



Gender, attachment orientations, rumination, and symptomatic distress: Test of a moderated mediation model



Numan Turan ^{a,*}, William T. Hoyt ^a, Özgür Erdur-Baker ^b

^a Department of Counseling Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

^b Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Education, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined rumination as a fundamental cognitive mechanism mediating the risk factors in insecure attachment orientations to symptomatic distress, and gender was tested as moderator of this mediation mechanism. A sample of Turkish university students composed of 278 females and 308 males ($N = 586$, $M_{age} = 22.43$, $SD_{age} = 2.21$) completed the self-report measures. Mediation and moderation analyses performed based on linear regression models partially supported the research hypotheses. Attachment orientations and rumination significantly predicted an increase in symptomatic distress. Rumination fully mediated the effect of secure and preoccupied attachment orientations, and partially mediated the effect of fearful-avoidant attachment on distress. Dismissive-avoidant attachment was related neither to rumination nor to symptomatic distress. Nonsignificant moderator findings supported equivalent mediation models for women and men, despite significant gender differences in levels of attachment, rumination, and distress. Rumination is a significant feature of preoccupied and fearful-avoidant attachment, and mediates their effects on distressed moods in the Turkish cultural context.

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1. Introduction

People differ in their ways of coping with life adversities. Attachment theory has proven to be a rich framework for understanding these individual differences in cognitive processes regarding stressors. According to this theory, attachment orientations inform one's overall capacity to manage a wide array of interpersonal (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007) and non-interpersonal stressors (Lopez, Mauricio, Gormley, Simko, & Berger, 2001; Mikulincer, Ein-Dor, Solomon, & Shaver, 2011). The mechanisms by which attachment orientations lead to distress include cognitive processing styles such as rumination (Burnette, Davis, Green, Worthington, & Bradfield, 2009; Marshall, Bejanyan, & Ferenczi, 2013). In the present study, we examined viability of this mediation model in a sample of Turkish college students, and also tested the hypothesis, informed by research on cultural practices (Turan, Kocalevent, Quintana, Erdur-Baker, & Diestelmann, 2016), that the mediated paths will be moderated by gender in this Turkish sample.

1.1. Attachment theory

Attachment theory proposes that how people are treated in early caregiver interactions leads to forming cognitive-affective scripts,

which are called attachment orientations (Bowlby, 1969; Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015). These attachment orientations were examined in the two-dimensional space – shown in Fig. 1 – with anxiety-proneness on the x axis and avoidance-proneness on the y axis (e.g., Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Attachment anxiety refers to fear of intimacy and one's tendency to overly worry about problems while attachment avoidance refers to avoidance of intimacy and one's tendency to suppress worries. These two dimensions compose four attachment orientations (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), which are called secure (e.g., comfort with closeness – low anxiety and avoidance), preoccupied (e.g., devaluing self over others), dismissive-avoidant (e.g., avoidant of intimacy and low anxiety), and fearful-avoidant attachment orientations (e.g., socially withdrawn, negative view of self and others) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Insecure attachment orientations are risk factors for developing psychological disorders while secure attachment orientation promotes wellbeing and resilience to stress (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2011).

1.2. Response style theory

Response style theory examines rumination, which is a passive thinking style that keeps people dwell on problems and plays a significant role in exacerbating distressed moods (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The act of rumination increases negative thinking, deteriorates instrumental coping behaviors and problem solving, and interacts with

* Corresponding author at: Department of Counseling Psychology, School of Education, UW-Madison, 335 Education Building, 1000 Bascom Mall, Madison, WI 53706-1326, USA.
E-mail address: nturan@wisc.edu (N. Turan).

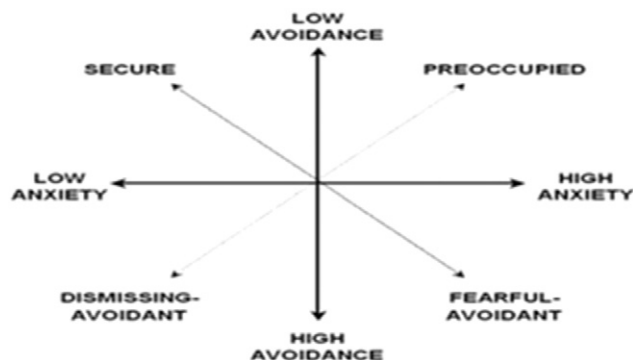


Fig. 1. The theoretical representation of four attachment orientations in relation to the two-dimensional model.

pessimistic cognitive processes, thereby prolonging distressed moods (for a review, Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Ruminators not only focus passively on their problems (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) but also suffer from a false perception that those problems are thereby being solved (Lyubomirsky, Kasri, Chang, & Chung, 2006). Rumination impinges on people's ability to implement adaptive solutions (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008) and may inhibit people, particularly women, from seeking professional help (Turan & Erdur-Baker, 2014). Rumination is thus viewed as predictor of psychological disorders and strongly associated with elevated psychological distress (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

