The Influence of Adult Attachment on Coping Strategies and Conflict

Carrie Grace Jaymess, Fatahyah Yahya

Abstract: This study aims to understand the influence of adult attachment for working individuals who are coping with conflict in marital relationships. A three-questionnaire survey of the working individuals comprising 130 people, was carried out to elicit their views. The titles of the questionnaires were; Experienced in Closed Relationship Revised (ECR-R), Coping Resources Inventory (CRI) and Communication Pattern Questionnaires (CPQ). A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to observe for moderation. Adult Attachments Styles have been found to have a wide range of positive effects on coping strategies and to result in an effective marriage. The results of this study are of interest to married couples striving to understand their adult attachment styles in order to cope better in times of conflict. Identification of conflict responses is assumed to provide guidance for marital intervention by counsellors or psychotherapist in attachment perspective.

Keywords: Adult Attachment, Marital Conflict, Coping

I. INTRODUCTION

As a basic social institution, family plays an important role in shaping the future generations. Current surveys and polls in North America suggested that about 50% of all currently married couples would end up in divorce [76]. Moreover, the role of marriage and family institution experienced changes in recent decades due to sociocultural evolution [4]. The reasons are oftentimes due to conflicting needs; such as women who don't want to be stay-at-home moms because they were raised to pursue a career and education. Different from old times, married couples these days earn individually and keep separate accounts, instead of combining their money for household use [25]. As for conflict, it is equally as disturbing for some couples and the main causes for that occur due to personality differences and preferences for life values and tastes [4]. In 2001, Erber and Erber agreed that marital conflict could harm relationships [36].

Conflict can lead to cohesion or separation. Marital conflict is influenced by unhealthy family dynamics such as poor parenting, problematic children, parent-child disagreement, and sibling rivalry [41].

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Some of the conflicts that fester from a troubled marriage include stalking, property damage, domestic violence, and murder. Therefore, preserving harmony in a marriage is really a choice couples have to make each day, by extending the time they spend on positive conflict resolutions.

The growing separation rate reflects the altering impacts of marriage and divorce [50]. In the long run, urbanisation and varying cultural norms in Asian societies will influence marriages. While the intense focus on career advancement and wealth will give Asian couples a lift, studies show that these effects are short-lived and can negatively impact the quality of current marital affairs. As marital affairs frequently viewed as less significance, Asian women have continued to focus all their energy pursuing a good education with the hope of becoming independent. Nowadays they have bravery to ask for divorce when their spouse is abusive. In the past, Asian marriages were traditionally the union of two families. However, there have been some indications that many successful Asian countries are moving in the direction of individualism. According to [50]. Asian people today are less willing to sacrifice their personal desires and ambitions for family.

Marriage should not come hastily, and workshop or seminars on marriage, are strongly recommended in all Asian nations. Western expertise is often welcomed in providing guidance to Asian couples looking to have gentler, extra warm family circle for their children and themselves. Through sharing what they know with people from different cultures amidst growing public concern on the risks of marital conflict, the affected families can grow mature and enhance the quality of their marriage. If marital education teaches you anything, it really should be how to address values and concepts such as commitment, forgiveness, responsibility, self-reflection, sacrifices, and the willingness to see that another's well-being is as important as our own [50].

Systematic psychological research on marriage emerged largely in response to the desire to better assist couples experiencing marital distress [42]. Identification of conflict responses is assumed to provide guidance for marital intervention in attachment perspective. Hence, this study proposed to investigate troubled couples who wanted to work on their marriages by understanding their adult attachment styles. In all situations, a clear sign of maturity is the ability to cope with conflict [36].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attachment refers to the emotional bond formed between a newborn and its caregiver [13].

Attachment theory proposes that the attachment system is a biologically prewired behavioural structure that activates upon perceiving threats and serves to ensure our survival by guiding physical proximity to attachment figures for protection [12]. In other words, the attachment system is a biologically evolved behavioural system, which motivates infants to seek proximity to caregivers to protect them from harm [64]. The attachment system is dynamic and significant through lifetime, and has effects for adult romantic relationships [61].

Attachment is a fundamental subject in the field of child-rearing and parent-child relationships [38]. Attachment means the tendency of young children to seek contact with one or more consistent caregivers when frightened, worried, or vulnerable and find such contact comforting [38]. Becker-Phelps (2014) stated in her book that to see a birth is to witness a miracle [5]. She further explained that no mother can resist wanting to hold, cuddle with, and tend to her newborn and this is where the story of every person's relationship and love begins [5]. Infants quite literally need their caregivers for survival and are hardwired with a need to connect with others and wherewithal to do it [5]. For instance, they like to look at people's faces, can get others to care for them by crying, and are usually comforted by being held or rocked [5]. A little one who ventures out will look back to mommy for reassurance. It's in these early years, beginning with infancy, that people learn how relationships can help them feel safe and can calm them when they are upset.

