



# Perceived support and relational conflict as mediators linking attachment orientations with depressive symptoms: A comparison of dating individuals from Hong Kong and the United States



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## ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study investigates how perceived support and relational conflict mediate the associations of attachment orientations with depressive symptoms among 367 (153 Chinese, 214 American) dating individuals. Results revealed a pan-cultural association of attachment anxiety with depressive symptoms mediated through relational conflict. Attachment avoidance was more strongly related to depressive symptoms through relational conflict in the Chinese sample than in the U.S. sample. Furthermore, attachment anxiety was related to perceived support across both cultural samples, while attachment avoidance was more strongly related to perceived support in the Chinese sample than in the U.S. sample. Findings are discussed in terms of the cultural logics governing interpersonal relationships across cultures.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment research has long assumed that health implications of attachment orientations are universal across cultures (Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Posada & Jacobs, 2001). This assumption is challenged, however, by recent studies on cultural differences in the nature, antecedents, and consequences of attachment (Friedman et al., 2010; Rothbaum, Kakinuma, Nagaoka, & Azuma, 2007). Nonetheless, limited efforts have been devoted to understanding the functions and mechanisms of the attachment system for persons of different cultural heritages. The current study addresses this research gap from two aspects. First, focusing on perceived support and relational conflict as relational mediators, we examine the manner in which attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are associated with depressive symptoms across cultures. Second, we investigate how the relational mediating models of attachment dynamics differ

across cultures to illustrate the different cultural logics governing attachment relationships.

### 1.1. Adult attachment orientations and depressive Symptoms

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973; Bowlby, 1980) posits that humans, based on their interactions with attachment figures in early years, form different types of attachment systems that govern their regulatory strategies to cope with stress. Once formed, attachment systems remain stable and shape the characteristics of their relationships with other attachment figures throughout the life span (Bowlby, 1980; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, & Wilson, 2003).

To characterize individual differences in attachment systems, researchers proposed two orthogonal dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Individuals with high attachment anxiety tend to be oversensitive to relationship-threatening cues and cling to their attachment figures with the fear of being abandoned; individuals with high attachment avoidance tend to distance themselves from their attachment figures to maintain

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psychological independence and to avoid being rejected (Brennan et al., 1998).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) posits that attachment orientations carry implications for health. Attachment orientations, particularly attachment anxiety, were found to correlate with more frequent reports of depressive symptoms among college students (Burnette, Davis, Green, Worthington, & Bradfield, 2009; Murphy & Bates, 1997), older adults (Besser & Priel, 2008), women with eating disorders (Tasca et al., 2009), individuals with traumatic experiences (Zakin, Solomon, & Neria, 2003), married couples (Besser, & Priel, 2003; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005; Whiffen, Foot, & Thompson, 2007) and three-generation triads (Besser, & Priel, 2005; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996).

### 1.2. Relational dynamics arising from attachment orientations

The associations of attachment orientations and depressive symptoms have been explained in terms of social support (Feeney, Alexander, Noller, & Hohaus, 2003; Mak, & Bond, 2010; Simpson et al., 2003), self-critical vulnerability (Besser & Priel, 2005), affect regulation strategies (Tasca et al., 2009), forgiveness (Burnette et al., 2009) and neediness (Besser & Priel, 2008). However, the relational dynamics underlying attachment system have not been adequately investigated. Social relationships could be well represented by two separable dimensions, namely perceived support and relational conflict (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). Bowlby (1980) proposes that the perceptions of negative and supportive interactions help to determine depressive symptoms. Indeed, studies found that perceived support and relational conflict carry great weight on determining psychological distress (Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Bloor, 2004). This study thus examined the relative importance of perceived support and relational conflict in linking attachment orientations to depressive symptoms.

Perceived support is the extent to which a relationship partner is perceived as available or utilizable for garnering social resources (Pierce et al., 1991). Perceived support has shown to be closely associated with attachment orientations. Studies have consistently revealed that individuals with high attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance perceive less social support in intimate relationships compared to securely attached counterparts (Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2003; Moreira et al., 2003; Priel, & Shamai, 1995). Notably, a recent study found that perceived support mediated the relationship between attachment orientations and depressive symptoms (Mak & Bond, 2010). Based on these findings, we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 1.** Perceived support would mediate the relationship between attachment orientations and depressive symptoms.

Relationship conflict, as negative exchanges that would be accompanied by negative feelings and relationship dissolution when unresolved (Pistole, & Arricade, 2003), is a typical threat to relationship stability (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Relational conflict has been proven to correlate with attachment orientations. For instance, individuals with higher attachment avoidance were found to experience greater anger (Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999) and to avoid expressing their needs openly (Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002). On the other hand, individuals with higher attachment anxiety reported more intense conflicts with their romantic partner (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005), perceived ambiguous social interactions as hurtful (Collins, & Feeney, 2004), and handled negative exchanges in a relationship-disruptive manner (Simpson et al., 1996). These relational styles may provoke their romantic partner's anger, thereby escalating relational conflict (Bradford et al., 2002). Given

the established positive association between relational conflict and depressive symptoms (Whiffen et al., 2007), we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 2.** Relational conflict would mediate the associations of attachment orientations with depressive symptoms.

### 1.3. Relational mechanisms of attachment systems across cultures

Inviting further complexity, the mechanisms underlying attachment dynamics and cultural orientations may also vary depending on culture. The culture fit hypothesis holds that personal characteristics may predict adjustment depending on the extent to which they match dominant cultural values (Lu, 2006; Ward, & Chang, 1997). Applying the cultural fit hypothesis to attachment research, researchers have argued that the impact of attachment orientations on psychological outcomes would also differ across cultures, given that the behavioral patterns associated with attachment orientations may match dominant norms concerning relationship management to a different extent (Friedman et al., 2010). In particular, they argued that attachment avoidance would be related to relationship and psychological problems in collectivistic cultures, since emotional distance and independence, emphasized by attachment avoidance, are in conflict with collectivistic cultural norms governing interpersonal associations. However, attachment anxiety may be universally related to psychological and relational problems, as a distrustful and self-serving interpersonal style will be discouraged by both American and Chinese cultures. Guided by this argument, we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 3.** Attachment avoidance would have a stronger association with depressive symptoms through the mediation of relational conflict and perceived support among Chinese than among Americans, but such mediation model underlying attachment anxiety and depressive symptoms would be universal across cultures.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

College students from the United States ( $N = 214$ ; 47% males) and Hong Kong, China ( $N = 153$ ; 46% males) participated in the study. All participants indicated that they had been involved in a romantic relationship lasting for at least 3 months. For the U.S. participants, mean age was 19.03 years ( $SD = 1.23$ ) and mean relationship length was 17.22 months ( $SD = 12.26$ ). For the Chinese participants, mean age was 20.44 years ( $SD = 1.90$ ) and mean relationship length was 23.47 months ( $SD = 21.34$ ). All participants from the United States and most participants from Hong Kong participated in the study as a partial fulfillment of a course requirement; other Hong Kong participants received HK\$50 (about US\$6.5) for their participation.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Attachment orientations

Attachment orientations were measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (Brennan et al., 1998). It includes two subscales containing 18 items each, tapping on attachment-avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.") and attachment-anxiety (e.g., "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them."). All items were rated on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*disagree*

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