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Research paper

Adult Attachment and Self Esteem

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Abstract

This study identifies the relationship between adult attachment, and specifically between attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety and self-esteem among married couples residing in the north-east of Peninsular Malaysia. A correlational research design was adopted to address the research objectives established for this study involving a representative sample of seventy married couples from the north-east of Peninsular Malaysia. Two sets of questionnaires were developed and reviewed by two expert panels before piloting and finalising. The structure and content of the questionnaires were specific to main two areas; Experience in a Close Relationship (ECR) scale and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). The questionnaires were then distributed to the participants. The data were collected and analysed using descriptive statistical analysis and Pearson Correlation. The findings indicated the existence of a meaningful relationship between adult attachment and self-esteem. Furthermore, it was recommended based on the work performed, limitations and findings that further research is conducted in a similar program, but a with broader and a more substantial population size covering multiple communities, again with a specific focus on married couples and improving their attachment and self-esteem in a relationship.

Keywords: *Attachment avoidance; attachment anxiety; self-esteem.*

1. Introduction

The theory of attachment is the collaborative work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth [1]. Attachment theory can be described as the nature of emotional attachment in humans [2]. It was described as the bond that develops between a child and a caretaker, that aids in the child's development and consequently, in the child's emerging self-concept and prospects in the social world [3]. Attachment can also refer to the means by which you (as a person) are attached to other people. Moreover, connecting one person to another person due to the enduring and everlasting emotional bond across both time and space [6].

The theory of attachment and the theory of object relations both describe similar relational phenomena during human adulthood with each describing the different angle of interpersonal relationships [7]. Also, one person may have an attachment even though the feeling of attachment is not physically shared. [8] These two dimensions of attachment are divided into four prototypes of adult attachment styles. The first relates to feeling secure, (view positive - self-positive others), consisting of three insecure subtypes which include anxious-preoccupied (view negative - self-positive others) and dismissive-avoidance (view positive - self-negative others), and fearful-avoidance (view negative - self-negative others), [9]. Therefore, this study aims to determine the relationship that exists between adult attachment and self-esteem among married couples. The Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) are both used to measure adult attachment, which in this case is avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment with self-esteem. As mentioned, the experimental population used in this study was from among the spouses presently living in North-east of Peninsular Malaysia, Kelantan.

There is limited research available that adequately addresses adult attachment and self-esteem. The most consistent and relevant research found was that of [9] a research examining the relationship between adult attachment styles, self-esteem, jealousy and life satisfaction. The analyses showed that individuals with a secure attachment style appear to rate higher on their levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with life within a positive relationship. In a separate study, [10] indicated that individuals with secure attachment styles are engaged in healthier preventive health behaviour, with higher self-esteem compared to individuals with insecure styles. Indeed, self-esteem aids in determining the relationship between attachment styles and health behaviour. Also, the previous study from Huntsinger & Luecken that [10] evaluated how attachment styles are related towards health behaviour in young adults, and the potential mediational role of self-esteem. Indeed, the results of the research demonstrated that those individuals with secure attachment styles were engaged in better preventive health behaviour with higher self-esteem compared to those individuals with insecure styles[10]. Notwithstanding, it showed that both research types demonstrate that self-esteem influences the behaviour of individuals.

It was reported that [11] the relationship between low self-esteem, loneliness, and social connectedness. The purpose of his study was

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to determine the correlation between self-esteem and the willingness to trust in a small undergraduate college environment. In a further study, Orth (n.d) suggested that high self-esteem is kindly or compassionate in a romantic relationship setting and that couples displayed high self-esteem having a positive effect on each partner's happiness. Nonetheless, researchers [12] discovered that the differences in adult attachment were related to different beliefs regarding oneself and others in ways that were consistent with the attachment theory [13].

In all the above research they examined and focused instead on insecurities attachment. To the best of the author's knowledge, no known research has been performed in Malaysia among married couples, although, past research has been carried out among undergraduate and young adults. Therefore, the overarching objective and purpose of this study are to identify and determine the relationship existing between adult attachment and self-esteem among married couples living in North-east of Peninsular Malaysia, Kelantan, using Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) scale and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) measurements. Indeed, this will provide valuable insight and knowledge and a better understanding of whether attachment styles do in fact, relate to self-esteem. Also, it is anticipated that this study will assist marriage and relationship counsellors in conducting group counselling and consultation for married couples' regarding self-esteem. Furthermore, it is hoped that counsellors' will be in a better position to utilize the findings of this study to help married couples gain a better understanding and appreciation of each other. The researcher in conducting this study was motivated by the fact that this information could be used as a reference model for other researchers interested in investigating attachment insecurities and marital satisfaction from different views and perspectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Attachment Theory

