



**Attachment dynamics and romantic
relationships:
A cross-cultural perspective**

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Introduction

Attachment dynamics in a non-Western context

Why does culture matter?

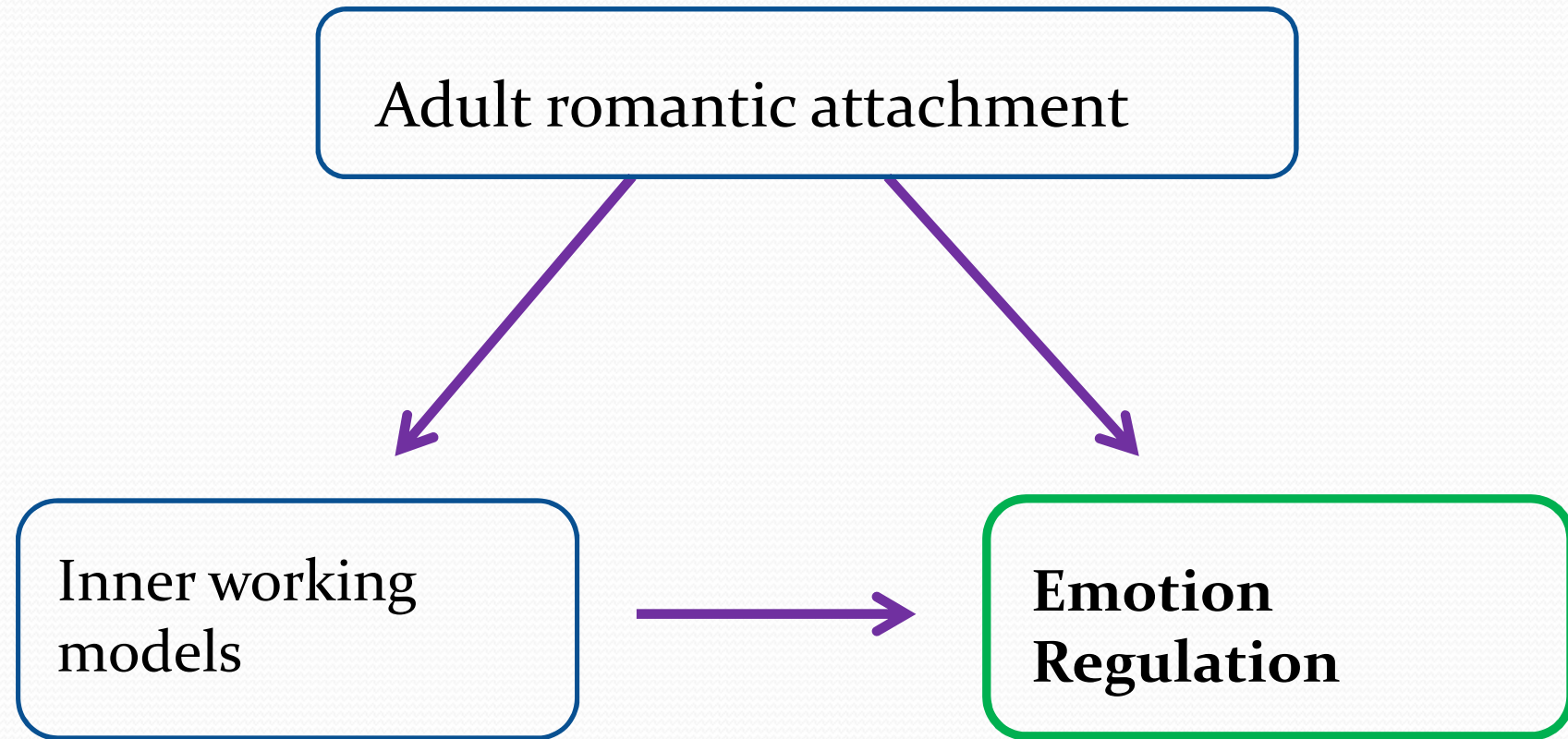
- Assumptions of attachment model rooted in Western values (eg., Rothbaum et al., 2000; Schmitt et al., 2004)
- Differences observed:
 - between individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures in romantic attachment (Schmitt et al., 2004)
 - wrt emotion regulation processes as well

=> How applicable is attachment theory as a framework for relationships in non-Western cultures?



What do we know about romantic attachment in Western cultures?

