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The Impacts of Adult Attachment Styles on Marital Relationships

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Abstract

Marriage is well-known to be one of the most significant areas in the lives of individuals. Having a satisfying marital life has been positively affecting individuals in many different ways. Many people who have consulted a psychotherapist with depression complaint are known to suffer marital problems. The couples bring their various past experiences, personal characteristics and habits to their marital lives when they get married. They also try to adapt to each other. Several research show that attachment styles have an impact on marital relationships. The attachment patterns that develop between the infant and the mother/caregiver during babyhood continue in a similar manner as the partner in adulthood. In this study, adult attachment styles will be explained in a theoretical context. Additionally, the analyses that show how adult attachment styles affect marital satisfaction will be told. Knowing the impacts of adult attachment styles on marriage might contribute to couple therapy studies.

Keywords: Adult Attachment Styles, Secure Attachment, Anxious Attachment, Avoidant Attachment, Marital Satisfaction

1. Introduction

The negativities that are encountered in marriage is included in the reasons that affect individuals' physical and mental health adversely. The studies imply that marital satisfaction decreases the life quality of married women (Altıparmak & Eser, 2007), and also stated that it is related to depression in married women. At the same time, the studies showed that edginess and disharmony between partners affect not just the individuals themselves, but also the children and the environment in a bad way. According to analyses while the edginess between partners affects family members, they affect the society's mental health on the other side. From that point of view, perceiving the marital relationship as satisfactory by both partners and continuing this perception provide benefit to the society (Bradbury, Finchman, Beach, 2000).

In the last years, it is being discussed that the quality of marriage is much more important than just being married on the impacts of marital relationship on the psychological and physiological health (Umberson et al. 2006; Dush et al. 2013). Proulx and his friends (2007) expressed the negative consequences of long-term, low-quality marital relationship's effects on the general state of health. Hawkins and Booth's (2005) 20 years of longitudinal studies that show the unfavorable impact on low-quality marriage's well-being also support this argument.

The role of relationship satisfaction has led to a wide range of research that identifies the variable related to relationship satisfaction, since it has a significant role in the happiness of partners and the marriage's continuation. Attachment styles are the primary ones among these variables.

Attachment begins to form in the first months of life. Whether it affects interpersonal relations or partner selection, later on, is an important question that today's researchers investigate. In these studies, the attachment styles that were developed during childhood are considered to be a crucial predictor of relationship satisfaction. According to theoretical perspective, the attachment behavior does not change a lot in time. The parents, close friends, romantic relationships and partners in the past and present contribute to the forming of attachment styles. There are also findings presenting that early attachment relationship can be thought of as an example to future love relationships (Kızıldağ & Şendil, 2006). For that reason, investigating whether there is a connection between individuals' attachment styles and marital satisfaction, couples with which attachment styles feel more marital satisfaction is seen to be significant.

2. Attachment

The Attachment Theory of Bowlby explains the reasons of people's tendency to form strong and emotional connections with others. The quality of the relationship between mother/caregiver and the baby affects the relationships that the person will establish in adulthood. Bowlby (1969, 1973) has stated that the experience gained from the first years of lifetime with the caregiver, the attachment figure, has permanent influences. According to Bowlby (1969), the infants will learn what to expect and adjust their behaviors accordingly during their repetitive interactions with the caregiver. The expectations that form during those years remain stable for a whole lifetime. The positive caretaking experiences, consistent and sensitive parenting lead to "secure attachment model", in which the person sees himself/herself as worthy of love and a valuable individual. In this model, the person perceives other as trustworthy and ready to be shown interest and love. The negative caretaking experiences cause "insecure attachment", in which the person sees both himself/herself and the others adversely. The individual perceives himself/herself as worthless and the others as unreliable.

3. Adult Attachment Styles

Hazan and Shaver (1987) adapted Bowlby's attachment theory developed on children to adulthood. Hazan and Shaver (1987) revealed that there are three attachment styles which are secure, avoidant and anxious. They also told that those affected adults' romantic love experiences and formed a framework for romantic relationships. According to this approach, securely attached individuals feel comfortable and secure about getting close with other. On the other hand, avoidant individuals cannot establish intimacy and they are distant to their partners. They have difficulties in establishing and sustaining close relationships. Anxious individuals really want to get closer to others, however, they are possessive and jealous. They often fail in relationships. They have an intense fear of being abandoned and rejected.