Bowlby's idea was in direct conflict with what mothers were taught at that time [5]. Bowlby's idea was generally rejected until researcher Mary Ainsworth helped him prove the truth of his theories. Mary Ainsworth began to systematically study infant-parent separations that prompted other researchers to question individual differences in the regulation of attachment behaviour. In 1978, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall developed a procedure called The Strange Situation, a widely used laboratory paradigm for studying infant-parent attachment [45]. During the procedure, an infants and one of their parents were observed in the laboratory as they were systematically separated from and reunited with one another. Their particular interest was the behaviour of the babies when reunified with their primary caregivers. Most infants became upset when the parent left the room, but when parent returned, they actively sought the parent and were easily comforted by him or her. Children who exhibited this pattern of behaviour were often labelled safe. Other children who were ill at ease initially, became extremely distressed upon separation. Importantly, when reunited with their parents, these children had a challenging time being soothed, and often exhibited conflicting behaviours that suggested not only they wanted to be comforted, but that they also wanted to punish the parent for leaving. These children were often labelled insecure-resistant or anxious-ambivalent. A third pattern of attachment that Ainsworth et al. documented was called insecure-avoidant. Insecure-avoidant children did not appear overly distressed by the separation, and upon reunion, actively avoided seeking contact with their parent, sometimes turning their attention to play with objects on the laboratory floor [45]. Children who were classified as secure in The Strange Situation tended to have parents who were responsive to their needs. Infants who were classified as insecure in The Strange Situation often had parents who were insensitive to their needs and engaged in inconsistent or rejecting care [45].

During evolutionary history, protection from danger by a stronger or wiser figure was essential for the survival of infants and young children [69]. To ensure sufficient care or protection, selection pressures produced an innate system, which is the attachment system that motivates vulnerable individuals to seek close physical and emotional proximity to their caregivers, especially when they are distressed. Specifically, attachment theory holds that the desire to be reunited with someone we love, someone who seems distant or inaccessible is a manifestation of an instinct that evolved originally to keep infants in close proximity to potential caregivers [45].

Simpson and Rholes (2017) pointed out that although the attachment system operates more visibly in infants and young children [69], Bowlby said that attachment affects how people think, feel, and behave in close relationships from the cradle to the grave. One of the unique features of the attachment theory is a feature that sets it apart from other theories in modern psychology [45]. It is its assumption that the same kinds of dynamics that play out in infant-parent relationships also govern the way adults function in their close relationships. For example, like children, adults are more confident exploring the world when they believe that there is someone to support and encourage them. Moreover, just like children, adults get restless and anxious when they are separated from their loved ones for a prolonged period of time, and just as some children are more secure in their relationships with their parents, some adults are more secure than others in their adult relationships, including those they have with parents, friends, and romantic partners.

Gillath, Karantzas and Fraley (2016) further stated in their book that Bowlby explores the processes by which bonds of affection are formed and broken; in particular, he describes how infants become emotionally attached to their primary caregivers and emotionally distressed when separated from them [45]. Bowlby is convinced that children need a close and continuous relationship with a primary caregiver to thrive emotionally and believed the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. He was the first attachment theorist, describing attachment as a lasting psychological connectedness between human beings. Attachment is a special emotional relationship that involves an exchange of comfort, care, and pleasure. Beginning in early life, infants seek closeness with their primary attachment figure and feel comforted and safe when their caregiver is nearby. They utilise their primary attachment figures as a safe base from which they be able to explore new surroundings and people.

A. Marital Conflict

Conflict are often reported as harmful and bring a lot of stress and it will bring negative impact to the sustainability of the relationship [40]. Conflict can be largely defined as the occurrence of disagreement, dissimilarity or inharmoniousness between partners. Securely attached individuals are more likely to have a positive view of self and others, engage in more pro social communication strategies, and implement the use of constructive conflict resolution behaviours,

while insecurely attached individuals are more likely to have a negative model of self and others, utilise more communication strategies in a self-serving way, and tend to use destructive and ineffective conflict resolution behaviours. Constructive conflict is the force for change and growth in a relationship. It is through conflict and conflict resolution that we achieve group and dyadic unity [35]. Destructive conflict, as the term implies, leads to the termination of relationships. It is painful, harmful and damaging to its participants [35].

B. Coping Strategies among Married Couples

Naturally, when people are exposed to daily life stressors, they either respond to them actively or [67]. These two processes are not only mutually interacting, but also vary according to their different dimensions. Stress is universal and common to the human experience, often involving a significant cost to individual and community alike. The better we understand how to effectively manage stress in all situations, the better our lives can become [68].

How a person copes with the focal stress situation is more important than the experience of stress [67]. Moreover, coping is ascribed as the central role in human adaptation to changing environmental interaction [67].

