

A CAUSAL MODEL OF THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACT OF INSECURE ATTACHMENT STYLES ON ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION MEDIATED BY EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGIES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

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Abstract: Influences of emotion regulation strategies (i.e. cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) and psychological distress were analyzed along direct and indirect association of insecure attachment styles (i.e., anxiety, avoidance) and romantic relationship satisfaction. N = 1,033 Thai adult participants who presently residing or working in Bangkok and being in romantic relationship were studied. Their age ranged from 18 to 60 years old (mean age 33.40, \pm SD 10.72). Thai-translated versions of the instruments *Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form* (ECR-S), *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ), *Outcome Questionnaire* (OQ), and *Relationship Assessment Scale* (RAS) were used when collecting data and had achieved sound psychometric properties (i.e. reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity). Study of Path analysis upon SEM revealed that insecure attachment styles affected psychological distress and reduced romantic relationship satisfaction. Also, cognitive reappraisal was found to indirectly affect relationship satisfaction with distress cutback, and that expressive suppression could cushion insecure attachment and safeguard the relationship, despite a distress backfire.

Keywords: Emotion Regulation Strategies, Psychological Distress, Romantic Relationship Satisfaction, Insecure Attachment Styles.

Introduction

Developmentally, the aspects about difficult interpersonal relationships for insecurely attached individuals are well supported by theoretical and empirical

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perspectives. Individuals with insecure attachment styles (anxiety or avoidance) are prone to be unsatisfied in romantic relationships and experience psychological distress as a result of their use of emotion regulation in a defensive manner (hyper activation, deactivation). Occupied by defensive emotion regulation, it prohibits them from expressing what they need and what they feel. It explains why functioning in romantic relationship is not an easy job (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Objectives

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating role of emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) as well as psychological distress within an association between insecure attachment styles (anxiety, avoidance) and romantic relationship satisfaction. In addition, it was aim to verify an influence of insecure attachment towards romantic relationship satisfaction among urban Thai adults.

Literature Review

Theoretical perspectives and empirical findings revealed associations among insecure attachment styles (anxiety, avoidance), emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression), psychological distress, and relationship satisfaction which formed the conceptual framework of this study.

Insecure Attachment Style (Anxiety, Avoidance) and Emotion Regulation strategies (Cognitive Reappraisal, Expressive Suppression)

Anxious attachment. Individuals with anxious attachment see their lovers' interaction within couple relationships as not enough, they consequently attempt heavily to achieve more proximity. The objective of this hyper activation approach is to gain assurance and security from their lovers (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Therefore, it is usual to see anxiously attached individuals ruminate on negative thoughts, overly focus on possible failures and danger, and obsess about physiological sensation. They therefore are less likely to use "cognitive reappraisal" to regulate their emotions (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Main & Solomon, 1986; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). It is understandable due to that negative emotions well corresponds with their anxious attachment style and they then intensify it (not suppress) (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007).

Avoidant attachment. Individuals with avoidant attachment are very good in suppressing their emotions and detach from the threatening factors, purposely for emotion regulation. They appear to rely in themselves intensively upon their deactivation strategy and therefore detach from their lovers (Bowlby, 1969/1982). This however doesn't mean that they are happier than the others. Avoidant attached individuals suffer from difficult emotions within couple relationship proximity. They are then prone to seek independence and want to gain control, and therefore suppress their emotional experience with an aim to disengage the attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). They as well are not likely to use "cognitive reappraisal" because it challenges their self-reliance (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

Nonetheless, an individual can have mix attachment styles of which the launch is triggered by different situations or different attachment figures (Sperling & Berman, 1994).

Insecure Attachment Styles (Anxiety, Avoidance) and Psychological Distress.

In collaboration and contribution to John Bowlby's "Internal Working Models" (Bowlby, 1973), Mary Ainsworth (1970s) studied ambivalent (anxious) babies being obsessed with looking for their mothers' locations distressfully. She as well highlighted about how avoidant attached babies had less ability to express. Later, Mary Main (1991) introduced that adults with insecure attachment suffered the distress due to a lack of "metacognition". Peter Fonagy (2001) added that so as to stop insecure attachment to pass along generations, parents' "metalized affectivity" in soothing their babies' distress is necessary (Sperling & Berman, 1994).

Insecure Attachment Styles (Anxiety, Avoidance), Emotion Regulation Strategies (Cognitive Reappraisal, Expressive Suppression), and Relationship Satisfaction.

