

ADJUSTMENT BETWEEN YOUTHS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore if there are differences between women and men in relationships among family-of-origin, romantic attachment, and marital adjustment. Two hundred and forty-nine participants filled out four self-reported measures: The Differentiation in the Family System Scale, Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, Experiences in Close Relationship Scale, and Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale. In order to analyze the data, multiple-group analysis with AMOS 16.0 was used. There was no difference between women and men in all observed variables. Regardless of gender, only the romantic attachment was a significant predictor of marital adjustment. Only in women, family-of-origin significantly predicted their romantic attachment. Across gender groups, the configure model fitted satisfactorily the observed data. When measurement and structural weights, as well as residuals were constrained to be equal across gender groups, the invariance of the model was also supported. The results suggest women and men could be similar when it comes to the relationships among constructions they both have regarding family-of-origin experiences, romantic attachment patterns, and marital adjustment. Some implications for research and clinical practice with marital couples are briefly discussed.

Keywords: *Adjustment, Youths, Evaluation, System*

INTRODUCTION

Several studies explored the connections between experiences within the family-of-origin and adult attachment patterns (Feldman *et al.*, 1998). The way adults cope with their premarital or marital relationship (Holman *et al.*, 1994) as well as adjustment to couple or family life (Holmes and Anderson, 1994). Attachment in infancy and childhood has attracted an increasingly interest from both researchers and practitioners (Blount-Matthews *et al.*, 2006). Basically, attachment was conceptualized as an emotional connection that develops between two individuals, one of them being capable of providing protection, comfort and support in times of need (McCartney *et al.*, 2002). Early attachment develops between an infant and a primary caregiver since the first year of life. Since 1980's, there was a new trend in the research of attachment focusing on working models, as well as on emotional and behavioral styles associated with adults' romantic attachment (Bartholomew *et al.*, 1998). In the last three decades, researchers have shown greater interest in conceptualizing the romantic relationship between two adults, taking into account attachment working models that adults acquire since childhood. It has been emphasized that attachment working models evolve over time, depending on the developmental tasks and on the relational experience of each individual (Bartholomew *et al.*, 1998). Although attachment patterns exist also in adulthood, relationship strategies adults use are not the same as those used by infants and children (Parker and Scannell, 1998). Thus, adults tend to have a broader repertoire of behaviors for their romantic relationships than infants do. Furthermore, in adults, romantic attachment patterns have a variety of functions and they are usually characterized by reciprocity, companionship, sexual bonds, and mutual goals (Crowell and Treboux, 1995). It has been shown that the romantic attachment adults acquire has its roots in the attachment patterns developed during childhood (Crowell *et al.*, 1995) and plays an important role in the adults' psychosocial adjustment (Crowell and Treboux, 1995). Based on John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's models of attachment and Shaver 1987) had described three styles of romantic attachment (secure, avoidant, and anxious). Researchers manifested a great deal of interest for the impact romantic attachment has upon the quality of adult couple relationships (Feeney *et al.*, 1999). Studies have shown that attachment patterns tend to be associated with variables such as: degree of affection expressed towards the partner,

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satisfaction regarding marital life, marital conflict-solving styles, and control of emotions or frequency of positive emotions expressed by marital partners. Giudice (2011) suggested that romantic attachment plays a central role both in the long-term regulation of the affective connections within a marital couple and parenting style, yet this process takes place differently for men and women. The role gender plays in the marital relationship build-up and evolution could be important, yet it has not been fully understood and empirical evidence is still contradictory (Larson and Holman, 1994). Thus, in a study on gender differences regarding the differentiation of self-experimeted within the family-of-origin and the adjustment level in adulthood, (Holmes and Anderson 1994) concluded that, for men, the level of differentiation of self in the family of origin is significantly associated with the level of subjective well-being, as well as with the level of personal functioning within the family system. However, for women, adjustment indices were not significantly related to the differentiation of self in the family-of-origin. In another study, (Holman and Harmer 1994) concluded that, only for married men, the better they perceived the quality of family-of-origin environment, the higher their marital relation quality (as measured after one year through the marital satisfaction and its stability). Sabatelli and Bartle (2003) argued that, when compared to the husbands' experiences within the family-of-origin, the wives' experiences in their families-of-origin had stronger relationships both with their own perceptions about marriage and with the perceptions of their partners. In a study aimed at testing a structural model of the relationships among differentiation of self within the marital relationship, romantic attachment styles, communication regarding sex life and sex and marital satisfaction, Timm and Keiley (2011) proved the invariance of the model depending on the participants' gender.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Statistical Analyses