Adult romantic attachment



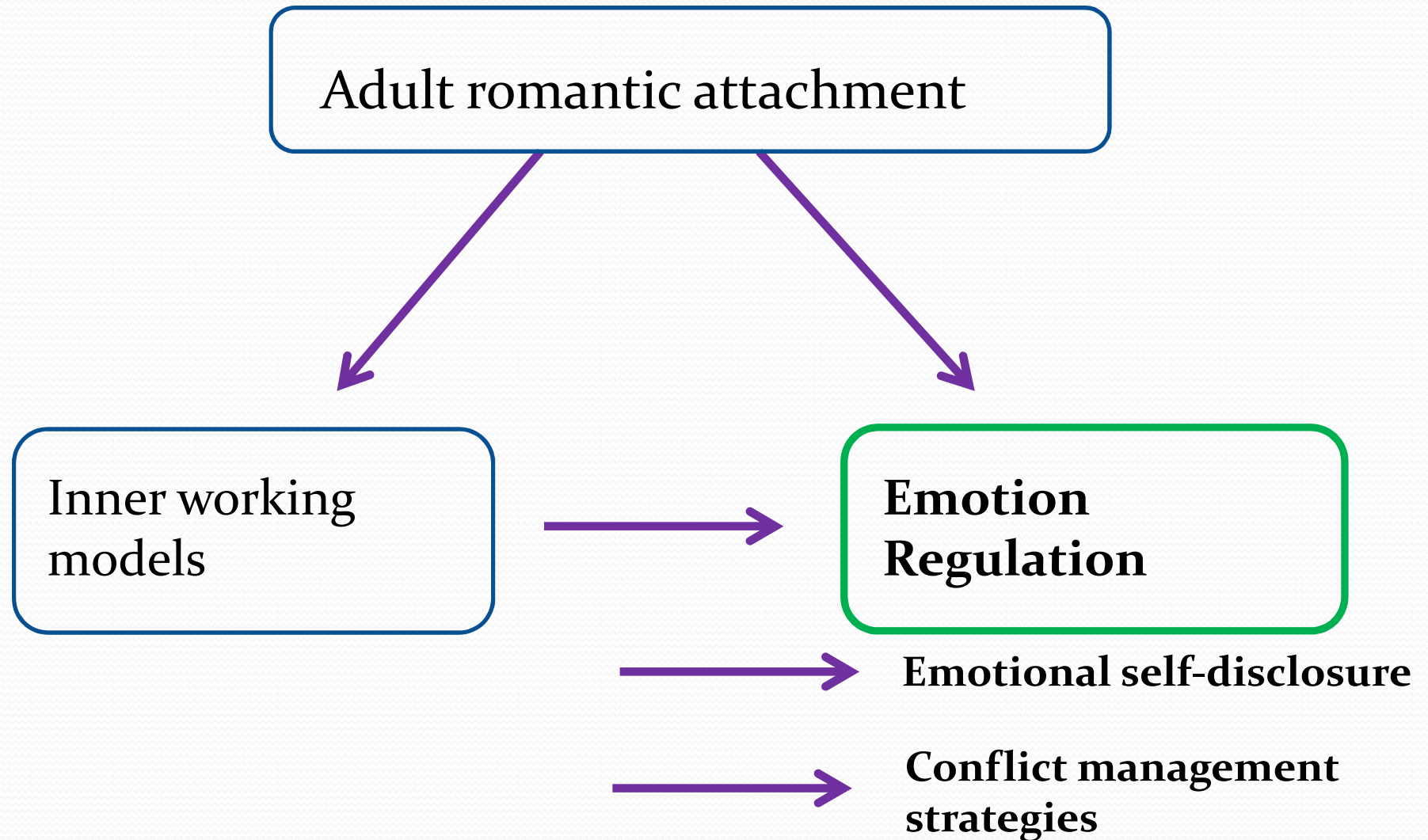
Emotion regulation

- Strongly guided by inner working models
- Emotion regulation strategies:
 - a. => *To express or suppress emotions?*
i.e. extent of **emotional control**
 - b. => *How to manage conflict?*
- However, findings are not consistent in the depiction of emotion regulation patterns in:
 - **Emotional self-disclosure**
 - **Conflict management strategies**



Let's take a closer look at emotion regulation patterns
based on studies conducted in Western cultures

Adult romantic attachment



Emotional self-disclosure

- How does this relate to emotional control?
 - \uparrow emotional control = \downarrow emotional expression through self-disclosure
 - Findings are consistent for secure attachment and avoidant attachment, but not for anxious attachment
 - Also, is self-disclosure good or bad for the relationship?
- => need for further theoretical considerations in conceptualizing emotional control

Conflict management strategies

- Constructive strategies –
e.g., negotiation
- Maladaptive strategies –
e.g., psychological aggression
- Lack of empirical consensus that anxious individuals are more likely to engage in maladaptive approach tactics, and avoidant individuals in withdrawal tactics (Pietromonaco et al., 2004)

=> are anxious and avoidant individuals more similar than different?



Would these patterns be similarly observed in a non-Western culture?



Taking a look at Asian cultures

- Emphasis on relational harmony
- Greater emphasis on indirect communication
- Cultural norms encourage less emotion expression, more control
- Asians make use of less social support in times of stress because norms discourage individuals from “burdening” others – personal needs are secondary to maintaining harmony (Taylor et al., 2004)



Cultural Differences

Implications:

- What does “secure” attachment mean?
 - Might “look” different in a non-Western context given cultural norms
- How does attachment relate to relationship quality?
 - Attachment anxiety may be culturally functional -> less impact on relationship quality (cf. findings in Western cultures)
 - Attachment avoidance less consistent with collectivistic cultural norms -> may be stronger indicator of relationship quality in collectivistic cultures



Cultural Differences

Implications:

- What about attachment dynamics?
 - Less emotional self-disclosure associated with both attachment anxiety and avoidance
 - More indirect communication to avoid open conflict –
 - > link between attachment and conflict behaviours weaker?



