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WOMEN'S ATTACHMENT STYLE AND DYADIC ADJUSTMENT: THE MEDIATOR ROLE OF PERCEIVED EFFICACY IN SOLVING MARITAL CONFLICTS

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In this study, we examined perceived efficacy in solving marital conflicts as a mediator between adult attachment style and dyadic adjustment, while controlling for the effects of duration of marriage. A total of 1921 married women participated in the research. The results suggest that women with high attachment avoidance are more likely to perceive themselves as inefficient in marital conflict resolution and maladjusted to the dyadic relationship, compared to women with high attachment anxiety. Furthermore, the results suggest that perceived efficacy in solving marital conflicts mediates the effects of insecure attachment styles on dyadic adjustment. Finally, there is evidence for a reciprocal causation between efficacy expectations and dyadic adjustment.

Keywords: attachment, dyadic adjustment, marital conflict, quality of marriage, mediation



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INTRODUCTION

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), human beings are born with an *attachment behavioral system* – an innate set of primary behavioral and social strategies with the main purpose of seeking and maintaining proximity of adults when an infant is in need of protection or support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Furthermore, Bowlby suggested that the nature of first close relationships between a child and primary caregivers (i.e. attachment figures) shapes its internal "working models of the world and of himself in it, with the aid of which he perceives events, forecasts the future, and constructs his plans" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 203). Later research attempts to test Bowlby's theoretical ideas have focused mainly on a person's *attachment style* (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998). Attachment style represents an operationalization of internal working models of self and others, which refers to specific social behaviors, expectations, needs and emotions, and can be assessed through observing the child's activities in experimental settings or by using interviews or questionnaires. Researchers so far have confirmed that there is one secure attachment style and several insecure ones. We can imagine these styles as patterns that are derived from a combination of two dimensions. One dimension, *attachment anxiety*, indicates the extent of the person's beliefs that they alone are unable to cope successfully with stressful situations, dependence on significant others in times of need and the amount of fear of abandonment by them. The other dimension, *attachment avoidance*, represents the extent to which a person expects that others will be negatively disposed, are untrustworthy and will reject them if they ask them for help or support; also these individuals show a high amount of fear of intimacy (Shaver et al., 2017).

Research results have shown that the relationship between children and their primary caregivers in early childhood represents the prototype of the relationships with intimate partners in adulthood. Previous studies have also highlighted that adult relationship satisfaction depends largely on the level of confidence between spouses that their partner can satisfy their needs toward security, care and sexual gratification (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Shaver et al., 1988). This level of confidence is directly determined by the nature of the relationship with primary caregivers and the internal working models of each spouse.

In accordance with this, a large body of contemporary research focuses on studying the association between attachment styles of romantic partners and various emotional, cognitive and behavioral indicators of relationship quality. The results have shown that individuals with insecure attachment

styles are more prone to lower levels of romantic relationship stability and satisfaction (Bolt, 2015; Bolt et al., 2019; Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014; Li & Chan, 2012), as well as to lower levels of marital satisfaction and a decline in marital quality over time (Davila et al., 1999; Kohn et al., 2012). Prior research results also point to the fact that the majority of depressive patients were insecurely attached in early childhood, as well as in latter adult romantic relationships (Marchand, 2004; Šakotić-Kurbalija et al., 2010). On the other hand, individuals with secure attachment styles form higher quality relationships in adulthood compared to insecurely attached people, and they perceive their relationships as more friendly, warm, trusting and supportive, with high levels of intimacy (Feeney, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Even though it may seem that research results suggest that adults with insecure attachment styles will necessarily have low quality romantic relationships, this is not always the case. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2003), the attachment behavioral system is not active all the time. The proximity of significant others as a safe haven is sought out mostly in situations when a person is feeling threatened, vulnerable or when he or she is in trouble. This is why the differences in behavioral and emotional features between the distinct forms of attachment styles can best be detected in distressing situations. This happens because the attachment system is designed to help people cope with threats and regulate distress. However, activation of the attachment system is not automatic, and it depends on the *subjective appraisal* of threats and not on their actual presence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Day to day reality for many couples is that they face disagreements, differences in attitudes, values or actions. In most cases, these differences enrich the romantic relationship and help the partners to adapt more easily to unfamiliar situations, but in distressing situations, a snide remark from a partner or differences in attitudes in seemingly important matters can be perceived as threatening. This kind of threat activates the attachment system and raises the question of whether the attachment figure is available, attentive, responsive, etc. If the partner is perceived as being reliable and supportive, the individual will feel safe and turn to security-based, *constructive* coping strategies (e.g. seeking support, comfort and care, pro-social activities). On the other hand, for people with high level of attachment anxiety who seek the proximity of the partner as this helps them cope with the feeling of insecurity, the same threatening event may prompt *hyperactivating* strategies. These strategies are aimed at gaining more support and attention from the partner (e.g. surveillance, excessive proximity and care seeking, rumination). Highly avoidant persons will try to distance themselves from the threat, and that in-