Individuals with insecure attachment cannot regulate emotions and therefore suffer from an unsatisfactory intimate relationship (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Nonetheless, their failure to constructively express their emotions can jeopardize the taste of interpersonal interaction (Keltner & Kring, 1998). In romantic relationship context, insecurely attached individual's inability to express emotional support to a lover when encountering hardship may cause a conflict. Consequently, emotion expression is deemed a powerful interpersonal emotion regulation (Rime', 2007). Hazan and Shaver (1987) theoretically explained that individual with insecure attachment felt scared for being abandoned. Their relationships were therefore at risk of breakup due to their less ability to trust or to be at proximity with others without uncomfortable feelings. They felt threatened upon interpersonal interdependence.

Conceptual Framework

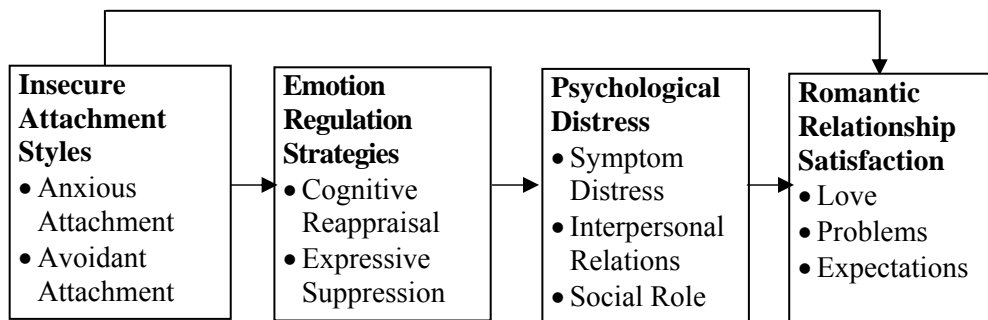


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of The Study

Method

As the conceptual framework may explain, the present study tested a causal relationships of the variables, i.e. insecure attachment styles (anxiety, avoidance), emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression),

psychological distress, and romantic relationship satisfaction. The Thai versions of western-based instruments (i.e. *Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form* (ECR-S), *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ), *Outcome Questionnaire* (OQ45) and *Relationship Assessment Scale* (RAS)) were developed and later tested for psychometric properties. In addition, direct and indirect causal relationships between insecure attachment styles and romantic relationship satisfaction, as well as mediating factors (i.e. emotion regulation strategies and psychological distress) were investigated.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire to measure each variable. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was a major analytical device to examine the causal relationships. Participants were Thai adults presently being in romantic relationship, and residing or working in Bangkok. Total sample size was $N=1,033$, with age ranged between 18-60 (mean age 33.40), 48.4% males and 51.6% females. It is important to note here that due to the political unrest in Bangkok during the last quarter of 2013 and the first half of 2014, total sample of $N=1,033$ participants were recruited all in one time (March 2014), employing purposive sampling. Fieldwork ran in Greater Bangkok area i.e. office buildings, government hospitals, and universities, etc.

Findings/Results

The result of this study verified that that insecure attachment styles (anxiety, avoidance) were influencers of romantic relationship satisfaction among urban Thai adults, as per standardized path coefficients shown in Table 1. Focusing on a direct impact, it revealed that avoidance attachment was the only one with direct impact to reduce relationship satisfaction. On the contrary, anxiety attachment did not show a direct impact on relationship satisfaction. Nonetheless, indirect impacts significantly introduced emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) as mediators which operated an intensity of psychological distress which negatively impacted relationship satisfaction. Expressive suppression was anyway beneficial to relationship satisfaction among urban Thai adults.

Table 1 basically revealed that avoidant attachment has direct as well as indirect influences on relationship satisfaction. Focusing on direct impact, the result reported that the higher the avoidance, the lower relationship satisfaction (-.46). As for indirect impacts, the result reported that the higher the avoidance, the lower use of emotion regulation strategies i.e. cognitive reappraisal (-.38) and expressive suppression (-.17). Furthermore, the lower the use of cognitive reappraisal, the higher the psychological distress (-.15), and so the lower relationship satisfaction (-.20). Moreover, the lower the use of expressive suppression, the lower psychological distress (.06) and so the higher relationship satisfaction (-.20).

As for anxiety attachment, only indirect impacts were found towards relationship satisfaction. The result reported that the higher the anxiety, the higher the use of emotion regulation strategies of cognitive reappraisal (.16) and expressive suppression (.15), as well as the higher psychological distress suffered (.33). Furthermore, the higher the use of cognitive reappraisal, the lower psychological

distress suffered (-.15) and therefore the higher relationship satisfaction (-.20). Finally, the lower the use of expressive suppression, the lower psychological distress suffered (.06) and consequently the higher relationship satisfaction (-.20).

