Adult Attachment Styles and Conflict Management Behaviors in Romantic Relationships: A Case Study of Thai College Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine how attachment styles affect individuals' conflict management behaviors among college students in Thailand. Attachment theory and five approaches to conflict—dominating, avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising—described by Rahim will be applied to understand conflict management behaviors among Thai young adults.

Participants for the study will be those who are involved in heterosexual romantic relationships, and recruited randomly from six faculties at a public university in Thailand. The questionnaires to be used are Bartholomew and Horowitz's Relationship Questionnaire (RQ), Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II (ROCI-II) to measure conflict style.

Keywords: Attachment Style, Conflict Management Behavior, Thai Young Adults

1. Introduction

Conflict is a normal part of everyday life. In any relationship, some degree of conflict is generally considered inevitable (Creasey and Hesson-McInnis, 2001). Conflict in dating relationships and marriage has become an increasingly popular topic among scholars (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

In a collegiate environment, conflict management problems in romantic partners are important to counseling professionals (Creasey, 2002; Creasey and Hesson-McInnis, 2001). When encountering conflict, relationship members may experience a variety of difficulties. Scholars have reported that disagreements or conflicts between dating couples can trigger psychological distress, self-esteem problems, and academic difficulties (Connolly and Konarski, 1994; Larson, Clore, and Wood, 1999). Thus, conflict management behavior in romantic relationships has been considered one of important issues in university settings (Creasey, Kershaw, and Boston, 1999). Attachment concepts developed by Bowlby (1969) can be used to explain adult relationships. According to Buhrmester (1996), when asked about attachment figures that are essential to their lives, college students often mention romantic partners first. Scholars have concurred that the attachment patterns formed in childhood have an impact on adult relationships (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Hazan and Shaver, 1994). The organization of attachment system may

influence the development of conflict management behavior in romantic relationships (Creasey and Hesson-McInnis, 2001). Pistole (1989) noted that individuals with different attachment styles could be expected to manage a conflictual situation in their relationships differently.

Although conflict in romantic relationships has been enormously interested by researchers (Caughlin and Vangelisti, 2006), only few studies have investigated how adults with different attachment styles try to manage or resolve interpersonal conflicts (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, and Pearson, 1992; Creasey et al., 1999; Creasey and Hesson-McInnis, 2001; O'Connell-Corcoran and Mallinckrodt, 2000; Pistole, 1989). In addition, research on adult attachment styles in romantic relationships in the Thai context is lacking. Hence, applying attachment theory in an effort to clarify how Thai adults with different attachment orientations cope with conflict within their romantic relationships is an interesting and appropriate area for investigation.

The purpose of the present study is to examine how attachment styles affect individuals' conflict management behaviors among college students in Thailand. Attachment theory and five approaches to conflict—dominating, avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising—described by Rahim (1983) will be applied to understand conflict management behaviors among Thai young adults.

2. Review of Literature

Conflict in Romantic Relationships

Conflict in romantic relationships is inevitable. According to Lloyd (1987), conflict is a general feature of a stable romantic relationship. Scholars have reported that romantic relationship members experience conflict approximately twice a week (Lloyd), once every few days (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, and Shoda, 1999) or at least several times monthly (Fitzpatrick and Sollie, 1999). The frequency of conflict is considered a key predictor of relational outcomes (Caughlin and Vangelisti, 2006). Among dating partners, the amount of conflict is related to relational dissatisfaction (Cramer, 2000) and presages a relationship's demise (Surra and Longstreth, 1990). Based on research in this area, it can be concluded that the amount of conflict experienced by couples foreshadows relational outcomes.

Since conflict in close relationships inevitably arises, how couples manage conflict is considered very important to their relationships (Clements, Cordova, Markman, and Laurenceau, 1997). In university settings, romantic partners are one of the essential ingredients of the social environment of college students (Furman and Wehner, 1994; Hazan and Shaver, 1994). Scholars have found that conflicts or disputes between young adult couples can trigger strong stress

responses, self-esteem problems, and academic difficulties (Connolly and Konarski, 1994; Larson et al., 1999). Premarital conflict can predict relational dissatisfaction after marriage (Kelly, Huston, and Cate, 1985).

Attachment Theory

Attachment styles have been conceptualized as "relatively coherent and stable patterns of emotion and behavior [that] are exhibited in close relationships" (Shaver, Collins, and Clark, 1996, p.25). Attachment theory, therefore, has become one of leading theoretical perspectives in the study of adult romantic relationships in terms of shaping individuals' behaviors with their partners (Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan, 1992). Theoretically, persons with different attachment orientations have different beliefs and attitudes pertaining to romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Scholars reported that individual differences in attachment styles predict different levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Simpson, 1990), partner pairing (Kirkpatrick and Davis, 1994), and relationship stability over time (Kirkpatrick and Hazan, 1994).