The means and standard deviations of observed variables for females and males were computed and the Student's t-Test for independent samples was used in order to perform comparisons by gender. For each comparison, the effect size was estimated using the Cohen's d coefficient (Cohen, 1992). Cohen's d values around .20 indicate a small effect size, values around .50 indicate a moderate effect size, while values as high as .80 indicate a large effect size. For both females and males, zero-order correlations among the indicators of all latent variables were computed using the product moment correlation coefficient (r). In order to estimate the parameters and degree of statistical fitting for our SEM model across gender, multiple-group analysis through maximum likelihood (ML) technique was used (Byrne, 2010). The SEM with ML procedure assumes that observed variables have normal distributions (Bowen *et al.*, 2012). In the present study, the unilabiate normality of distribution for each observed variable was assessed by examining the skewness and kurtosis values. The SPSS package uses 0 as a reference value for skewness and kurtosis, to decide if a distribution is normal or not. There is no clear cutoff to indicate an acceptable level of skewness and kurtosis (Byrne *et al.*, 2012). In a conservative approach, the researcher might conclude that a skewness value greater than 1 or less than -1 is problematic (Bowen and Guo, 2012). The value of skewness tends to impact tests of means. More problematic than skewness is kurtosis, which severely impacts tests of variances and covariance's. As in the case of skewness, if kurtosis is greater than 1 or less than -1 (in software packages using 0 as reference value for a normal distribution), one might conclude that the distribution could be problematic. Participants answered on a six-point Likert type scale, except for one item formatted on a five-point scale. Consensus on matters of importance to marital relationship (decision making, values, and affection) was measured using six items. Four items (e.g., "How often do you discuss terminating your relationship?") measured marital satisfaction. This dimension refers to stability of a couple and conflicts between spouses. Other four items (e.g., "How often do you have a stimulating exchange of ideas?") operational zed marital cohesion which included discussions and activities engaging both marital partners. The RDAS was selected because it had proved good psychometric qualities (Busby *et al.*, 1995). In the original sample, values of internal consistency were .81 for consensus, .85 for satisfaction, .80 for cohesion, and .90 for total RDAS. Busby *et al.* (1995) reported a correlation equal to .97 ($p < .001$) between RDAS and DAS. Also, authors provided

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evidence for criterion-related validity of RDAS, suggesting that RDAS and DAS are equal in their ability to correctly classify cases as either distressed or non-distressed married adults. In the present study, the internal consistency values were: .83 for marital consensus, .92 for marital satisfaction, and .77 for marital cohesion. However, several simulations (Muthén *et al.*, 1985) have found significant problems in the ML procedures arising with unilabiate skewness at least equal to 2 and kurtosis to 7 (in software packages using 3 as reference value for a normal distribution) or 4 (in programs using 0 as cutoff). One approach to handle the presence of non-normal observed variables in SEM suggests the use of a bootstrapping procedure which yields more accurate ML estimates of parameters from a model (Byrne, 2010). The fitting between the configure model and observed data was assessed by examining the following indexes (Browne *et al.*, 1993): χ^2 (critical level of significance was set at .05, two-tailed), Bentler Bonnett normed fit index (NFI) and non-normed (Tucker-Lewis) fit index (NNFI/TLI), comparative fit index (CFI) and the classical root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). RMSEA is one of the most important indicators showing the degree to which estimated parameters of a SEM model are representative for the whole population from which the sample was drawn. Since RMSEA is sensitive to misspecifications of relationship among variables and it is accompanied by a confidence interval which provides an indication of precision of estimation, its use in applied research is strongly encouraged (MacCallum and Austin, 2000). A non-significant χ^2 value, as well as values greater than .95 for NFI, NNFI and CFI, and RMSEA value lower than .05 indicate a good fit of the configure model to the observed data (Byrne, 2010). Following suggestions from the literature, it was considered that a value of RMSEA as high as .08 indicates an acceptable fit of the SEM model (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). Also, TLI and CFI values ranging from .90 to .95 indicate an acceptable model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1998). The configure model provides the baseline to which all subsequent tests for invariance are compared. The classical approach in arguing for evidence of invariance is based on the χ^2 difference ($\Delta\chi^2$) test (Byrne, 2010). The value $\Delta\chi^2$ represents the difference between the χ^2 value for the configure model and the χ^2 values for the other models in which equality constraints have been imposed on particular parameters. According to Byrne (2010), evidence of invariance is claimed if $\Delta\chi^2$ value is not statistically significant. In the criticism of the $\Delta\chi^2$ procedure, some researchers have argued that, from a practical perspective, the χ^2 difference test represents an excessively stringent test of invariance, because SEM models, at best, are only approximations of reality (Byrne, 2010). It was consequently argued that it may be more reasonable to base decision on a difference in CFI rather than on the $\Delta\chi^2$ value (Cheung *et al.*, 2002). Evidence of invariance should be based on a Δ CFI value not exceeding .01. Although this practical approach has been criticized, its use is increasingly reported in the family and couple psychology literature (Lucas *et al.*, 2008).