cludes overall distancing from the partner as well. If proximity seeking is perceived as dangerous or forbidden, certain *deactivating* strategies emerge, which include ignoring or dismissal of the threat, neglecting attachment needs, emotion suppression, preference for emotional distance, self-reliance and detachment from the partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Research results so far have linked attachment insecurity to maladaptive strategies of conflict resolution (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Saavedra et al., 2010; Shi, 2003) and negative behaviors while attempting to resolve major relationship problems (Simpson et al., 1996). Individuals with insecure attachment styles are likely to perceive conflicts as a threat to their self-esteem and/or to maintaining the relationship. In accordance with this perception, they express more negative affect during disagreements, have less confidence in coping during arguments, less optimal problem-solving strategies (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001) and less confidence in their ability to regulate negative moods (Creasey et al., 1999). Moreover, couples where both partners have insecure attachment styles have a higher frequency of disagreements concerning matters of importance to the relationship (Trifunović et al., 2016). On the other hand, securely attached people use constructive strategies of problem solving more frequently (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Individuals with a secure attachment style see conflicts as a possible way for deepening closeness and a way for improving mutual understanding and thus they use constructive, mutually focused conflict resolution strategies (Pistole, 1989).

However, even though the securely attached spouse may use constructive strategies for conflict resolution, it is highly probable that hyperactivating or deactivating strategies of the insecurely attached partner will escalate and prolong the conflict and lower relationship satisfaction. This discontentment may be limited to those aspects of marriage in which disagreements are most frequent (Trifunović et al., 2016), but it may also generalize to other domains or to the marriage as a whole (Doherty, 1981; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989).

One of the models that more closely explains the cognitive processes that underlie conflict behavior in intimate relationships is the Attribution-Efficacy Model (Doherty, 1981; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987, 1989). According to this model, conflicts in close relationships initiate two distinct cognitive processes. The first one is determining why the conflict arose (Attributions), and the second process is associated with assessing whether the conflict can be resolved (Efficacy). In the context of close relationships, efficacy expectations refer to the belief of each spouse that his or her effort can lead to effective and successful conflict resolution. In the Attribution-Efficacy

Model, efficacy expectations moderate the relations between causal attributions and the deficits associated with learned helplessness (dissatisfaction with the marriage, low marital quality and divorce) (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

The main goal of this research was to analyze the mediator role of perceived efficacy in resolving marital conflicts in explaining the relationship between attachment styles and marital quality. Based on theory and prior findings we have formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between attachment avoidance and anxiety and marital quality is mediated by perceived efficacy in resolving marital conflicts (Original model).

We may assume that women with insecure attachment styles experience relationship conflicts as very stressful, which leads to them feeling helpless and inefficient in dealing with these conflicts. Low levels of perceived efficacy and a large amount of unresolved conflicts eventually result in a perception of low marital quality. However, we have also proposed an alternative mediation hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between attachment avoidance and anxiety and the efficacy expectations is mediated by the perception of marital quality (Alternative model).

