



Brief Report

The role of adult attachment and alexithymia in dyadic adjustment

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ABSTRACT

Background: The present study aimed to investigate if romantic attachment dimensions and alexithymia could significantly predict the dyadic adjustment of individuals in a romantic relationship.

Methods: To achieve these goals, 410 participants, who were in a romantic relationship, were asked to complete an anonymous online survey, which included the following measures: Toronto Alexithymia Scale, Experience in Close Relationship Scale and Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

Results: The hierarchical regression analysis revealed that only avoidant attachment dimension was a significant predictor of dyadic adjustment in the final model. However, alexithymia was found to be negatively and indirectly associated with dyadic adjustment through the effect of avoidant attachment. Indeed, avoidant attachment significantly mediated the association between alexithymia and dyadic adjustment.

Limitations: We used self-report measures, and we adopted a cross-sectional design. The sample comprised a higher number of women and well-educated participants.

Conclusions: The current findings highlight the importance, from a clinical perspective, of paying attention to the planning of tailored psychological treatments directed at individuals who are in a relationship to reduce the levels of insecure attachment and alexithymia.

1. Introduction

Research on romantic relationships has often been focused on dyadic adjustment, a multidimensional construct that includes the subjective perception of tensions in the couple and degree of happiness, agreement, affective expression, and cohesion between the partner (Spanier, 1976). Several personal, relational, and psychological characteristics of an individual can play a role in dyadic adjustment (Constant et al., 2021; Romeo et al., 2022).

Among those factors, attachment determines the way of being in a relationship with the other, in terms of defining the image of self and the image of the other (Constant et al., 2021; Li and Chan, 2012). Particularly, the anxious attachment dimension characterises individuals who worry about being abandoned by their partners, while the avoidant dimension is typical of individuals who fear closeness and dependence on others (Li and Chan, 2012). Both those insecure attachment dimensions have been negatively associated with the quality of romantic relationships (Siegel et al., 2019). Those dimensions are also associated with difficulties in emotion recognition and regulation processes (Besharat et al., 2014; Lyvers et al., 2021; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Montebanocci et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2014).

Alexithymia is characterised by difficulties in identifying and describing one's own emotions and an externally oriented thinking (Taylor et al., 2003). Since it has often been associated with difficulties in sentimental communication with partners and lower relationship satisfaction (Hesse and Gibbons, 2019; Lyvers et al., 2021), alexithymia can play a role in dyadic adjustment, together with attachment dimensions (Besharat et al., 2014; El Frenn et al. 2022; Karukivi et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2014).

Although some evidence of the relationship between attachment dimensions, alexithymia, and romantic relationship is present in the literature, it is not extensive and previous studies often investigated the quality of intimate relationship using different constructs that only partly overlap with that of dyadic adjustment (Besharat et al., 2014; El Frenn et al. 2022; Karukivi et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2014). Interestingly, in addition to the negative association between insecure attachment dimensions and relationship quality (Siegel et al., 2019), and between alexithymia and relationship satisfaction (Hesse and Gibbons, 2019; Lyvers et al., 2021), studies that have examined both alexithymia and attachment dimensions have shown that the association between those constructs and relationship satisfaction may not be direct (Besharat et al., 2014; El Frenn et al., 2022; Karukivi et al., 2014; Taylor

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et al., 2014). For example, Karukivi et al. (2014) found that alexithymia was not directly associated with marital satisfaction, and the study of Besharat et al. (2014) showed that attachment dimensions played a role in the association between alexithymia and marital satisfaction.

Based on this evidence, the main aim of this study was to investigate the predictive role of anxiety and avoidance attachment dimensions and alexithymia in the dyadic adjustment of individuals in a romantic relationship. We hypothesised that both these constructs could play a significant role in explaining dyadic adjustment.

2. Methods

Data were collected using an anonymous online survey from 4 December 2020 to 10 January 2021. A snowball sampling strategy was employed, wherein the participants were initially recruited via online advertisements and were encouraged to pass the survey link to others. The inclusion criteria were as follows: > 18-years-old, sufficient knowledge of the Italian language, and being in a stable romantic relationship. The following definition of stable relationship was provided to the participants: "A relationship between two partners who share aspects related not only to sexual intimacy, but also to value, spiritual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. It is a relationship based on mutual trust, openness to the other and sharing of daily life and planning" (Spanier, 1976). A total of 410 participants were eligible for the study and made up the final sample. Participants were asked to provide sociodemographic information and to complete the following validated questionnaires in Italian: (1) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Gentili et al., 2002; Spanier, 1976), to evaluate dyadic adjustment; (2) Toronto Alexithymia scale (TAS-20) (Bressi et al., 1996; Taylor et al., 2003), to assess alexithymia; and (3) Experience in Close Relationship Scale (ECR-12) (Brugnera et al., 2019; Lafontaine et al., 2016), to evaluate attachment to romantic partners. The current data are part of a wider investigation and only those relevant to the research question will be presented here.

