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Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Self-Worth and Romantic Relationship Attachment Styles

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ABSTRACT

In this study we measured self-reported relationship anxiety and avoidance and variables assessing various aspects of self-worth. There were a total of 116 heterosexual couples. The average age of participants was 21.6. We found that there are not many gender differences in self-reported self-worth variables or relationship avoidance, though women did report marginally more relationship anxiety. Additionally, gender difference emerged in the relationships between self-worth variables and relationship anxiety and avoidance, though overall, higher emotional intelligence, physical attractiveness, and communication abilities were associated with less relationship anxiety and avoidance.

INTRODUCTION

It is frequently anticipated that men and women will differ with regards to relationship anxiety and avoidance as well as in self-ratings of physical attractiveness, emotional and intellectual intelligence, and communication abilities. In this study we measured self-reported relationship anxiety and avoidance and self-reported variables assessing various aspects of self-worth. Kenny and Sirin (2006), state that if a child has a caretaker that is sensitive and responsive to their emotional and physical needs then they will develop a sense of security. The child could have the confidence to explore his or her environment, and become a well adjusted adult. In the same study, Kenny and Sirin also state that if a child is raised with a caretaker that is insensitive and unreliable he or she could become untrusting and believe themselves to be unworthy. Avoidant attachment style is an attachment style characterized by a suppression of attachment needs because attempts to be intimate have been previously rebuffed; people with this style find it difficult to develop intimate relationships. Anxious/ambivalent attachment style is an attachment style characterized by a concern that others will not reciprocate one's desire for intimacy, resulting in higher-than-average levels of anxiety (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2005). In this study we seek to find if there is a difference between men and women when it comes to self-reported ratings of physical attractiveness, intelligence, emotional intelligence, and communication ability? Also, is there a relationship between the self-reported ratings and their attachment / relationship style?

METHODS

There were a total of 232 participants, comprised of 116 heterosexual couples (116 men and 116 women). The average age of participants was 21.6; 80% were college students. Students in a Psychology 101 class were asked to participate in this study. The students brought in their partner. They could be married, engaged, or dating. The partners participated in a questioner study. In our survey, the Relationship items include two subscales from The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) Questionnaire by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000). There are 18 "anxiety" items and 17 "avoidance" items.

Main Questions:

Are there associations between:

- Self-reported ratings of:
1. Physical Attractiveness
 2. Intellectual Intelligence
 3. Emotional Intelligence
 4. Communication Ability

← AND →

- Self-reported levels of:
1. Relationship Anxiety
 2. Relationship Avoidance

And ... are these associations different for men versus women?

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVNESS

Men's self-reported physical attractiveness was negatively correlated with relationship avoidance ($r = -.21, p = .02$) but not with relationship anxiety ($p > .05$). Women's self-reported physical attractiveness was negatively correlated with relationship anxiety ($r = -.29, p = .002$) but not correlated with relationship avoidance ($p > .05$), opposite to the men's results.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Men's self-reported emotional intelligence was negatively correlated with relationship avoidance ($r = -.27, p = .004$) but not correlated with relationship anxiety ($p > .05$). Women self-reported similar values for emotional intelligence and relationship anxiety ($r = -.295, p = .001$) but were marginally negatively correlated with avoidance ($r = -.291, p = .002$).

INTELLECTUAL INTELLIGENCE

There were not any significant correlations with intellectual intelligence and relationship and anxiety for either men or women (all p 's $> .05$).

COMMUNICATION ABILITY

Men's self-reported communication abilities were negatively correlated with both anxiety ($r = -.26, p = .005$) and avoidance ($r = -.42, p = .000$). Women's self-reported communication abilities were also negatively correlated with both anxiety and avoidance.

DISCUSSION

Relationship avoidant individuals have an inclination for distance and self-reliance and view interdependency and intimacy as threatening. When relationship avoidant individuals feel threatened, they often display defensive characteristics (Mukulincer et al, 2010). Men that report low values on physical attractiveness may feel a heightened sense of threat in their dating relationship and may display more relationship avoidance such as distancing themselves from their dating partner as a result. On the other hand, attachment-anxious individuals tend to have an intense fear of rejection and separation and have strong desires for security and closeness which causes them to focus on the potential rewards of intimacy and hold positive attitudes about dating relationships and their dating partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Women that report low values on physical attractiveness may be encouraged to draw closer to their dating partners due to a desire for intimacy and security.

Relationship avoidant individuals tend to view intimacy and closeness as aversive states and feel vulnerable revealing their core-selves (Rowe & Carnelly, 2005). Individuals that self-report low values on emotional intelligence may engage in relationship avoidant behaviors due to a heightened sense of discomfort in disclosing their feelings and emotions.

Confidence in communication ability correlates with relationship security between dating partners (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001).

Overall, higher emotional intelligence, physical attractiveness, and communication abilities were associated with less relationship anxiety and avoidance. The higher values individuals report of these self-worth variables, the more secure they feel in their relationships.

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF-WORTH & RELATIONSHIP VARIABLES

	RELATIONSHIP ANXIETY		RELATIONSHIP AVOIDANCE	
	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN
PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVNESS	-.06	-.29**	-.21*	-.17+
INTELLIGENCE	-.02	-.12	.02	-.10
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE	-.03	-.15	-.27**	-.18+
COMMUNICATION ABILITY	-.26**	-.29**	-.42***	-.29**

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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