Participants

Two hundred and forty nine adults completed the measures by which the indicators of latent variables introduced in the model were obtained. There were 79 men and 170 women. The mean age for participants was 35.5 years (SD = 7.8). Most of them had a bachelor degree (80.3%) and were married for the first time (94%). Almost 59%

Of the participants had a marriage experience of more than five years, having on average 2.4 children (SD = .73).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Participants tended to obtain a higher score in the differentiation between them and their mothers, while the score in differentiation between their parents was lower and more heterogeneous. The average anxious attachment score was higher than the one for avoidance, although the distributions for both dimensions displayed the same amount of variation. Family-of-origin adaptability, participant-father, participant-mother, as well as mother-father differentiation had quasi-symmetric distributions. Marital satisfaction and cohesion, as well as anxious attachment showed modest departures from the reference value for skewness, while the distribution for family-of-origin cohesion had a more prominent skew.

1. On the other hand, family-of-origin cohesion, anxious attachment and marital cohesion had quasi-

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kurtic distributions, while participant-father and mother-father differentiation were platykurtic in their distributions. Avoidant attachment and marital consensus had more prominent leptokurtic distributions (kurtosis > 1), while marital satisfaction was more platykurtic. Thus, none of the skewness values for observed variables were greater than 2, while none of the kurtosis values were greater than 7. Therefore, we considered that the distributions of the observed variables did not significantly depart from normality. Furthermore, we used the ML procedure without performing the bootstrapping. There were no significant differences between females and males in all observed variables. Cohen's *d* values were close to zero, indicating negligible effect sizes.

2. Except for cohesion, all family-of-origin indicators correlated significantly and positively with marital cohesion in females. For males, there was a significant correlation only between family-of-origin cohesion and marital cohesion. Regardless of gender, the correlations between family-of-origin indicators and marital satisfaction were inconsistent. For both sexes, the pattern of associations among avoidant/anxious romantic attachment and indicators of marital adjustment was similar. There were significant correlations among romantic attachment styles and marital consensus and cohesion.

3. The current findings suggest that emphasizing stereotyped differences between women and men is not fruitful in clinical practice. Family and couple therapists could rather work on deconstructing the social discourses about gender differences, enabling a sense of personal agency for their clients. In the present study, romantic attachment was a negative predictor of marital adjustment for both women and men. These results are consistent with those reported in previous studies that have examined the relationship between adult romantic attachment and indicators of marital quality (Feeney *et al.*, 1998). In agreement with the data reported in a prior study (Muraru and Turliuc, 2012), but contrary to the study carried out by Sabatelli and Haring (2003), the family-of-origin had no significant contribution to the marital adjustment prediction for either women or men who participated in the present study. When the configure (unconstrained) model was taken as reference, marital satisfaction was not a significant indicator of marital adjustment, neither for women nor for men. The other nine observed variables were significant indicators of latent variables. For both women and men, romantic attachment was a significant and negative predictor of marital adjustment. Otherwise, family-of-origin had no significant contribution to the prediction of marital adjustment. Family-of-origin was also a significant predictor of the romantic attachment only in females. The configure model proved a satisfactory fit to the observed data across gender groups: $\chi^2 = 109.87$, $df = 64$, $p < .001$, CFI = .960, NFI = .991, NNFI = .943, RMSEA = .054 (90% CI = .036; .071). When measurement and structural weights, structural covariance and residuals were constrained to be equal across gender groups and the $\Delta\chi^2$ criterion was used, multiple-group analyses yielded four models. All of them indicated a satisfactory fit to the observed data. The differences between the χ^2 value for the configure model and the χ^2 value for constrained models were not statistically significant ($p > .05$), thus supporting the invariance of hypothesized model across gender groups. Moreover, the values of ΔCFI were lower than .01, strengthening the evidence of invariance.

Discussion

Our study was designed to be exploratory. The purpose was not to test any hypothesis regarding invariance across gender when it comes to relationships among family-of-origin, romantic attachment, and marital adjustment, but to explore if there is a difference regarding the impact early family-of-origin experiences have on later adjustment to romantic relationships in the case of women and men. By incorporating suggestions from well-known couple and family therapists (Nichols *et al.*, 2001), our hypothetical model assumed that experiences individuals undergo in their families-of-origin represent a legacy which tends to influence adjustment to developmental tasks throughout their lifespan, including to romantic relationships. From an intergenerational perspective, Murray Bowen has developed a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain how constructions individuals have about their families-of-origin are reflected in the choices they make in everyday life, including their romantic relationships (Nichols and Schwartz, 2001). Bowen's theory has influenced the practice of many couple and family therapists who emphasized the role family resources have in the process of rewriting stories related to the personal lives of clients. In line with suggestions from the literature, in the