We could assume that women with insecure attachment styles have difficulties in accomplishing and maintaining satisfying relationship with other people, including romantic relationships. Once conflicts with the partner emerge, the previous perception of low dyadic adjustment may evoke the feeling of helplessness and inefficiency in solving the problems, mistrust toward the spouse, as well as the belief that the solution of the conflict depends much more on the partner, other people or circumstances than on their own engagement.

Since previous research suggested the existence of not only quantitative, but also qualitative differences in male and female biobehavioral responses to stress (Taylor et al., 2000), we have decided to include only female participants. Taylor and her colleagues propose that although the primary physiological responses to stress for both males and females are characterized by a fight-or-flight reaction, subsequent female responses more frequently follow the tend-and-befriend pattern. Tending represents various nurturing activities designed to reduce distress, and protect the self and the offspring, and it is closely related to the caregiving part of the attachment-caregiving system. Befriending represents selective affiliation in response to stress, the creation and maintenance of social networks that may ensure safety. Based on neuroendocrine evidence from rodents, non-human primates and human studies, Taylor and her colleagues suggested that oxytocin, in conjunction with female reproductive hormones and endo-

genous opioid peptide mechanisms, may be at the core of the tend-and-befriend response. This could be the reason why the differences between males and females in responses to stress are more obvious during periods of puberty, pregnancy and lactation (Taylor et al., 2000).

It should also be noted that the differences in biobehavioral responses to stress do not imply that men care less about children than women do or that women are or must be better parents, who can take more appropriate care of the offspring (Taylor et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the non-dyadic and cross-sectional nature of the data are the main limitations of this research, as discussed later, and one should have them in mind before reaching conclusions based on the results.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

This study included the responses of 1921 married women. The mean age of the participants was 39.36 years ($SD = 8.82$), while the mean age of their husbands was 42.55 years ($SD = 9.27$). In order to participate in the study, the wives needed to be married for at least a year, the average duration of their marriage was 14.18 years ($SD = 8.99$), and the majority of them (91.4%) reported to have children: one child (24%), two children (61.8%), three children (11.9%) and four or more children (2.3%). Elementary education only was received by 4.5% of participants, 65.5% had a high school degree and 30% had university education. Most of the participants were permanently employed (59.8%), 25.9% were unemployed and 14.3% had other sources of income. They estimated their family income as average (47.7%), above average (23.6%) or below average (28.7%).

The participants were recruited at obstetrics and gynecology clinics, kindergartens, elementary schools and high schools in the Republic of Serbia. Participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. The members of the research team briefly presented the research objectives to the interested participants and distributed survey packets. The participants completed surveys individually at home, and returned them to the research team members in sealed envelopes, in order to ensure the anonymity of gathered data.

Measures

Attachment. As a measure of adult attachment, we used the Modification of Brennan's Experiences in Close Relationship Inventory (Kamenov & Jelić, 2003). The original ECR scale (Brennan et al., 1998) is a 32-item inventory divided into two

subscales: attachment anxiety (e.g., "I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me") and attachment avoidance (e.g., "I am nervous when partners get too close to me"). The modified version is shortened and consists of 18 items, while maintaining psychometric characteristics and latent structure of the original instrument (Kamenov & Jelić, 2003). Both the attachment avoidance (odd items) and the attachment anxiety (even items) subscales consist of nine items rated on a Likert-type scale. Higher scores represent more attachment insecurity.

Perceived Efficacy in solving relationship conflicts was assessed by a 7-item scale developed by Fincham and Bradbury (1989). The scale measures the extent to which spouses believe that they could resolve marital conflicts (e.g., "I am able to do the things needed to settle our conflicts"). The items are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores represent a higher perceived efficacy in marital conflict resolution.

Dyadic Adjustment was measured by DAS (Spanier, 1976), a 32-item, self-report scale originally presented as a global measure of marital adjustment. Spanier also indicated that the DAS could be used to measure the separate components of dyadic adjustment (Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion and Affectional Expression). The majority of the items are rated on a Likert-type scale defining the amount of agreement or the frequency of an event, with higher scores indicating a better adjustment to one's relationship.

