

**Attachment Style Effects on Marital Satisfaction**

Laura Gibbs

Department of Social Work,

Southern Adventist University

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Dr. Cornel Rusu

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## Introduction

Attachment theory, brought to us by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, helped by the work of Harry Harlow, has created a wealth of literature and inspired studies while further exploring the implications of our initial infant-caregiver relationships. This literature review is primarily focused on three main attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious; and their effects on marital relationships. Secure attachment allows a person to feel confident and secure in their connection through a good view of oneself and others. This is formed by having one's needs met consistently and having positive interactions with caregivers. Avoidant attachment is when a person is fearful of closeness and might even push away from someone they love. This can develop from a positive view of self combined with a negative view of others. This style often forms when one's needs were met inconsistently throughout infancy. The anxious attachment appears to be in a rush to receive the love that a partner might not be ready to give. This can come from having a negative view of oneself and a positive view of others, usually formed by negative reactions from caregivers (Mary Ainsworth). Attachment patterns are first formed in childhood and then repeated as the learned pattern of attachment becomes the default way a child has learned to interact with the world around them. This repetition of behavior from their initial attachment style impacts the satisfaction of future relationships (Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013). Attachment styles can be recognized, and behaviors that result from initial attachment patterns can be relearned and modified with some effort. This literature review explores attachment style impact on marital satisfaction and what society, individuals and clinicians can learn and implement as a result to increase marital satisfaction.

## **Findings**

### **Secure Attachment Style and Marital Satisfaction**

Across several studies marital satisfaction consistently correlated positively with the secure attachment style (Chellan & Michael Raj, 2015; Diamond et al., 2018; Nadiri & Khalatbari, 2018; Sandberg et al, 2017), this means a married couple where both partners exhibit secure attachment styles are usually more competent in forming a stable and secure romantic attachments with each other. Marital satisfaction is often quantified by a personal satisfaction survey given to each participant, and it was noted that the marital satisfaction of husbands and wives is positively correlated to this attachment style (Jarnecke & South, 2013). As one partner's satisfaction increases, so do their partner's. One reason this could be is that individuals with a secure attachment style have positive beliefs about themselves and others and this enables them to exhibit more positive relational skills as they go about forming and maintaining lasting relationships. Not only are people with secure attachment styles more likely to have more positive views of others and be more satisfied in their relationships, but they are also more likely to be in a relationship (Diamond et al., 2018).

### **Avoidant Attachment Style and Marital Satisfaction**

Avoidant attachment style is negatively correlated with marital satisfaction (Sebastian, 2018), and relationship cohesion (Towler & Stuhlmacher, 2013). This can be explained through the behaviors that go along with the avoidant attachment style. Those who are more avoidantly attached have negative views of those around them, which results in avoiding emotional intimacy and shying away from connectedness with a partner. This can harm the relationship when the differing needs of the individuals are not communicated and desires expressed. Avoidant

attachment style does have one positive correlation, as opposed to a partner's having a negative anxious response to a partner's need for solitude, an avoidant attachment style reacts positively to a partner needing alone time. Wives' solitude experience was more beneficial to husbands' marital satisfaction when the husband was more avoidantly attached (Zhang & Li, 2021). While avoidant attachment style is negatively related to relationship satisfaction, it can be positive in that it provides the individuals' space to explore their individuality and make the relationship richer as a result.

### **Anxious Attachment Style and Marital Satisfaction**

Similar to avoidant attachment styles, anxious attachment styles are negatively correlated with marital satisfaction (Nadiri & Khalatbari, 2018; Sebastian, 2018). While the result might seem the same, the reason for the negative impact is different. Those who are anxiously attached have lower marital satisfaction because of their negative view of themselves. Having a lower model of self can mean that when a miscommunication or small incident occurs that a securely attached individual would not dwell on, or see as significant because they are secure in a positive image of themselves, and insecurely or anxiously attached individual would internalize the event as being significant in confirming what they believe about themselves, that they are not worthy of love. This false belief of their value has big implications for romantic success, even causing divorce: "separated/divorced participants reported significantly higher scores on preoccupied attachment compared to first-married participants..." (Diamond et al., 2018). Anxious or preoccupied attachment behaviors reduce marital satisfaction.