4. Internal Working Models

According to Bowlby (1969), infants learn what to expect and adjust their behavior accordingly during their repetitive experiences with the attachment figure. Bowlby (1969) suggested that the expectations he named "internal working models" formed by parents' and caregiver's behaviors and children internalize their early period experiences with their caregiver in time. These models, which can be thought of as a kind of cognitive-emotional schema, have three main elements: beliefs that are related to self-worth of being loved and being cared, beliefs that are related to partner's accessibility and readiness to help when needed, what kind of information the individuals will be careful about their relationships, the rules and strategies associated with how to process these information (Collins & Read, 1990). It is possible to think of internal working models as a sort of cognitive-emotional frames that lead to individuals' feelings and behaviours about relationships (Main, Kaplan, Cassidy, 1985).

4.1. Secure attachment

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) indicated that securely attached adults need less approval to protect their positive self-images, they can establish intimacy with other easier and succeed

being autonomous. They do not feel anxious about abandonment and people getting much closer to them than they want them to. They establish long-term relationships. They have high self-esteem and self-respect. Also, they have high respect for other people. In their social relationships, they tend to show constructive attitude and find solutions to problems (Finzi et al, 2001). According to Curun and Çapkin (2014), individuals that have secure attachment style, they tend to show their positive or negative feelings when a conflict arises. Secure attachment is the source of intimacy in marriage. Moreover, it provides open communication skills and problem-solving abilities.

4.2. Anxious attachment

Anxiously attached people generally fail in their relationships. Distinctly from people with avoidant attachment style, they think that their partners are unwilling to get closer. They also feel anxiety about their partners' love towards them and willingness to stay with them (İşinsu, 2003). For that reason, those individuals become jealous, possessive and demanding in their relationships and make their partners go away from the relationship. In the past studies, anxious individuals define their marriages as unsatisfactory. Çıkılı-Uytun, Öztop, and Eşel (2013) have stated that anxiously attached people feel more in need to get closer to their partners than their partners do. At the same time, they blame their partners for not being close enough.

4.3. Avoidant attachment

Avoidant attachment style is the model of negative ego negative others. These individuals feel uncomfortable to get closer to their partners, have difficulty to trust and feel dependent (İşinsu, 2003). These people are pessimistic about their social relationships. It is brought forward that the people having this attachment style are afraid of opening themselves and lack of empathy (Bacaksız, 2011). This reveals that people with avoidant attachment style have negative expectations from other people and they act with their fear of rejection and losing to avoid a similar situation. The individuals with avoidant attachment styles are uninterested in solving marital problems. They do not realize their partners' needs and issues. They feel uncomfortable with their partners' willing to be close. Adults with avoidant attachment style prefer being emotionally distant. Thus, this situation prevents establishing and sustaining close relationships (İşinsu, 2003).

5. Marital Satisfaction

Marriage has an important place in adults' lives. According to Baltaş and Baltaş (1998), marriage is two persons, who are different from each other in terms of families and education, deciding to spend their lives together. On the other hand, Bentowim, Barners, and Cooklin's (1987) marriage definition, in which they highlight the relationship between partners, is a dynamic unit that consists of people that are interacting with each other and have close relationships.

The divorce rate has increased nowadays. Couples having problems in their marriages have begun trying couples therapy more and more. Therefore, research on marriage have also increased. Gibson (1993) specified that couples consulting to marital therapy complain more about dissatisfaction caused by their relationship rather than money, sexuality, and children. Hawkins (2005) defined the satisfactory marriage as couples feeling happy in their marital life. Marital satisfaction is psychological content obtained from personal dimensions such as love type, sexual satisfaction, and relationship type and from environmental dimensions such as equality in decision making, earnings, work and sharing problems between partners (Sokolsi & Hendrick, 1999).

