



Towards explaining relationship dissatisfaction in Chinese dating couples: Relationship disillusionment, emergent distress, or insecure attachment style?



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ABSTRACT

The sample ($N = 712$) comprised both partners from 356 heterosexual dating partners living in Chongqing, China. Participants completed a self-report battery that included measures of relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with in-law relations, passionate love, relationship aggrandizement and disillusionment, conflict tactics, and attachment styles. Structural equation modeling indicated attachment difficulties, particularly high levels of avoidant attachment, were associated with elevations in disillusionment as well as conflict which, in turn, predicted decreased satisfaction with one's partner and in-laws. Similar strengths of association between these experiences and overall model fits were observed within each gender. In sum, the study provides plausible integrated accounts of links between attachment style and relationship dissatisfaction within dating couples in a particular non-Western context.

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1. Introduction

Satisfying relationships can be sources of individual and mutual comfort, well-being, and fulfillment (Meunier & Baker, 2012), while unsatisfying relationships can result in emotional turmoil and ill health (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014). Given the relative benefits and costs of more and less satisfying couple relationships, respectively, theorists and researchers have attempted to pinpoint factors critical to explaining relationship satisfaction and continuity versus relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution. Competing paradigms have emphasized the roles of (1) enduring relationship dynamics (e.g., attachment styles), (2) idealization and disillusionment, and (3) skills that conflict management as key influences on relationship stability and satisfaction in dating U.S. couples.

1.1. Disillusionment model

In explaining how relationship dissatisfaction develops, disillusionment perspective theorists have posited that passion during courtship causes partners to highlight their own and their partner's positive characteristics while discounting each other's faults (e.g., Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 2001b). Although a premise of this perspective is that idealization is reduced and disillusionment is increased as a relationship continues, presumably there are individual differences in the extent to

which relationship idealization or aggrandizement and passion are maintained. Consequently the degree to which disillusionment is experienced has a direct bearing of how dissatisfying one's relationship becomes (Huston et al., 2001b).

Unfortunately, romantic partners who are too idealistic early in a relationship are susceptible to disillusionment as previously hidden differences surface (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001a; Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006) and efforts to be considerate and responsive are relaxed (Murray et al., 2011). Some existing research suggests that idealistic biases might hasten distress. Newlyweds who make charitable attributions for serious problems also experience steeper declines in satisfaction (McNulty, O'Mara & Karney, 2008). Disillusionment perspectives would link and/or decreased aggrandizement of the partner over time. In this cautionary light, people who believe their partner mirrors their perceived ideal might experience disappointment as time later reveals their partner has fallen short of these lofty standards. Meanwhile, Acker and Davis (1992) found when the levels of intimacy and passion generally decline, the great the amount of dissatisfaction. In sum, disillusionment model proponents contend that decreased aggrandizement and passion of partners, and increased disillusionment lead to marital dissatisfaction, marital distress, and divorce.

1.2. Emergent distress model

The model posits that early in relationships, partners are deeply in love and highly affectionate. However, over time, previously overlooked

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problems surface and cause friction (Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997). For partners who lack interpersonal skills necessary for resolving differences, antagonism rises and grievances accumulate. Increases in conflict coincide with erosions in relationship satisfaction and commitment (Gottman, 2014). Emergent distress model underscore exacerbations in negativity or conflict and failures in their management as key determinants of relationship dissatisfaction and/or termination risk (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

In general, conflict is regarded as negative and harmful to the family, and therefore partners tend to avoid conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2012). Lambert, Engh, Hasbun, and Holzer (2012) concluded higher levels of marital conflict are associated with dissatisfaction. In another study of 100 heterosexual dating couples, high levels of conflict were related high level relationship dissatisfaction (Papp & Witt, 2010). Gottman's (2014) analysis of distressed couple relationships suggests, in part, that if distress intensifies, spouses may antagonize each other, furthermore, once partners decide their conflicts are intractable, they may reduce their interdependence.

1.3. Enduring dynamics model

This model presumes that couples' courtship experiences accurately foretell what their marriage will be like (Caughlin & Huston, 2006), marriage is an extension of love, for person's personality is invariant, such as attachment style. Existing studies have identified adult attachment as a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Timm & Keiley, 2011). Attachment researchers have been successful in generating a large body of theory-consistent findings showing that secure attachment is associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction in both dating and married couples (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002). Meanwhile, Ho et al. (2012) found among young dating couples in the United States and Hong Kong. Specifically, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were negatively related to relationship quality.