Table 1: Standardized Path Coefficients in The Measurement Model

Factor Items	Anxiety	Avoidance	Reappraisal	Suppression	Distress	Relationship
Anxiety	-	.69	.16	.15	.33	-
Avoidance		-	-.38	-.17	.27	-.46
Reappraisal			-	-	-.15	-
Suppression				-	.06	.05
Distress					-	-.20
Relationship						-

Nonetheless, it is important to note here that assumption of SEM path analysis doesn't allow mediator variables to correlate. Therefore, although earlier research in Thailand reported an interchangeable use of Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression (e.g., Nimkannon, 2014), it was not the case for this present study.

Interestingly, although the Thai-translated versions of the instruments (*Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form* (ECR-S), *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ), *Outcome Questionnaire* (OQ), and *Relationship Assessment Scale* (RAS)) achieved sound psychometric properties, it is important to highlight culturally different findings here.

In testing psychometric properties of the Thai-translated version of these standardized instruments, *Confirmatory factor analysis* showed adequate factor structures of anxiety attachment, avoidance attachment, cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, symptom distress, interpersonal relations, social role, and relationship satisfaction to represent each key variable. Convergent and discriminant validity test also confirmed that the Thai-translated versions of instruments were valid. However, when looking into details as in Table 2, even after deleting factor items with low corrected item-total correlation, the result reported that Cronbach Alpha achieved among Thai participants in this study for the suppression subscale (.57) was lower than those of the western samples (.73-.78) (Gross & John, 2003; Spaapen, Waters, Brummer, Stopa, & Bucks, 2013).

Table 2: Corrected Item-Total Correlations and Cronbach's Alphas of ECR-S, OQ45, ERQ, and RAS

Factor Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
<u>Anxiety (Attachment style)</u>	
"I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like"	.57
"My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away"	.55
"I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them"	.44
"I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them"	.63

Table 2: Corrected Item-Total Correlations and Cronbach's Alphas of ECR-S, OQ45, ERQ, and RAS

Factor Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
Cronbach's alpha = .75	
<u>Avoidance (Attachment style)</u>	
"It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need"	.41
"I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back"	.57
"I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance"	.37
"I try to avoid getting too close to my partner"	.60
"I am nervous when partners get too close to me"	.56
Cronbach's alpha = .74	
<u>Symptom distress (Psychological distress)</u>	
"I tire quickly"	.51
"I feel no interest in things"	.40
"I blame myself for things"	.48
"I feel irritated"	.52
"I have thoughts of ending my life"	.53
"I feel weak"	.64
"I feel fearful"	.62
"After heavy drinking, I need a drink the next morning to get going"	.39
"I am a happy person"	.40
"I feel worthless"	.59
"I have difficulty concentrating"	.46
"I feel hopeless about the future"	.61
"I like myself"	.38
"Disturbing thoughts come into my mind that I cannot get rid of"	.59
"I have an upset stomach"	.47
"My heart pounds too much"	.55
"I am satisfied with my life"	.43
"I feel that something bad is going to happen"	.63
"I have sore muscles"	.51
"I feel afraid of open spaces, of driving, or being on buses, subways, and so forth"	.51
"I feel nervous"	.59
"I feel something is wrong with my mind"	.65
"I have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep"	.55
"I feel blue"	.65
"I have headaches"	.51
Cronbach's alpha = .92	
<u>Interpersonal relations (Psychological distress)</u>	
"I get along well with others"	.34
"I feel unhappy in my marriage/significant relationship"	.37
"I am concerned about my family troubles"	.49

Table 2: Corrected Item-Total Correlations and Cronbach's Alphas of ECR-S, OQ45, ERQ, and RAS

Factor Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
"I have an unfulfilling sex life"	.45
"I feel lonely"	.56
"I have frequent arguments"	.48
"I feel loved and wanted"	.38
"I feel annoyed by people who criticize my drinking (or drug use)"	.34
"I have trouble getting along with friends and close acquaintances"	.46
"I feel my love relationships are full and complete"	.45
"I am satisfied with my relationships with others"	.38
Cronbach's alpha = .77	
<u>Social role (Psychological distress)</u>	
"I feel stressed at work/school"	.37
"I find my work/school satisfying"	.31
"I enjoy my spare time"	.33
"I am not working/studying as well as I used to"	.47
"I have trouble at work/school because of drinking or drug use"	.39
"I feel that I am not doing well at work/school"	.50
"I have too many disagreements at work/school"	.53
"I feel angry enough at work/school to do something I might regret"	.51
Cronbach's alpha = .73	
<u>Cognitive reappraisal (Emotion regulation)</u>	
"When I want to feel more positive emotion (such as joy or amusement), I change what I'm thinking about"	.52
"When I want to feel less negative emotion (such as sadness or anger), I change what I'm thinking about"	.57
"When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm"	.36
"When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation"	.58
"I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in"	.63
"When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation"	.59
Cronbach's alpha = .79	
<u>Expressive suppression (Emotion regulation)</u>	
"I keep my emotions to myself"	.31
"I control my emotions by not expressing them"	.45
"When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them"	.38
Cronbach's alpha = .57	
<u>Relationship satisfaction</u>	
"How well does your partner meet your needs?"	.65