Data analysis

To determine the effect of avoidance and anxiety on dyadic adjustment indirectly, through perceived efficacy in resolving marital conflicts as a mediator variable, while controlling for the duration of marriage, we conducted a simple mediation analysis using ordinary least squares path analysis. The same procedure was used in the alternative model. The estimates of direct and indirect effects were calculated using PROCESS 3.4 macro for SPSS written by Andrew F. Hayes (Hayes, 2013).

RESULTS

The psychometric properties of the five variables used in the model (ECR – avoidance; ECR – anxiety; perceived efficacy; DAS – total score and duration of marriage) are shown in Table 1. The internal consistency of all scales used in the research was acceptable ($\alpha > 0.75$). The results of the empirical testing of latent structures on our sample suggest a two-factor structure of the ECR scale with 39.84% of the total variance explained and the odd and even items grouped within separate latent dimensions; a single-factor structure of the Perceived

TABLE 1
Psychometric properties
and correlations
between variables

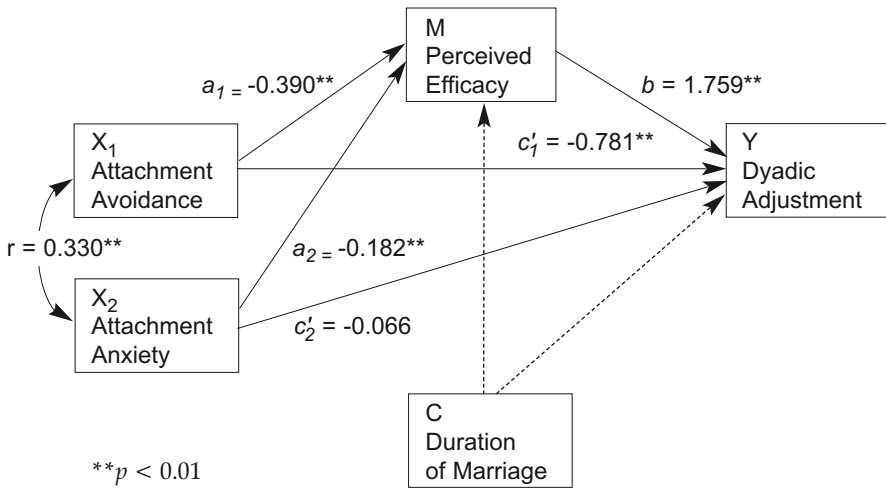
efficacy in solving relationship conflicts scale with 51.77% of the total variance explained and a single-factor structure of the DAS scale with 38.90% of the total variance explained.

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1 Avoidance	17.92	6.14	0.78	-			
2 Anxiety	20.32	6.88	0.79	0.330**	-		
3 Efficacy	27.44	5.78	0.84	-0.467**	-0.349**	-	
4 DAS _T	123.59	18.58	0.95	-0.530**	-0.305**	0.673**	-
5 Duration of Marriage	14.18	8.99	-	0.199**	0.064**	-0.148**	-0.177**

** $p < 0.01$

As can be seen in Table 1, there is a moderately strong positive correlation between dyadic adjustment and perceived efficacy in solving marital conflicts ($r = 0.67$), i.e., these two variables share approximately 45% of the variance. The two dimensions of attachment are in a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.33$) with approximately 10% of shared variance. There is no correlation between the duration of marriage and the variables examined. The correlations among the predictor variables, taken as a set, are generally modest in magnitude, so we can assume that each of them has its own unique variance to contribute to the multivariate model.