1.4. Study hypotheses

While each model has garnered at least some support, it is not clear whether one of these accounts has more utility than the others in explaining individual differences in relationship dissatisfaction. Considering this issue may aid in identifying factors that are most relevant to developing fulfilling couple relationships and isolating interventions targets that foster improvements in highly dissatisfied couples. As well, empirical tests of these models have been conducted primarily within samples living in the United States and Europe. As a consequence, it is not clear whether features of these accounts are only salient to explaining relationship satisfaction in cultures such as the U.S., or whether such experiences are potentially universal and apply to couples living in very different cultures around the world. In the study, we assessed how well models based on the integration of key attachment model features and facets of disillusionment versus emergent distress perspectives explain variable marital satisfaction levels within heterosexual dating couples in mainland China.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 356 heterosexual dating couples including both partners. On average, participants were 21.15 years of age ($SD = 2.18$, range: 18 to 29 years) and had been involved in their current relationship for 1.75 years ($SD = 1.42$ range from four weeks to 8 years). A substantial majority (90.62%) were of Han ethnicity while remaining volunteers were members of 12 ethnic minorities, most notably the Tuja

(1.97%), Hui (1.26%), and Tibetan (0.98%). In relation to personal education levels, 1.12% of the sample reported less than high school completion, 1.72% completed high school, and 97.16% reported post-secondary education or training.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

Demographic items assessed age, marital status, gender, ethnicity, and duration of current relationship. In addition, highest level of personal education (less than high school completion, high school completion, and post-high school training/education) was assessed.

2.2.2. Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988)

The RAS is a 7-item measure of relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction with one's partner. Items were rated between 1 = *unsatisfied* and 5 = *extremely satisfied* with higher scores reflecting more relationship satisfaction. Past research with mainland Chinese couples replicated the original RAS factor structure (Jackson, Chen, Guo, & Gao, 2006). In this study, alphas were $\alpha = 0.88$ for men and $\alpha = 0.89$ for women.

2.2.3. Relationship Disillusionment Scale (DS; Niehuis & Bartell, 2006)

The DS is an 11-item measure of disenchantment and disappointment with one's relationship and romantic partner. Items were rated between 1 = *strong disagreement* and 7 = *strong agreement* with higher scores reflecting more relationship disillusionment. PCA resulted in interpretable 11-item unidimensional solutions (men: KMO: 0.95, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$; women: KMO: 0.95, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$) that explained 71.32% of the scale variance among men and 71.44% among woman of the variance in the PCA solution and reflected marital disillusionment. Alpha coefficients were $\alpha = 0.96$ for both men and women in this research.

2.2.4. Marital Aggrandizement Scale (MAS; O'Rourke & Cappeliez, 2002)

The 18-item marital aggrandizement scale assesses idealization of one's spouse and relationship. Items were rated between 1 = *strongly disagreement* and 5 = *strongly agreement* with higher scores reflecting more aggrandizement. PCA within each gender resulted in equivalent, interpretable 14-item univariate solutions (men: KMO: 0.92, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$; women: KMO: 0.91, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$) that explained 36.82% of the MAS variance for men and 35.54% for women. Four other items failing to load above 0.40 on the component (e.g., "My marriage could be happier than it is") were dropped from the scale. MAS alphas were $\alpha = 0.87$ for men and $\alpha = 0.87$ for women in this research.

2.2.5. Passionate Love Scale (PLS; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986)

The 15-item PLS is a widely-used measure of intense longing and physiological arousal in relation to one's partner. Items were rated from 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*definitely true*) with higher scores indicating more passionate love. In this research, interpretable 15-item univariate solutions (men: KMO: 0.96, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$; women: KMO: 0.96, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$) explained 64.50% and 60.26% of the PLS variance for men and women, respectively. Alphas were $\alpha = 0.95$ for men and $\alpha = 0.96$ for women in the sample.

2.2.6. Relationship Dynamics Scale (RDS; Stanley & Markman, 1996)

The 8-item RDS evaluates volatility and problems in relationship communication and conflict management. Items were rated between 1 = *almost never* and 3 = *frequently* with higher scores reflecting more relationship conflict. In this study, PCA resulted in interpretable eight-item unidimensional solutions (men: KMO: 0.82, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$; women: KMO: 0.83, Bartlett's test: $p < 0.001$) that accounted for 35.64% and 34.81% of the scale variance among men and women, respectively. RDS alphas were $\alpha = 0.74$ for men and $\alpha = 0.73$ for women in the sample.

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