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current study it was assumed that constructions married adults hold about their families-of-origin tend to be associated both with patterns of romantic attachment and their adjustment to marital relationships. Data from a multiple-group analysis using structural equation modeling suggested the invariance of our hypothetical model across gender. The data revealed that romantic attachment had a significant negative effect upon marital adjustment for both women and men. This result is consistent with previous studies (Feeney *et al.*, 1999). There is a growing body of literature suggesting that romantic attachment patterns impact the quality of a couple's relationship (Feeney *et al.*, 1999). In a marital couple, a secure attachment expressed by the two spouses implies an active, affectionate, and reciprocal relationship in which both marital partners mutually provide closeness and emotional comfort. Adults expressing a secure attachment toward their partners tend to have relationships characterized by high levels of reciprocal trust, support, and intimacy, as well as shared feeling and ideas (Hazan *et al.*, 1987). In contrast, adults with prevailing insecure attachment tend to fear abandonment, to experience emotional ups and downs, to be obsessively jealous, and overly dependent on their partner (Parker and Scannell, 1998). Adults with an avoidant attachment pattern tend to deny attachment needs, are reluctant to trust others, avoid closeness and, often, are over involved with activities, such as professional work. In a relationship, two adults tend to bring with them their own working models about attachment and related behaviors. Thus, the relationship tends to be shaped by the partners' style of relating. Moreover, the interaction of their personal styles tends to influence the way the two partners are experiencing their relationship. Family-of-origin had no significant effect upon marital adjustment for either women or men. At least one explanation might be advanced in relation to this result. In Romania, the family-of-origin exerts a great influence on the way adults give meanings to their lives and relationships. The postmodern tendencies regarding changes in the pattern of family values are rather weak, being characteristic for a minority (e.g., young people from urban areas) within the Romanian population (Popescu, 2008). However, in the present study, over 87% of the participants were under forty, representing the cohort born since 1970. When democracy was reinstated in Romania, these participants were around 20 years old. Therefore, we assumed that the majority of participants had opportunities to be exposed to the new ideological representations about family and its role in society. This could have an impact on how participants in our study represent their families-of-origin and the role early experiences play in later personal development. In addition, in the present study, FACES and DIFS were adapted to allow the exploration of constructions participants had about their own family-of-origin experiences. This approach involved an effort to remember the early past, which could be impacted by the subjectivity of participants, regardless of their gender. At the same time, the RDAS asked participants to assess their current marital relationship. It is possible that the two factors above have a significant contribution to the way adults surveyed in this study perceived their own past (including the meaning of experiences specific for their families-of-origin) and related it to their perception of the current marital relationship. However, further explanations for this finding remain to be found. Moreover, no significant effect of the family-of-origin upon romantic attachment was revealed in the case of male participants. This finding is consistent with data reported by Feldman and Fisher (1998). Why the family-of-origin was significantly related to romantic attachment only for women? Searching for an explanation, we presumed that gender could moderate the relationship between family-of-origin experiences and romantic attachment styles. Thus, we observed that correlations among differentiation of self within family-of-origin, adaptability, cohesion, and avoidant attachment were negative and significant only for women. Additionally, the correlations for men were lower than those for women. As far as anxious attachment was concerned, the pattern of correlations was quite similar, except for differentiation between participants and their fathers (for this variable the correlation was slightly greater for men, even if non-significant). The moderating role of gender could be related both to working models of attachment (Crowell and Treboux, 1995) and transitional changes over time, which, in conjunction with family-of-origin experiences, could have a different impact on the functioning of women and men. Although, regardless of gender, working models and romantic attachment behaviors (especially those related to the secure attachment) tend to be relatively stable over a short-term period (Fuller *et al.*, 1995), relationship

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experiences can initiate some changes over time. Thus, getting married usually involves a major transition for the individual and many changes are likely to occur over the early transitional years of marital life. Women and men may differently integrate the legacy of experiences they undergo in their family-of-origin into the transitional stage of the first years of marriage, including in terms of restructuring models of romantic attachment. It is possible that, in structuring working models of romantic attachment, women tend to be more rooted in experiences acquired within their family-of-origin, while men tend to avoid recognizing the connection between the “relational present” and their early experiences. It is just one of the hypotheses that we intend to explore in future studies. A limitation of the current study was the disproportion between number of male and female participants that could affect the accuracy of estimated parameters. Secondly, the findings were based on data from a relatively small and homogeneous (e.g., residence or level of education) convenience sample of participants, thus limiting the generalization of results. Adults married for the first time, living in urban areas and having a bachelor degree, may not be representative of all married adults.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is grateful to Dr. Ale Boye Head of Islamic Azad Yasouj University who helped me this research.

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