FIGURE 1
Original model of the
relationship between
attachment, perceived
efficacy and dyadic
adjustment



In order to test hypothesis 1, we have construed a model with efficacy expectations as a mediator and dyadic adjustment as a consequent variable. The whole model explains 54% of the variance of dyadic adjustment ($R^2 = 0.535$; $F(4,1553) = 447.420$; $p < 0.001$), while the dimensions of attachment have somewhat higher than 28% of shared variance with perceived efficacy in conflict resolution ($R^2 = 0.282$; $F(3,1554) = 203.771$;

$p < 0.001$). As can be seen in Figure 1, the direct effect of anxiety on dyadic adjustment is not statistically significant ($B = -0.066$; $SE = 0.051$; $t = -1.304$; $p = 0.193$). It should also be noted that the duration of marriage has a relatively modest effect on dyadic adjustment ($B = -0.097$; $SE = 0.037$; $t = -2.655$; $p < 0.01$), and an effect that is not statistically significant on perceived efficacy in conflict resolution ($B = -0.028$; $SE = 0.014$; $t = -1.937$; $p = 0.053$).

	Indirect effect				95% CI
	Ps	Cs	Us	SE	
Attachment Avoidance	-0.037	-0.224	-0.687	0.054	-0.794 to -0.583
Attachment Anxiety	-0.017	-0.119	-0.320	0.042	-0.404 to -0.238

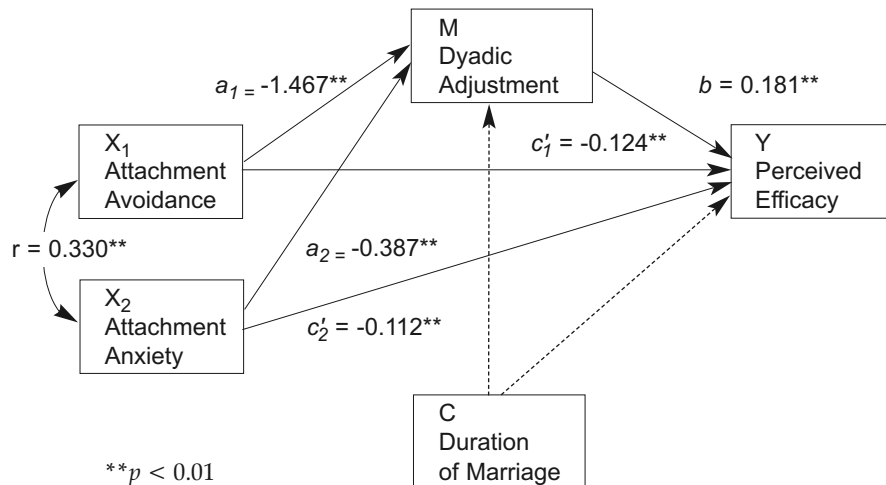
TABLE 2
Magnitude and statistical significance of indirect effects for the original model

Note: Ps – partially standardized indirect effects; Cs – completely standardized indirect effects; Us – unstandardized indirect effects (*ab*); SE – bootstrap standard error (standard deviation of the 10,000 bootstrap estimates of the unstandardized indirect effect); 95% CI – lower and upper limits of 95% – bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for estimation of the unstandardized indirect effect.

Table 2 shows that both attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety have statistically significant indirect effect on dyadic adjustment through perceived efficacy in conflict resolution.

FIGURE 2
Alternative model of the relationship between attachment, dyadic adjustment and perceived efficacy

Alternative Model. In order to test hypothesis 2, we have construed an alternative model with dyadic adjustment as a mediator and efficacy expectations as a consequent variable.



The whole model explains 51% of the variance of perceived efficacy ($R^2 = 0.511$; $F(4,1553) = 406.311$; $p < 0.001$), while the dimensions of attachment have somewhat less than

TABLE 3
Magnitude and
statistical significance
of indirect effects for
the alternative model

32% of shared variance with dyadic adjustment ($R^2 = 0.318$; $F(3,1554) = 241.114$; $p < 0.001$). Compared to the original model, we can conclude that the dimensions of attachment have somewhat more shared variance with dyadic adjustment (54% and 32%) than with perceived efficacy in marital conflict resolution (51% and 28%). We can also notice that the effect of the duration of marriage on dyadic adjustment ($B = -0.146$; $SE = 0.044$; $t = -3.288$; $p < 0.01$) is fairly modest, while the effect on perceived efficacy is not statistically significant ($B = -0.001$; $SE = 0.012$; $t = -0.096$; $p = 0.924$). The unstandardized regression coefficients for the alternative model are presented in Figure 2.