There were several research studies carried out on adult attachment styles and self-esteem. The initial research review was conducted in 2014 by Kaprale [9] regarding the relationship between adult attachment styles and self-esteem, jealousy and the satisfaction of life. One hundred and seven participants from among the cabin crew and office staff from the Ryanair Head Office at Dublin Airport were recruited via convenience sampling methodology. The participants were provided with a self-report questionnaire comprising of four individually separated questionnaires; The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ), The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and the Self Report Jealousy Scale (SRJS). All questionnaires were designed to measure jealousy, self-esteem, attachment styles and the satisfaction with life. The findings from the research survey found that there were significantly different impacts on the level of self-esteem between those individuals with secure and insecure attachment styles. However, the findings did not show the different effect on the feelings of jealousy between secure and insecure attachment styles.

Huntsinger & Luecken (2004) researched attachment relationship and health behaviour; the mediational role of self-esteem. Huntsinger & Luecken (2004) also examined how attachment styles were related to health behaviour in young adults, and the potential mediational role of self-esteem. The results showed that those individuals with secure attachment styles participated in healthier preventive health behaviour and were evidenced to have higher self-esteem compared to those with insecure styles. A further study collected data from 793 students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course at the Arizona State University where each participant was only provided with a random subset of questionnaires. The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ), the Rosenberg Self-esteem and Health Behaviour questionnaires were used to document the attachment style of the participants [10].It was hypothesised[10] that individuals with secure or dismissive attachment styles would report healthier behaviour than those with fearful or preoccupied styles. However, they also found that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between attachment styles and health behaviour and the individuals with the secure style of interaction had high self-esteem compared to those with other styles. Three studies to examine the relationship of adult attachment [12]. The first study measured the dimension of adult attachment using an 18-item scale to measure adult attachment style dimensions. Hazan's first study, the analysis revealed three distinct dimensions. These included; to which an individual is comfortable with closeness, that he or she can depend on others, and that he or she is anxious or fearful about such issues such as being abandoned or unloved. In their second study, they investigated the relationship between the attachment dimensions and the working models of self and others. Notably, the attachment dimensions were found to be related to self-esteem, expressiveness, instrumentality, trust in others, beliefs about human nature, and the styles of loving. In the third study, they explored the role of attachment style dimensions in three aspects; ongoing dating relationships, partner matching on attachment dimensions, the similarity between the attachment of one's partner and the caregiving style of one's parents, and relationship quality including communication, trust, and satisfaction.

The research by Bouras & Holt [18] indicated the impact of self-esteem, adult attachment, and the family environment, on conflict resolution in intimate relationships. The study also examined the effects of self-esteem, adult attachment and violence in the family environment. The significance of the study highlighted the main impact emerging for all independent variables with a significant interaction between gender and inter parental violence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A correlational research design was used to identify the relationship between adult attachment and self-esteem among married couples using a quantitative research approach. The data were collected using a questionnaire. Indeed, this type of method was favoured in collecting the data to save time and effort and was considered to be more straightforward to obtain the data needed of the participants. A correlational research design was used to identify the relationship between adult attachment and self-esteem among married couples using a quantitative research approach. The data were collected using a questionnaire. Indeed, this type of method was favoured in collecting the data to save time and effort and was considered to be more straightforward to obtain the data needed of the participants.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The targeted population in this study were married couples living in North-east of Peninsular Malaysia at Kelantan Darul Naim. The population size was approximately N = 170, and the participant or

sample size was S = 118. The researcher applied purposive sampling, and the received information was obtained from the village head who held the information on the number of married couples residing in that village. The Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table was adapted in determining the sample size. The population size in North-east of Peninsular Malaysia at the time was 170, so based on the Morgan and Krejcie, table, a sample size of 118 participants were invited to participate in the study.

3.3 Research Instruments

Experience in Close Relationship (ECR)

The adult attachment styles were measured using 36-items representing the Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) scale measures based on two subscales of attachment; avoidance and anxiety. In general, avoidant individuals find discomfort with intimacy and seek independence whereas anxious individuals tend to fear rejection, abandonment and feeling unloved [20]. A high score on the avoidance subscale indicates the level of jealousy, fear of rejection and preoccupation with attachment needs.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (1965) consists of 10-items, and four Likert scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". A question, for example, is, "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others". The findings for this were good, as the reliability according to the Alpha Cronbach measure showed 0.88 [10]. The 10-item scale to measure global self-worth consisted of both positive and negative feelings concerning the self. The Rosenberg Self-esteem scale is a widely used self-report instrument for evaluating individual self-esteem[22]. Five of the statements were adversely worded for example, "I certainly feel useless at times", and five were positively worded for example, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"[9].