Most research studies have investigated coping strategy responses in samples of battered women or survivors of sexual abuse [75], yet very little is known about the link between adult attachment styles and coping strategies. Understanding attachment styles is an easy and reliable way to understand and predict people's behaviour in any romantic situation and in fact, one of the main messages of this theory is that in romantic situations, we are programmed to act in a predetermined manner [55].
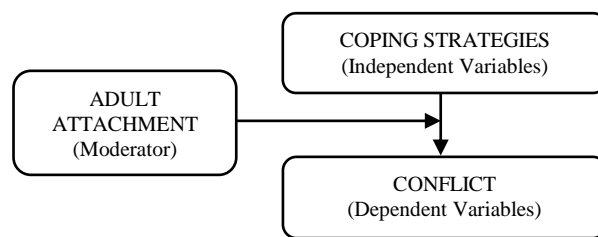
C. Theoretical Framework

According to Becker-Phelps (2014) the story of every person's life of relationships and love begin at birth. At the early years during infancy we learn how relationships can help us to feel safe and can calm us when we are upset [5]. A stable and available attachment figure can provide a safe and secure base in an infant's life [1]. The secure relationship with a caregiver could be fundamental for normal psychological development. This secure relationship is a crucial factor in preventing psychopathology [1].

Main and Solomon's study describe a fourth attachment style, disorganized-disoriented, characterized by the infant's confused and disoriented behaviors in the mother's presence, suggesting a temporary "collapse" of a behavioral strategy [62]. Consistent with Bowlby's theory, these patterns of attachment have been directly linked to differences in caregiver warmth and support [62]. Attachment theory could be used as a framework in understanding personality development. An infant who is nurtured and supported by a caregiver will develop models of others as trustworthy and helpful, protecting the infant from danger by seeking security from a caregiving guardian [62]. This working model allows the infant to develop a healthy, realistic, and coherent sense of self which is adaptive throughout a person's life.

D. Conceptual Framework

In this study, coping strategies can be considered as dependent variables, conflict is the independent variable, while adult attachment serves as the moderator. It is important

to discover a significant connection between adult attachment styles and coping strategies in times of conflict. Adult attachment styles are important aspects influencing the effects coping strategies have on conflict management. As a person becomes ever more secure of his or her attachment, their coping strategies will increase.

III. METHODOLOGY/MATERIALS

A total of 130 married working individuals from Kota Kinabalu participated in this study. The purposeful sampling was based on both the inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine the participants. The inclusion criteria are participants must have been married for at least 6 months, less than that is unacceptable, residing in Sabah, have good understanding of both English and Malay language and must be employed.

To examine the research question, a Baron and Kenny (1986) moderation analysis [2] was conducted to assess the ways in which adult attachment styles moderate the relationship between coping strategies and conflict. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to observe for moderation. The dependent variable of the regression is coping strategies. The independent variables of the regression are conflict, adult attachment styles, and the interaction between independent variable and moderator. By multiplying conflict and adult attachment styles, after both variables have been centred, will create the interaction. If the interaction is significant, then the observation for moderation is supported.

IV. RESULT AND FINDINGS

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate the ways in which avoidance attachment styles could moderate the relationship between coping and conflict among married working individuals. In Step 1, coping was entered as the independent variable, followed by avoidance attachment styles as the moderator, and conflict as the independent variable in Step 2. The interaction between avoidance attachment styles and conflict in Step 3 was recorded. The results showed that model 1 appeared significant with F (2, 127) = 6.01, p = .003, indicating a significant influence of avoidance attachment styles on coping. However in model 2, the interaction between avoidance attachment styles and conflict showed no significant moderating effects with F (1, 126) = 1.24, p > .05. While this clearly showed that avoidance attachment styles did influence coping and conflict positively, it did not moderate the effects of marital conflict on coping.

To understand the ways in which anxiety attachment styles could moderate the relationship between coping and conflict among married working individuals, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted for all the variables. In Step 1, coping was entered as the independent variable, followed by anxiety attachment styles as the moderator, and conflict as the independent variable in Step 2.

The interaction between anxiety attachment styles and conflict was recorded in Step 3. The results showed that model 1 appeared significant with $F_{(2, 127)} = 5.4$, $p = .006$, indicating a significant influence of anxiety attachment styles on coping. However, in model 2, the interaction between anxiety attachment styles and conflict showed no significant moderating effects with $F_{(1, 126)} = .256$, $p > .05$, demonstrating that anxiety attachment styles did have a significant positive influence on coping and conflict, but yet it did not moderate the effects of marital conflict on coping.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Adult attachments styles have been found to affect coping strategies and conflict among working married individuals. Therefore, it is important for couples to consider how their attachment styles will affect judgment and emotion in times of conflict resolution. However, in this study, when the interaction between adult attachment styles and conflict showed no moderating effects, it suggested a future revision where researchers will be allowed to measure all types of adult attachment styles along with the elements in conflict and coping mechanisms, in order to contribute different results.

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