	Indirect effect				95% CI
	Ps	Cs	Us	SE	
Attachment Avoidance	-0.046	-0.278	-0.266	0.019	-0.302 to -0.230
Attachment Anxiety	-0.012	-0.083	-0.070	0.014	-0.098 to -0.044

Note: Ps – partially standardized indirect effects; Cs – completely standardized indirect effects; Us – unstandardized indirect effects (*ab*); SE – bootstrap standard error (standard deviation of the 10,000 bootstrap estimates of the unstandardized indirect effect); 95% CI – lower and upper limits of 95% – bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for estimation of the unstandardized indirect effect.

As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3, the completely standardized indirect effect sizes of the original and the alternative model are similar in magnitude. The indirect effect size of avoidance is somewhat larger in the alternative (-0.278) than in the original (-0.224) model, whereas the indirect effect of anxiety is somewhat larger in the original (-0.119) than in the alternative (-0.083) model. Additionally, we can observe that attachment avoidance has a consistently larger negative effect on both perceived efficacy and dyadic adjustment than attachment anxiety.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of our research we can conclude that women with high attachment avoidance are more likely to perceive themselves as inefficient in marital conflict resolution and maladjusted to the dyadic relationship, compared to women with high attachment anxiety. Furthermore, the results suggest that perceived efficacy in solving marital conflicts mediates the effects of insecure attachment styles on dyadic adjustment. The mediation effect seems to be more robust for attachment anxiety, since the direct effect is not statistically significant after excluding the effects of perceived efficacy. Finally, there is evidence for a reciprocal causation between efficacy expectations and dyadic adjustment.

Examining the results, we can clearly see that attachment avoidance is related more strongly than attachment anxiety to both perception of low relationship quality and perception of inefficacy in conflict solving. This could be expected, since according to the attachment theory, attachment avoidance involves fear of intimacy and mistrust toward other people (Shaver et al., 2017). In accordance with this, attachment avoidance is related with detachment, withdrawal, distancing, lack of openness, refusal to discuss the topic and negotiate as a response to conflict (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). Since a strong direct effect of attachment avoidance on relationship quality is also confirmed by the results of other research (e.g. Saavedra et al., 2010), we may assume that women with avoidant attachment styles have many difficulties in initiating and maintaining close relationships in adulthood. Furthermore, we may also assume that their perception of low relationship quality is not primarily mediated by the perception of inefficacy in conflict solving, but rather that they are both strongly associated with flight-related, deactivating secondary attachment strategies.

On the other hand, attachment anxiety indicates the extent of the person's beliefs that they alone are unable to cope successfully with stressful situations, dependence on significant others in times of need and the amount of fear of abandonment by them (Shaver et al., 2017). In order to establish and maintain proximity to the attachment figure, women with anxious attachment styles need to keep the attachment system in a chronically activated state, so they often ruminate about potential threats, exaggerate the threatening aspects of various events and seek proximity of the partner even in the absence of any external signs of real danger. Unfortunately for them, the attachment figure cannot be accessible constantly, and as a result, these women often detect signs of the partner's distancing, rejection or unavailability. Since the crucial issue that determines the course and outcome of conflicts in close relationships, according to attachment theory, is the question of the partner's availability, we may assume that highly anxious women often respond to conflicts by triggering the set of fight-related, hyperactivating secondary attachment strategies associated with destructive engagement, confrontation, coercion, blame, and manipulation (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017).