Validity and Reliability

Both instruments were back-translated for the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) questionnaires. Both questionnaires were reviewed using two expert panels, of which reviewed the translated version, and conceptual intention and content equivalence. The final version was piloted by 30 undergraduate students in the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development. Both instruments were shown to have a high level of internal consistency and validity, with constructive validity and internal consistency being 8.5 for ECR, and 9.0 for RSE. Table 1 below displays the test-retest reliability.

Table 1: Reliability for the Pilot Study

Scale	Experience in Close Relationship (ECR)		Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)
	Anxiety Attachment	Avoidance Attachment	Self-Esteem
No. of Items	18	17	10
Cronbach's Alpha	0.451	0.787	0.758

Table 2 displays the value of Cronbach's alpha for each questionnaire, where ECR Avoidance is 0.58, ECR Anxiety is 0.73, and RSE Self-esteem is 0.64. Previous studies documented the reliability and validity with Cronbach's alpha attaining 0.94 for Avoidance and 0.91 for Anxiety [24]. While previous research [9] indicated that Cronbach's alpha for self-esteem was by 0.84. Therefore, the overall reliability is excellent, and the questionnaires are valid to be used for the research.

Table 2: The Reliability Test of Two Questionnaires

Section	Variables	No of Items	Cronbach's Alphas
B - ECR	Avoidance Attachment	18	0.58
	Anxiety Attachment	18	0.73
C - RSE	Self-Esteem	10	0.64

4. Result

The respondents' background is divided into nine elements which included gender, age, order in the family, race, religion, years of marriage, employment history and educational background. The total number of respondents in this research was 70, consisting of 35 males and 35 females (Table 5). The age of the respondents' ranged from 20 years to 50 years of age. All respondents were married, and the majority was Islam.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Age

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
Age	70	1.00	4.00	2.9143	.89674
Valid N (list wise)	70				

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Avoidance Attachment	70	61.57	12.47
Anxiety Attachment	70	71.76	15.54
Age	70	2.91	0.90
Gennder	70	1.50	0.50
Self-Esteem	70	133.33	19.70

Pearson correlation 'r' was used to determine whether there is a relationship between adult attachment (attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety) and self-esteem. The significance value, p is 0.00 less than 0.05, meaning that there is a significant relationship between attachment avoidance and self-esteem (p = 0.00, r = 0.38), (table 4). This finding is consistent with previous research reporting that the results revealed a negative correlation between avoidance attachment and self-esteem.

Table 5: Attachment avoidance and Self esteem

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Avoidance Attachment	70	61.57	12.47
Anxiety Attachment	70	71.76	15.54
Age	70	2.91	0.90
Gender	70	1.50	0.50
Self-Esteem	70	133.33	19.70

It was hypothesised that there is no relationship between attachment anxiety and self-esteem. However, the significance value, *p* is 0.03 less than 0.05 (Table 6}. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Which means there is a significant relationship between attachment anxiety and self-esteem (p = 0.03, r = 0.25). Indeed, these findings are found to be consistent with previous research (Rosen, 2016) indicating there is a significant main effect on anxious attachment and self-esteem. Also, this finding is consistent with the findings from previous research [25] where anxious/ambivalent attachment correlates negatively with self-esteem.

Table 6: Attachment Anxiety and Self-Esteem

Variable	N	Pearson Correlation *r*	Significant Value *p*
Anxiety Attachment	70	0.25	0.03

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (2 tailed)

It was hypothesised that there is no relationship between age and self-esteem. The significance value, *p* is 0.94 more than 0.05, so the null hypothesis is failed to reject. Therefore, the result shows that there is no significant relationship between age and self-esteem ($p = 0.94$, $r = 0.20$), (Table 5). This finding is consistent with the previous research (Rosen, 2016) showing that age is insignificantly related to self-esteem.

Table 7: Age and Self-Esteem

Variable	N	Pearson Correlation *r*	Significant Value *p*
Age	70	0.20	0.94

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (2 tailed)

Here it is hypothesized that there is no relationship between gender and self-esteem. The significance value, p is 0.63 more than 0.05 (Table 7), so the null hypothesis is failed to reject. Therefore, the result shows there is no significant relationship between gender and self-esteem (p = 0.63 r = -0.58). This finding is consistent with the previous research (Rosen, 2016) reporting that the results indicate no significant differences for males and females.