### **Parental Attachment and Marital Satisfaction**

Attachment theory has a good deal of controversy in its' connection to parents, specifically which parent the infant is attaching themselves to. Before Harry Harlow performed his groundbreaking experiment with monkeys and wire vs cloth surrogate mothers, the prevailing theory was of "cupboard love" from Freud that suggested infants attached to their mothers because they met their physical needs (Contact love is extremely important). Bowlby challenged that theory but did not challenge the gender of the one the infant is attaching themselves to, focusing on the importance of the mother-infant relationship, as opposed to the connection between an infant and their primary caregiver regardless of gender. Studies have found that being securely attached to both the mother and father, "significantly predicted greater satisfaction with life and less overall distress" in college students (Kumar & Mattanah, 2016), which could potentially have a positive spillover effect into relational satisfaction as well. However, on the topic of marital satisfaction specifically, in this study, the attachment type of the mother-child relationship was the only one found to be statistically significant in its' impact on relationship satisfaction (Kumar & Mattanah, 2016). This was mediated by the factors of psychosocial adjustment and romantic competence, meaning that a more secure relationship with their mom meant better psychosocial adjustment and higher romantic competence which then increased relationship satisfaction.

As a side note, low marital satisfaction in one's parents results in an individual being more likely to have avoidant and anxious bonds with their parents (Jarnecke & South, 2013), and avoidant and anxious attachment styles and behaviors as discussed earlier lead to lower marital satisfaction. This gives support to the idea that marital satisfaction transfers over generations. Yet the correlation in marital satisfaction does not transmit evenly across genders. "Reports of higher

parents' marital satisfaction were positively related to greater marital satisfaction for husbands" (Jarnecke & South, pp 556 2013), but this correlation was not seen in the wives' scores.

### **Gender differences**

The rate at which marital satisfaction is transmitted through generations is not the only difference in marital satisfaction across genders. Chellan and Michael (2015) found that while women's marital satisfaction negatively correlated with both anxious and avoidant styles, men's marital satisfaction was only negatively correlated with avoidant style, and the correlation with anxious attachment style was not statistically significant (Chellan & Michael Raj, 2015). A Female's anxious attachment style contributes more to overall marital satisfaction than a male's fits with another finding that the husband's attachment behaviors were significantly and positively related to the wife's marital quality, but not vice versa (Sandberg et al, 2017). These two findings provide evidence for literature that says the female perception of a relationship is more influenced by their partner than vice versa (Miller, Silvermany, & Faulk qtd. In Sandberg et al, 2017). This could be due to how women are socialized to put others' needs before their own.

## **Applications**

### **How to Improve Marriage Satisfaction**

If our goal as individuals, society, and clinicians is to improve marital satisfaction, then education is the perfect place to start. Education about attachment styles especially the two insecure attachment styles avoidant and anxious can increase awareness about the tendencies of these attachment styles and what can be done to foster secure attachment (Nadiri & Khalatbar, 2018). Another approach for clinicians is to focus more on the behaviors instead of the styles of attachment. By emphasizing behaviors over styles, clinicians can move from processing events

that have happened in a client's life to focusing on the behaviors they can control now and helping couples build security (Sandberg et al 2017). These behaviors are described in one of these studies as the concept of “Mattering”: communicating to another individual that they matter to you by showing: support, respect, caring, longing for presence, communication, and being responsible (Sebastian, 2018). Explaining the different attachment styles, what those styles look like in behavior, and then emphasizing the importance of showing your partner that they matter to increase relationship security and satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

The attachment styles impact not what the couples experience but how they react to outside circumstances and each other. As this study found, a couple was not impacted as much by the amount of solitude itself, but the way their attachment style led them to interpret their partner's solitude (Zhang & Li, 2021). By having a secure attachment and positive instances of support between partners, a couple can increase the security in the relationship and overall relationship satisfaction.

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