In order to reach the goal of this study, descriptive data for the total sample were first computed and presented as means with standard deviations, for continuous variables, or frequencies with percentages, for categorical variables.

As a second step, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to evaluate if sociodemographic variables (age and gender), alexithymia, and anxiety/avoidant attachment dimensions could significantly predict the DAS total score. Finally, the PROCESS macro 4 for SPSS (model 4) was employed to verify the possible statistical mediation of attachment in the association between alexithymia and dyadic adjustment. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals (CI) were calculated based on 5000 bootstrap samples.

Normal distribution was assessed using the indices for asymmetry and kurtosis. All variables were normally distributed (values for asymmetry and kurtosis between -2 and $+2$ are considered acceptable in order to prove normal univariate distribution; George and Mallery, 2010). Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Armonk, NY, USA: IBM Corp.).

This study was approved by the University of Turin Ethics Committee (protocol n. 488755) and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided written informed consent.

3. Results

Descriptive data of the sample are presented in **Supplementary material 1**.

Results of the regression analysis showed that alexithymia ceased to be a significant predictor of DAS total score with the introduction of the ECR 'Avoidance' subscale into the model. In fact, this variable ($\beta = -0.548$, $p < .001$) was the only significant predictor of dyadic

adjustment (DAS total score) in Model 3. The final model was statistically significant [$F(5, 404) = 46.690$, $p < .001$] and explained 37 % of the variance (Table 1).

Starting from these results, we assumed that attachment avoidance might be a mediator in the relationship between alexithymia and dyadic adjustment. Therefore, a mediation model was tested.

Results of mediation analysis showed a significant indirect effect of TAS-20 total score on DAS total score via ECR 'Avoidance', $b = -0.241$, BCa CI [-0.316 , -0.172] (Fig. 1). This suggests that higher levels of alexithymia were related to lower dyadic adjustment, indirectly through the effect of avoidant attachment dimension.

4. Discussion

Confirming our hypotheses, the present study revealed that both attachment and alexithymia play a significant role in dyadic adjustment.

Specifically, avoidant attachment dimension was a significant predictor of dyadic adjustment: higher scores on attachment avoidance were, in fact, associated with lower levels of dyadic adjustment.

It is well known both from theoretical framework and from several empirical studies that attachment plays a significant role in the quality of couple relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Several researchers have described a negative association between both anxious and avoidant attachment and dyadic adjustment (Nofle and Shaver, 2006; Li and Chan, 2012; Siegel et al., 2019). Particularly, in line with our findings, Nofle and Shaver (2006) found that avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with relationship quality, and it was found to predict relationship quality better than personality factors.

Moreover, our results showed that alexithymia was negatively and indirectly associated with dyadic adjustment: avoidant attachment dimension mediated the association between alexithymia and dyadic adjustment.

Compared to this result, previous evidence seems to be more inconsistent. Some studies have shown a direct association between alexithymia and marital satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2014; Hesse and Gibbons, 2019; Lyvers et al., 2021), whereas others have revealed an indirect association. Particularly, in line with our results, the study by Besharat et al. (2014) found that avoidant attachment moderated the relationship between alexithymia and marital satisfaction. Similar results were obtained by Karukivi et al. (2014) in a sample of pregnant women: alexithymia was significantly associated with higher anxiety and avoidance in the relationship and appeared to have a significant effect on relationship-related anxiety and avoidance.

Taken together, these findings seem to emphasize not only the important role that both adult attachment and alexithymia play in dyadic adjustment, but also the complex link that the same variables have with each other within the couple's health.

Indeed, it is well known that alexithymia and attachment are two closely related factors and that people with insecure attachment often report increased levels of alexithymia (e.g., Montebanocci et al., 2004). These constructs are relatively stable in adulthood and can influence self-regulation processes and behavioural strategies in romantic relations (e.g., Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007).

