world. For instance, if the caregiver is available and responsive to an infant's distress signal, distress can be regulated with strategies that involve active seeking of comfort and support from that figure. In less optimal circumstances, the parent may reject the infant's attempt to gain comfort or be inconsistently available and inept at comforting the child. Thus, the caregiver's emotional availability and responsiveness to the child's needs largely determine the nature and quality of this early relationship.

Bowlby (1988) conceptualized attachment as a lifespan construct, with children maintaining attachment bonds to their parents across childhood and into adulthood. These internal representations of attachment figures become intertwined with representations of the self and have pervasive effects on everyday thinking and behavior (Guidano, 1988). Through the course of development, patterns of attachment modulate as the individual assimilates new relational information.

Thus, romantic love can be viewed as an attachment process—a process of becoming emotionally attached to an adult romantic partner in somewhat the same way that an infant becomes attached or emotionally bonded to its primary caregiver. Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed that the three attachment styles—secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent—exist in adulthood and influence the ways in which adults experience romantic love, providing a framework for behavior in romantic relationships. According to their definition of adult attachment styles, secure individuals feel comfortable getting close to and depending on others. Avoidant individuals feel uncomfortable getting close to or depending on others. Anxious-ambivalent individuals have a strong desire to get close to others coupled with a fear of abandonment and rejection.

Individuals with these three styles experience romantic relationships quite differently (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Secure lovers described their most important love experience as especially happy,

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