6. The Relation Between Marital Satisfaction and Attachment

There are many studies that show connection between marital satisfaction and attachment styles in the literature. According to the theoretical approach, the behavior of attachment does not

change a lot over time. Parents, close friends, past and present romantic relationships or partners contribute to the development of attachment styles. Therefore, the review of studies, which analyses the relationship between individuals' marital satisfaction and attachment styles, are important. From the attachment theory's point of view, marital satisfaction mostly depends on meeting the needs of comfort, care, and sexual satisfaction. Mutual sexual interest can bring couples together. However, if couples fail in comforting and satisfying their needs of security, the result will most likely be dissatisfaction. Several research about the bond between attachment styles and close relationships specified that securely attached individuals invest more in the relationship, have more compatible and satisfying relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, 1990), have higher partner acceptance and are more constructive (Feeney & Noller, 1990) compared to people with anxious and avoidant attachment styles.

Each partner's attachment style affects marital relationships of couples. The characteristics of marriage also affect attachment styles. A partner that starts a marriage with insecure attachment style might feel more secure and less anxious when sufficient emotional support is found in the relationship. Abandonments might make a securely attached individual insecure. Some avoidants might become secure in a new relationship (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Attachment styles are effective in individuals' behaviors in a close relationship, getting satisfaction from relationships, being affected by negativities in a relationship and dealing with those negativities (Gonzaga et al, 2001). Establishing secure and comfortable intimacy is associated with higher marital satisfaction (Furman & Flanagan, 1997). According to Feeney's (1999) findings, the anxiety of being abandoned causes low marital satisfaction both in women and men. On the other hand, Ertan (2002) stated that the majority of couples from his study on married couples have insecure attachment style. Ertan (2002) found out in his study that women's secure attachment affects mutual satisfaction in a positive way and observing secure attachment style in at least one of the partners have a positive impact in marital satisfaction. Moreover, the highest marital harmony points belong to couples that are composed of securely attached partners. Stackert and Bursik (2003) also reached to the same results in their research. According to researchers' findings, romantic relationship satisfaction decreases in insecurely attached young adults, whereas the relationship satisfaction increases insecurely attached people.

Kobak and Hazan (1991) discovered that there is an important connection between both of the partners having secure attachment style and marital satisfaction. Additionally, securely attached people can find more constructive solutions to marital problems compared to others. Lussier, Sabourin, and Turgeon (1997) revealed that avoidant and anxious husband and wife express more stress about marriage than securely attached people. In Uluyol's (2014) study that examines the connection between marital harmony and attachment, it is found out that the less avoidance level the participants have in attachment, the more marital harmony level the couples have. Anxious and avoidant attachment predict marital harmony in the opposite way. It was seen that avoidant attachment predicts marital harmony stronger (Uluyol, 2014).

According to Beştay's (2007) research conducted with university students, there is a relation between attachment style scores and relationship satisfaction scores. Beştay revealed that fearful, obsessed and reckless attachment styles predict relation satisfaction in a negative way. Simpson (1990) has investigated university students' satisfaction in their relationships and the relevance between other relationship variables and attachment styles. The results presented that securely attached individuals develop more consistent and supportive relationships. There are high trust, mutual commitment, and satisfaction in their relationships.

According to Çıkılı-Uytun and her friends' (2013) study findings, securely attached women and men's thoughts about their partners when they are in a romantic relationship is substantially

related to the reliable base. Individuals, which have developed a secure attachment and can consider their partners as a reliable base, can ask for help, explain their needs and are supportive in solving tough problems. Insecurely attached individuals, on the other hand, are not sufficient in using their partners as a reliable base. In the light of these information, the behaviour patterns of individuals that cannot develop secure attachment are considered to likely cause dispute, disharmony and dissatisfaction in the relationship.

Crowell and friends (2002) have made a research that evaluates pre and post-marital attachments in individuals. It is found out that 96% of people that had secure attachment before marriage also continues to have secure attachment. 79% of people with avoidant attachment keeps showing avoidant attachment style after marriage, whereas 27% changes their attachment style to anxious attachment. This shows that attachment behavior mostly remains unchanged in marriage. Gallo and Smith (2001) have stated that anxious attachment is a more critical determinant in marriage harmony than avoidant attachment. Moreover, Erdem and Kabasakal (2015) have discovered that anxiety in marital relationships has more predictive power than the aspect of avoidant.