4.1. Limitations

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, we adopted a cross-sectional design, not allowing causal inferences. Second, we used only self-report measures and an online survey, which might facilitate responses influenced by social desirability bias or random compilation. Third, our sample comprised a higher number of women and well-educated participants, affecting the generalisability of the results to a population with different sociodemographic characteristics. Finally, no other psychological variables that might be associated with our constructs of interest were investigated. Further studies should thus recruit more heterogeneous samples and use a longitudinal design to

Table 1
Hierarchical multiple regression predicting DAS total score from sociodemographic variables, alexithymia, and attachment style.

| Predictors | B | β | t | p | 95% CI | Adj R ² | F | p |
|-----------------|--------|---------|---------|--------|---------------|--------------------|--------|--------|
| Model 1 | | | | | | 0.042 | 10.021 | <0.001 |
| Age | -0.219 | -0.210 | -4.332 | <0.001 | -0.319;-0.120 | | | |
| Gender | -1.225 | -0.037 | -0.770 | .442 | -4.355;1.904 | | | |
| Model 2* | | | | | | 0.123 | 20.203 | <0.001 |
| Age | -0.226 | -0.217 | -4.663 | <0.001 | -0.321;-0.131 | | | |
| Gender | -0.403 | -0.012 | -0.263 | .792 | -3.408;2.603 | | | |
| TAS Total | -0.326 | -0.289 | -6.222 | <0.001 | -0.429;-0.223 | | | |
| Model 3# | | | | | | 0.3580 | 46.690 | <0.001 |
| Age | -0.068 | -0.066 | -1.532 | .126 | -0.156;0.019 | | | |
| Gender | 1.115 | 0.034 | 0.844 | .399 | -1.483;3.713 | | | |
| TAS Total | -0.076 | -0.068 | -1.526 | .128 | -0.174;0.022 | | | |
| ECR Anxiety | -0.678 | -0.066 | -1.558 | .120 | -1.533;0.177 | | | |
| ECR Avoidance | -6.814 | -0.548 | -11.981 | <0.001 | -7.932;-5.696 | | | |

ECR = Experience in Close Relationship Scale; TAS = Toronto Alexithymia scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

* F change (1, 406) = 38.710, $p < .001$.

F change (2, 404) = 75.325, $p < .001$.

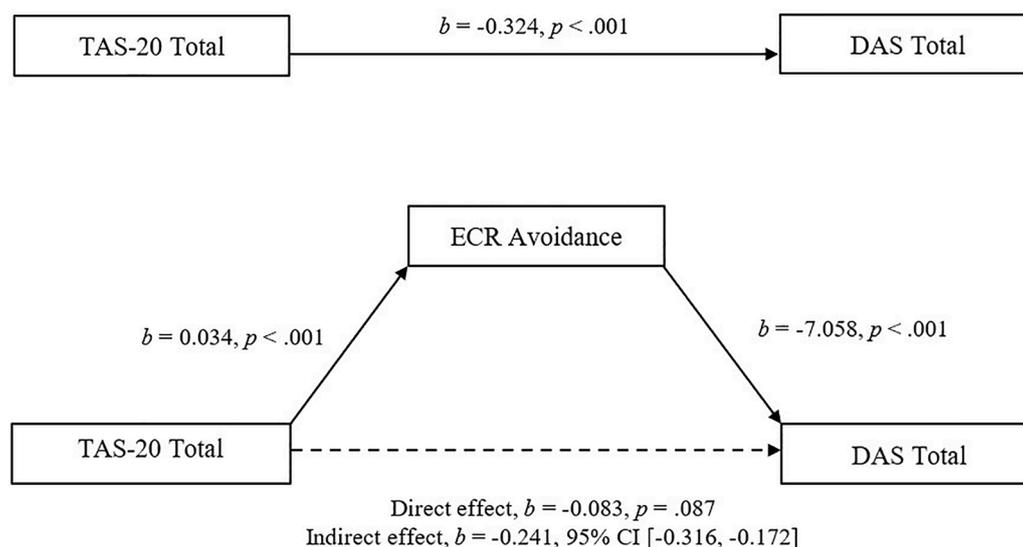


Fig. 1. Model of alexithymia (TAS-20 Total) as a predictor of dyadic adjustment (DAS Total), mediated by attachment avoidance (ECR Avoidance). The confidence interval for the indirect effect is a BCa bootstrapped CI based on 5000 samples.

confirm the present findings.

5. Conclusions

The present findings revealed that both attachment and alexithymia play a significant role in dyadic adjustment, with avoidant attachment that mediated the relationship between alexithymia and dyadic adjustment.

These results may have important implications for clinicians. Particularly, therapists should target their intervention both on the improvement of emotional regulation strategies and on the reprocessing of the representation of self and others developed through the attachment process. This intervention could help couples develop a greater feeling of security in their relationship and improve their dyadic adjustment.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Annunziata Romeo: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Agata Benfante:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Lorys Castelli:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Marialaura Di Tella:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology,

Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.jadr.2024.100743](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2024.100743).

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