Table 8: Gender and Self-Esteem

Variable	N	Pearson Correlation *r*	Significant Value *p*
Gender	70	-0.58	0.63

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (2 tailed)

5. Discussion

The main objective of this research was to investigate the relationship between adult attachment and self-esteem. Questionnaires were distributed to 118 individuals to partake in the survey, but only 70 questionnaires were returned and used for data analysis using SPSS, descriptive statistic and Pearson correlation. The ages of the respondents varied as with the order (or standing) in the family, and their race, religion, years of marriage, employment history and educational background. The findings from the data are based on the questionnaires which consisted of three sections; demographics in Section A, the Experience in Close Relationship (ECR) in Section B, and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) in Section C. The Cronbach alpha value for each part was 0.58 (Attachment avoidance), 0.73 (attachment anxiety) and 0.64 [28] therefore, meaning that the questionnaire was acceptable and valid to be used in this research.

The findings indicated that there is a significant relationship between adult attachment, attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety with self-esteem. Attachment avoidance appeared to have a reasonable relationship with self-esteem. The findings are consistent with the previous research hypothesising that the results would indicate a weak to moderate relationship between self-esteem and self-reported attachment. The weighted mean effect size *r* -0.23 was found for attachment avoidance. Furthermore, the results indicated that the attachment measure that was used, and whether the sample was clinical in nature, were both found to influence the association between adult attachment orientation and self-esteem. Insecure-avoidant individuals could positively help individuals to become aware of their positive mental models of self, and the negative mental models of others. Moreover, to notice, their tendency in placing their independence above their relationships, or through judging their partners negatively because of their underlying fears of intimacy.

While attachment anxiety showed a weak relationship with self-esteem, the previous research) showed that these results invariably highlight the link between the type of adult attachment and self-esteem. [25]It was indicated that individuals with secure attachment reported higher global self-esteem than those adults with avoidant and anxious/preoccupied attachment (lower global self-esteem). Also, attachment experiences provide the ability to make complex judgments about self which continue to exist independent of the specific self-perceptions later in life. Indeed, insecure, anxious individuals can try to be proactively aware of their negative mental models of self and the positive mental models of others; which can be achieved by noticing the tendency to underestimate them, while placing their partners or loved ones on a pedestal. Furthermore, individuals and/or group organisational efforts to foster and encourage secure attachment in insecurely-attached individuals could perhaps help in equipping a more substantial number of people with healthier levels of self-esteem from adulthood through to the remaining stages of life. The meta-analysis based on 38 studies and 9,494 participants also indicated that both attachment dimensions are statistically significant predictors of self-report measures of adult self-esteem.. While for the demographic elements; age and gender hypothesis were rejected. The previous study [26]) mentioned that the analysis of age is insignificantly related to self-esteem, while the results hypothesize a significant association between gender and self-esteem, indicating no significant differences for males and females.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted in this study focused on married couples in North-east of Peninsular Malaysia, Kelantan. Accordingly, the findings cannot be generalised as being applicable to other married couples or individuals in other areas. In performing the study, there were several issues regarding the cooperation of respondents and time constraints which could be considered as limitations in the research. For example, the researcher needed to distribute all the questionnaires in one day, by moving from house to house and collecting the questionnaires from each household several days later. This resulted in a longer time than initially anticipated to distribute and collect the questionnaires. The researcher also found that there were respondents who were not cooperative during the data collection phase. Considering these issues, for future studies, it may be useful to conduct similar research on married couples in other villages as well to broaden the field of study. In this way, the researcher could compare the current findings with the future results at a different village. Also, future studies should increase the sample size to obtain more valid data applying the qualitative research method in gathering a broader range of comparative data and details. Furthermore, future research could also consider conducting replication studies using different methods of operationalisation for the construct of attachment, as there are several techniques available for this purpose.

This study is significant for counsellors to acquire further relevant and current information that may help married couples who are experiencing self-esteem issues and for themselves as counsellors towards enhancing their cultural knowledge and understanding of multicultural challenges and barriers. A further opportunity for counsellors may be in establishing educational programs to raise the level of awareness and understanding related to attachment which would potentially help to enhance the individual's self-esteem issues. This research focuses on the relationship between adult attachment and self-esteem among married couples in North-east of Peninsular Malaysia and demonstrating the inter-relationship between the two. This study will enable married couples to firstly, detect early warning signs of a conflict brewing between each other due to self-esteem issues. Secondly, to help and support couples to understand their various attachment styles and to enhance their marriage and relationship. The findings of this research will also enhance the knowledge of counsellors on

the various issues among married couples in Malaysia. Given the limited number of studies in this area, it is therefore proposed that future research is undertaken to broaden the population size and demographics specific to adult attachment and self-esteem with particular emphasis on married couples and their relationships.

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