Hirschberger and friends (2009) have determined in their study that the factors of marital satisfaction and attachment styles are substantially affiliated. Furthermore, they have shown that secure attachment is not unilateral, which means that if one of the partners is securely attached and feels satisfied in the marriage, then the other partner has also stated the same. Collins, Cooper, Albino and Allard's study revealed that people with avoidant attachment experience relationships with less intimacy and satisfaction level. Also, they have low problem-solving skills and go through more conflict in relationships in comparison with other attachment styles. The partners of people with avoidant attachment style also state that they do not feel satisfied with the relationships. In addition, they do not feel close to their partners and they have low commitment level to the relationship (Cited in Solmuş, 2003). Secure couples have specified less withdrawal and verbal aggression than secure-insecure or insecure-insecure couples (Senchak & Leonard, 1992). Munroe and friends have compared husbands that have marital problems and use violence with husbands that are happy in their marriages. They have discovered that violent husbands express more insecure and obsessive attachment (Cited in Doumas et al, 2008).

The researchers have revealed that securely attached individuals go through fewer breakups or divorces (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). On the other hand, Senchak and Leonard (1992) have discovered that anxious/indecisive husbands marry more quickly than secure and avoidant men. According to researchers, the reason for this is that individuals perceive marriage as a way to decrease their abandonment fears and they want to restore the trust of being loved.

In their longitudinal study regarding couples, Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) have seen that women with avoidant attachment style and anxious/indecisively attached men have the relationships that end the quickest. Apart from that, it has been revealed that the longest relationships are the ones in which women have anxious/indecisive attachment style and men have avoidant attachment style (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990).

7. Conclusion

Bowlby's "Attachment Theory" is one of the most effective theories in explaining relationships in adulthood. The individuals' attachment styles affect important points such as partner selection, the amount of conflict in a marital relationship, communication skills and the stability of relationships. Secure adults tend to be more satisfied than insecure adults. Their relationships are more stable, secure and independent and they are stronger at dealing with problems. Developing a secure attachment affects the entire life, psychological and physiological health of

an individual. Having knowledge regarding the style of individuals' attachment enables planning of both personal and couple therapies. Being informed of attachment processes makes it convenient for the consultant to establish a therapeutic relationship. Increasing marital satisfaction by couple therapies is crucial for the relationship to last. Couples' attachment styles also influence how they deal with conflicts. Only conflict resolution and exercises for communication skills would be insufficient in couple therapies without a study regarding the attachment styles of individuals. Informing couples with those kinds of information without examining attachment processes would cause the consultant not being able to do all of those and feel unsuccessful and in despair about marriage. Interfering in the real reasons of marital problems is the thing that will work in couple therapies. In couple and family therapies, what the woman and the man bring to the session is related to the quality of their attachment to their parents. If one of the partners continues with a disturbed parental affair, as a consequence, all negative feelings experienced in that connection will continue on their behavior with their partner and children. This situation can be transferred from one generation to another.

It should be considered by the couple and family therapist that the attachment with mother and father has a critical role in the psychosocial development of children, therefore, during the sessions, parents must be informed. If the parents do not fully understand the structure of their relationship with their parents, there is a high probability to reproduce same mistakes in their relationship. As an adult, if we feel that we have difficulties in our relationship with our parents, we should consider applying for an expert in order to break the vicious cycle. The couple and family therapists should conduct informative studies about attachment by organizing training for both adults and adolescents. In individual or couple therapies we may also see activation of attachment behaviors when partners are separated or deceived. People who can not learn to leave successfully from their parents can not or will not make the break even if they have completed their life. The part that needs to be looked at here is the individual's problems with parental attachment. Apart from people's psychological and physiological health, having a happy marriage plays an important part also for children's psychology. In addition, the existence of marriages with high satisfaction levels is known to be beneficial for society.

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