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) proposed three different attachment styles—secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant, while Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) presented a clearer conceptualization of the relationship between internal models and attachment styles by proposing four distinct attachment styles for adults—secures, dismissives, preoccupieds, and fearfuls.

Adult Attachment Orientations and Conflict Management Behaviors

Conflict management styles proposed by Rahim (1983) can be linked to the study of adult attachment styles (e.g., Bippus and Rollin, 2003; O'Connell-Corcoran and Mallinckrodt, 2000). That is, conflict management styles based on two dimensions of concern for self and concern for others are similar to the constructs of working models of self and others proposed in attachment theory. Rahim identified five approaches to managing conflict: integrating, compromising, dominating, obliging, and avoiding.

From an attachment perspective, individuals with a secure attachment style are more likely to communicate with their partners openly and use various strategies to negotiate with their partners during conflict (Kobak and Duemmler, 1994; Simpson, Rholes, and Phillips, 1996). Scholars found that adults with secure attachment style are related to the two mutually focused conflict style—integrating and compromising (e.g., Pistole, 1989; Van Leeuwen, 1992).

In contrast, for individuals with a preoccupied style, corresponding to anxious/ambivalent style in Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) model, conflict is considered a threat to the relationship. That is, conflict may spark their concerns pertaining to being abandoned or ignored by their partners, which lead to hyperactivation of the attachment system (Kobak and Duemmler, 1994; Simpson et

al., 1996). These persons are most likely to engage in demanding behavior, nagging, and whining during conflicts (Creasey et al., 1999; O'Connell-Corcoran and Mallinckrodt, 2000; Simpson et al., 1996); they might prefer an obliging conflict style (Pistole, 1989).

Finally, individuals with avoidant attachment styles (dismissives and fearfuls) are most likely to apply withdrawal and defensiveness when getting involved in conflict situations (Creasey et al., 1999; O'Connell-Corcoran and Mallinckrodt, 2000). Since avoidance is associated with more withdrawal during conflicts (e.g., Simpson et al., 1996), avoidant persons may prefer an avoidant style of coping with conflict (Creasey and Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 1992).

Based on studies in this area, it can be concluded that attachment theory predicts the ways individuals respond to conflict. Since individuals with different attachment styles should vary in their attitudes and beliefs regarding romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987), they might cope with problems or conflicts differently.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1: Individuals with secure attachment style will demonstrate more integrating and compromising conflict strategies than will individuals with insecure attachment styles (dismissive, preoccupied, and fearful);

H2: Individuals with avoidant attachment styles (dismissives and fearfuls) will demonstrate more avoiding conflict strategies than will individuals with secure or preoccupied attachment styles; and

H3: Individuals with preoccupied attachment style will demonstrate more obliging conflict strategies than will individuals with secure, dismissive, or fearful attachment styles.

3. Methodology

The goal of this study is to examine how attachment styles influence individuals' conflict management behaviors among Thai young adults. Individuals with different attachment styles may respond to romantic conflict differently. This part will detail the specific method that will be employed to investigate the proposed hypotheses.

Participants

Participants for the study will be recruited randomly from six faculties at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University in Thailand where the researcher is working. Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University consists of six faculties: Faculty of Education, Faculty of Fine Arts, Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Management Science, Faculty of Industrial Technology, and Faculty of Humanities and Social Science. The participants who are involved in heterosexual romantic relationships will be

asked to sign informed consent forms. They then will be given a set of questionnaire pertaining to attachment orientations and conflict management styles. All respondents will receive extra credit for their participation.

Measures

To examine the hypotheses, the participants will be asked to complete Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) in order to assess attachment orientations. The RQ consists of four paragraphs, each of which describes one of the four attachment styles: secure, preoccupied (anxious/ambivalent), dismissive, and fearful. Each paragraph will be rated on a single 7-point Likert-type scale (1=This is nothing like me; 7=This is exactly like me). After completing Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) Relationship Questionnaire (RQ), the participants then will complete the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II (ROCI-II, Rahim, 1983) to measure conflict style. The ROCI-II contains 28 self-report items, with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) which measure the conflict styles of integrating (7 items), obliging (6 items), dominating (5 items), avoiding (6 items), and compromising (4 items).

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