Also, since women with high levels of attachment anxiety are in a constant state of distress and need, they frequently feel anger, jealousy and lack of trust toward their partners, as well as anxiety and fear of rejection or abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Women with anxious attachment styles often have ambivalent feelings toward their partners as

well as the relationship they are in. We may assume that this ambivalence is the reason why high attachment anxiety is not as strongly related to the perception of low marital quality as is high attachment avoidance, since highly anxious women may evaluate their marriage as high quality at one point, but they also may evaluate the same marriage as unsatisfactory at some other point in time. Furthermore, we may assume that the perception of relationship quality of highly anxious women is primarily mediated by their perception of efficacy in conflict solving. If they believe that their effort can lead to effective and successful conflict resolution, even if they do not use cooperative and constructive strategies to resolve the conflict, highly anxious women will perceive their relationship as satisfactory, and vice versa.

Previous research results indicate that the way conflicts are resolved plays an important role in the functioning of a romantic relationship (Greeff & De Bruyne, 2000). Insecure attachment styles are related to less constructive ways of marital conflict resolution (Kobak & Hazan, 1991), lower sexual satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008) and the perception of a low relationship quality (Knoke et al., 2010; Senchak & Leonard, 1992). People with insecure attachment styles also have negative judgment of the relationship and the partner's expectations and have pessimistic assessments about the future of their marriage (Collins & Read, 1990; Meyers & Landsberger, 2002). Based on previous results and the results of our own study, we can assume that perceived efficacy in solving marital conflicts mediates the effects of insecure attachment styles on marital quality primarily through the amount of negative feelings toward the partner and the discord between the spouses that remains unresolved.

In this study, we have also tested an alternative hypothesis, that the perception of dyadic adjustment mediates the effects of attachment insecurity on perceived efficacy in solving relationship conflicts. Since conflicts often include heightened emotionality, misperceptions and polarized thinking, they may activate memories of other congruent episodes of past hostilities that came from the partner or other important individuals and memories of previous failed attempts to resolve them. Therefore, we can assume that women who had a lower general perception of relationship quality prior to the conflict are less likely to perceive their partner as available and to resolve the argument constructively. The results of our study are in line with the results of a longitudinal study of partners (Lavner et al., 2016), which has shown that the quality of communication among partners affects their subsequent judgments of relationship satisfaction. However, according to Lavner et al.'s (2016) findings, we should also consider the

reverse pathway, which suggests that positivity, negativity and effectiveness of communication between spouses are merely a consequence of their prior levels of relationship satisfaction. The authors concluded that the effects of communication on relationship satisfaction do not differ significantly from the satisfaction-to-communication effects in most of the cases (Lavner et al., 2016).

However, it must be highlighted that although avoidance and anxiety both have a negative influence on marital quality and on perceived efficacy in resolving marital conflicts, mediation effects are less apparent for attachment avoidance. A somewhat larger indirect effect of avoidance in the alternative model and of anxiety in the original model can be explained with the results of Li and Chan's (2012) meta-study about the quality indicators of romantic relationships. These authors highlight different correlates of avoidance and anxiety and have found that avoidance shows a higher correlation with low levels of general satisfaction, support and closeness, while anxiety is more strongly connected to general conflicts. Previous research results have also revealed that conflict related distress, reported by highly anxious individuals might erode marital quality and commitment over time (Campbell et al., 2005).

In order to understand the results better, we must also consider some of the sample characteristics. Namely, the majority of the sample consists of women with an average age of 39 years, predominantly with children, high-school education and permanent employment. We must also consider the fact that the participation in the research was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. As a result, most participants who decided to complete the questionnaires and return them to us were securely attached women with mean scores on avoidance ($M = 17.92$) and anxiety ($M = 20.32$) below the theoretical mean for the ECR scale (27). Also, the sample mean score on the Perceived efficacy in solving relationship conflicts scale ($M = 27.44$) is higher than the theoretical mean (20), and most of the examined women perceived their marriage quality higher than average, with the sample mean for the DAS scale ($M = 123.59$) well above the theoretical average score (94.5). Therefore, we may assume that the results presented in this paper will probably not apply to women in pre-marital relationships, newlywed brides, highly insecure women, women in low quality relationships, victims of domestic violence, etc., and one should have this in mind especially when considering the practical implications of this research.