1.3. Attachment and rumination effects on distress: Gender and cultural context

1.3.1. Research in western samples

Rumination has been shown to mediate the effect of insecure attachment on adaptation (Burnette et al., 2009; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). High attachment anxiety is positively associated with rumination, contributing to difficulty with managing stressors (Burnette et al., 2009; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007) and life transitions such as relational breakup (Burnette et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2013). In theory, attachment avoidance might be thought to be negatively associated with rumination, as attachment avoidance implies that relationship outcomes have low importance (Mikulincer et al., 2003). The bi-dimensional model in Fig. 1 implies that avoidant attachment can have either high anxiety (fearful-avoidant attachment) or low anxiety (dismissive-avoidant attachment) prone (Mikulincer et al., 2003), which may explain the failure to find a link between avoidance and rumination (e.g., Garrison, Kahn, Miller, & Sauer, 2014). We therefore study four attachment orientations to gain more insight into possible combinations of attachment anxiety and avoidance in predicting rumination and subsequently mental health.

1.3.2. Culture and attachment

We aim to replicate this mediation model within a Turkish sample of college students. There is an ongoing debate about whether attachment orientations are universal (Van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008) or variable across cultures (Keller, 2013; Keller & Harwood, 2009; Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000). For example, attachment practices in collectivist cultures lead to higher incidence of anxiety-prone attachment orientations (Jin, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2010; Rothbaum et al., 2000; Sümer & Güngör, 1999) while those in individualist cultures lead to higher incidence of the avoidance-prone attachment orientations (Simonelli, De Palo, Moretti, Baratter, & Porreca, 2014). What is maladaptive in one culture may be normative or even adaptive in another cultural context (Jin et al., 2010; Turan et al., 2016). Turkish cultural expectations promote interdependence and relational autonomy (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005), and may be viewed as

congruent with preoccupied and secure attachment orientations but not with dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment.

1.3.3. Gender, attachment, rumination, and distress

Women report ruminating more on problems (Johnson & Whisman, 2013) and have higher attachment anxiety and lower attachment avoidance compared to men (Giudice, 2011). Women also report higher depression compared to men, which may be partially explained by their tendency to ruminate (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), in addition to other factors leading to gender differences such as biopsychosocial factors (Hyde, Mezulis, & Abramson, 2008). However, for attachment patterns, "...the effects of sex either go entirely untested or are examined only to be statistically controlled for" (Giudice, 2011, p. 193). Meta-analytic findings from European and Middle Eastern samples indicated higher scores for anxiety dimensions in women while avoidance dimensions in men (Giudice, 2011). The gender role differences are reported between Turkish women and men. Turkish women experience cultural control mechanisms and are exposed to idealized traditional gender roles (e.g., chastity or being a good mother) (Erden-İmamoğlu, 2013). Therefore, we examine if such gendered expectations are reflected in the proposed mediation mechanisms beyond the gender differences reported to exist in attachment orientations and ruminations.

1.4. Hypotheses

Based on the earlier findings and theoretical accounts, in addition to testing the proposed moderated-mediation model in the Turkish cultural context we hypothesize that:

H1. There will be gender differences in rumination and attachment patterns. Women will report higher rumination and preoccupied attachment while men will report higher fearful-avoidant and dismissive-avoidant attachment.

H2. Both preoccupied and fearful-avoidant attachment will be positively related to rumination and distress, with rumination mediating the effect of fearful and preoccupied attachment on distress. Secure attachment will be negatively associated with both rumination and distress, and again rumination mediates the effect on distress. Dismissive-avoidant attachment has been less studied, so we viewed these analyses as exploratory, predicting weak relations with rumination and distress, and examining the mediating role of rumination.

H3. Gender will moderate the path from predictor to mediator (i.e., the attachment-rumination relation), from mediator to outcome (i.e., the rumination-distress relation), and predictor to outcome (attachment-distress relation). Preoccupied attachment will be more strongly related to rumination among women, subsequently will predict higher distress while this mechanism will relate with lower rumination and lower distress among men. We will also explore the gender differences in avoidance-prone attachment in predicting stress in women and men.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

From Turkish public universities, 586 university students were recruited. We did not ask about students' ethnicity and socio-economic status. However, these universities attract students from various socio-economic status and represents typical college students of Turkey. The sample included 278 female and 308 male university students ($M_{age} = 22.43$; $SD = 2.21$). The majority ($n = 522$) reported continuing their bachelor studies, with $n = 37$ enrolled in a graduate school, and 27 did not provide a response. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, indicating that the study aimed to measure the relationship between individuals' coping resources, attachment

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