Table 2: Corrected Item-Total Correlations and Cronbach's Alphas of ECR-S, OQ45, ERQ, and RAS

Factor Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
"In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?"	.69
"How good is your relationship compared to most?"	.62
"How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?"	.45
"To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?"	.65
"How much do you love your partner?"	.56
"How many problems are there in your relationship?"	.41
Cronbach's alpha = .82	

Discussion

Psychometric properties of the Thai-translated measures

As mentioned that even with the sound psychometric properties achieved for the overall Thai-translated version of instruments, Cronbach Alpha achieved among Thai participants in this study for the suppression subscale (.57) is lower than those of the western samples (.73-.78) (Gross & John, 2003; Spaapen, Waters, Brummer, Stopa, & Bucks, 2013). This is in line with recent studies in Thailand by Nimkannon (2014) and Zohar (2012) from Assumption University whose studies revealed Cronbach's alpha of suppression subscale at .56 and .58, respectively. Thai values rooted in the Buddhism belief (i.e. equanimity, calmness, and acceptance) can explain this incidence, such that a peaceful state of mind as well as the unchanged of existing state of affairs are highly treasured by Thais (Tori & Bilmes, 2002). In western culture, positive emotional experience is held in high regards, whereas in Asian culture, being humble and suppressing positive emotional experience are what people value (Matsumoto et al., 2008; Tsai et al., 2006). Therefore, suppression (established as Thai cultural norm) might happen in the form of regular emotional response which launches when situations together with cultural contexts enable such emotion regulation (Mesquita & Albert, 2007).

Role of Cognitive Reappraisal, Expressive Suppression, and Psychological Distress in the Causal Relationship between Insecure Attachment Styles and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

This study introduced a measurement model investigating both direct and indirect causal associations between insecure attachment styles and romantic relationship satisfaction, with mediating power of emotion regulation strategies and psychological distress. It confirmed that cognitive reappraisal affected romantic relationship satisfaction indirectly, given a decrease in distress. In addition, it also revealed that expressive suppression within Thai cultural context can cushion insecure attachment and is helpful with romantic relationship, yet indirectly yielded a distress cost. Psychological distress was apparently a disadvantage of utilizing suppression. This is understandable given an absence of "intrapersonal congruence",

"authenticity", together with "emotional coherence" (Dan-Glauser & Gross, 2013; English & John, 2013).

Among Thai participants in this study, a strong association among insecure attachment styles (anxiety, avoidance), psychological distress, and relationship satisfaction was found, where both anxious attachment as well as avoidant attachment heightened psychological distress and consequently decreased relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, anxiously attached Thais were to make more attempt to regulate emotion than the avoidant attached Thais. This is not a surprise as the avoidant are more likely to prevent the use of cognitive reappraisal as it doesn't match with their self-reliance approach, and withdraw their suppression in order to deactivate the attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

On the contrary, anxiously attached Thais made a lot of effort to heal negative emotional experience. This is explainable given that anxious attachment has a higher tendency to influence cognitive reappraisal with an aim to fix unpleasant emotional experience (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Gross & John, 2003). The reappraisal then helps handle psychological distress and enables a more satisfactory romantic relationship.

In addition, the findings also emphasized an incidence that the more anxious Thais were, the more Thais suppressed, so as to maintain interpersonal harmonization. In the same route, the more Thais wished to avoid (or deactivate) the attachment, the less Thais suppressed so as to interrupt the cultural harmonization. Social or cultural norms really played a crucial role here when coming to emotion regulation. Given the fact that each culture aims for different goal upon emotion regulation (Tsai et al., 2007), suppression will be used when such emotion doesn't align with culturally/socially approved norms (Cheung & Park, 2010; Mauss & Butler, 2010; Mesquita et al., 2014; Soto et al., 2011).

Even though this study has pointed a new perspective of an association between insecure attachment styles and emotion regulation strategies in influencing romantic relationships among urban Thai adults, it is important to note that participants of cohabitation and divorce group is recommended to be considered in future research. This is due to an increasing incidence of cohabitation and divorce in Thailand. It shall then enable a wider generalizability of the findings (Euromonitor, 2011; Nationmultimedia, 2014).

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