The main limitation of this research is its focus on intrapsychic processes and the non-dyadic nature of the data. We have included only female participants in this research for

three reasons. First, we may assume an existence of not only quantitative, but also qualitative differences in male and female biobehavioral responses to stress (Taylor et al., 2000). *Second*, the results of previous research (e.g. Kitamura et al., 1998; Shek, 1995; Šakotić-Kurbalija, & Kurbalija, 2015; Vannoy & Cubbins, 2001) have shown significant differences in the perception of marital quality between males and females. Some authors have even concluded that it is reasonable to talk about "her" and "his" marriage (Šakotić-Kurbalija, 2017), or "her" and "his" divorce (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Finally, most studies about romantic relationships that used non-dyadic samples were conducted primarily on women and this trend is even more obvious in online studies (e.g., in the study conducted by Saavedra et al. (2010) the male to female ratio was 21:79). Furthermore, even though there are no specific prior inclusion criteria, we may assume that the males who voluntarily participate in relationship studies are even less representative for their population than the females are. Since the disproportionate representation of males may obscure some significant influences and patterns of responses, we have decided to conduct our study entirely on a female sample. However, future research should include couples and consider partners as additional focal individuals. Examining the mutual influences of the partners could help us to understand better the complex relations between attachment systems, conflicts and relationship quality.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of this study prevents us from drawing conclusions about the causal relationships between the examined variables. Based on the results, we can assume the existence of reciprocal causation between perceived efficacy in solving relationship conflicts and dyadic adjustment. However, there is a need for more longitudinal studies like Lavner et al.'s research (2016), which would offer a more comprehensive insight into the dynamics and nature of these relations.

One other limitation of this study might be the fact that we did not collect information about the participants' religion, and we recommend that future researchers do that, since this aspect interferes in an important way in how the partner's difficulties, problems and failures are perceived by the spouse.

In spite of the outlined limitations, the results of this study also provide valuable information about the relations between attachment styles, conflicts and marital quality. Although research results suggest that learning and improving communication and conflict skills of the spouses has direct beneficial ef-

fects on their relationship quality (e.g., Shadish & Baldwin, 2005), the results of the present study point to the fact that activation of the insecure attachment system greatly reduces the probability of using those communication skills. Our results offer more support to the assumptions of the model of attachment system activation that every interaction in which the partner helps in decreasing distress and restoring the experience of safety affirms the adaptive value of closeness and amplifies emotional attachment to the partner. This way the feeling of safety is gradually restored in a romantic relationship along with the belief that the partner will be available and will give support when it is needed (Mikulincer, 2006).

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Stil privrženosti i dijadička prilagodba kod žena: medijacijska uloga percipirane učinkovitosti u rješavanju bračnih sukoba

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U ovoj smo studiji ispitali doprinos percipirane učinkovitosti u rješavanju bračnih sukoba kao posrednika u objašnjenju veze između stila privrženosti odraslih i dijadičke prilagodbe, istodobno kontrolirajući učinak duljine braka. U istraživanju je sudjelovala 1921 udana žena. Rezultati sugeriraju da će se žene sklone izbjegavajućoj privrženosti vjerojatno smatrati neučinkovitim u rješavanju bračnih sukoba te slabije

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ET AL.:
WOMEN'S ATTACHMENT...

prilagođenom partnerskom odnosu u usporedbi sa ženama s visokom anksioznom privrženosti. Nadalje, rezultati sugeriraju da uočena učinkovitost u rješavanju bračnih sukoba posreduje učincima nesigurnih stilova privrženosti na dijadičku prilagodbu. Konačno, možemo pretpostaviti postojanje uzajamne uzročne veze između očekivanja učinkovitosti u rješavanju bračnih sukoba i dijadičke prilagodbe.

Ključne riječi: privrženost, prilagodba partnera, bračni sukobi, bračna kvaliteta, medijacija



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