Present Study

- Hypothesis 1: Both attachment anxiety and avoidance would be
 - a) Negatively correlated with emotional self-disclosure,
 - b) Negatively correlated with the use of negotiation (by self and by partner), and
 - c) Positively correlated with the use of psychological aggression (by self and by partner).



Present Study

- Hypothesis 2:
 - a) Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety would be associated with lower relationship quality.
 - b) However, attachment avoidance would be a better predictor of relationship quality compared to attachment anxiety in a collectivistic culture



Present Study

- Hypothesis 3:

Emotional control, operationalized as the extent to which individuals express themselves through emotional self-disclosure, would be an important predictor of relationship quality.

Specifically, self-disclosure of both positive and negative emotions would be positively related to relationship quality, after controlling for attachment dimensions.



Method

Participants

- 60 Chinese individuals from Singapore (43 females; 17 males)
- Age: 19-54 ($M=30.87$, $SD=8.04$)
- Participants had to be in a committed heterosexual relationship of at least a year
- Completed an online survey

Measures

- Adult romantic attachment:
Experiences in Close Relationships Scale – Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000)
- Emotional self-disclosure:
Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS; Snell et al., 1988).
- Conflict management:
Subscales from Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS₂; Strauss et al., 1996) – *Negotiation* and *Psychological Aggression*
- Relationship quality:
Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby et al., 1995)

Response rate

- A total of 118 unique individuals visited/attempted the online survey
- Recruited through email networks and online social platforms such as Facebook
- Estimated response rate was 53%



Results

Descriptive Statistics

- All scales were checked for skewness and kurtosis – generally acceptable except for *Psychological Aggression* (25% reported 0 frequency)
- Good reliability for all scales/subscales (α range: 0.75-0.98), except for *Psychological Aggression (Partner)* subscale ($\alpha = 0.57$)

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1: Both attachment anxiety and avoidance would be

- a) Negatively correlated with emotional self-disclosure,
- b) Negatively correlated with the use of negotiation (by self and by partner), and
- c) Positively correlated with the use of psychological aggression (by self and by partner).



Results – Attachment Anxiety

- Consistent with expectations, participants who were more anxious were *less* likely to disclose their emotions to their partners, particularly negative emotions.
- However, attachment anxiety was not associated with greater psychological aggression.
- Interestingly, participants who were more anxious perceived more negotiation behaviours by their partners during conflict, but not themselves.



Results – Attachment Avoidance

- Consistent with expectations, participants who were more avoidant were less likely to disclose their emotions, good or bad, to their partners.
- However, attachment avoidance was not associated with greater psychological aggression or less negotiation during conflict.

Hypothesis 2

- Hypothesis 2:
 - a) Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety would be associated with lower relationship quality.
 - b) However, attachment avoidance would be a better predictor of relationship quality compared to attachment anxiety in a collectivistic culture

Results – Correlates of Relationship Quality

Some correlates of relationship quality

- Self-disclosure of +ve emotions -> +ve
- Self-disclosure of -ve emotions -> +ve
- Perceived psychological aggression (self and partner) -> -ve

Results – Attachment + Relationship Quality

- Consistent with expectations, both attachment avoidance and anxiety were associated with lower relationship quality
- Both explained 29% of variance in relationship quality
- Consistent with expectations, multiple regression analysis revealed that attachment avoidance was a predictor of relationship quality ($\beta = -.45$, $t = -3.43$, $p < .01$), over and above attachment anxiety.
- Attachment anxiety was not a significant predictor in the model when fitted last

Results – Attachment + Relationship Quality

Regression Model Predicting Relationship Quality from Attachment Anxiety and Avoidance

Variables	β	T	p
Attachment anxiety	-0.15	-1.15	0.26
Attachment avoidance	-0.45	-3.43**	0.001

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Hypothesis 3

- Hypothesis 3:

Emotional control, operationalized as the extent to which individuals express themselves through emotional self-disclosure, would be an important predictor of relationship quality. Specifically, self-disclosure of both positive and negative emotions would be positively related to relationship quality, after controlling for attachment dimensions.

Results – Self-disclosure + Relationship Quality

Regression Models Predicting Relationship Quality from Attachment Dimensions and Emotional Self-Disclosure

	β	t	p
1. Self-disclosure (Positive Emotions)			
<i>Step 2</i>			
Attachment Anxiety	-0.15	-1.13	0.26
Attachment Avoidance	.044	-3.00**	0.004
Self-disclosure (Positive Emotions)	0.03	0.20	0.84
2. Self-disclosure (Negative Emotions)			
<i>Step 2</i>			
Attachment Anxiety	-0.15	-1.13	0.27
Attachment Avoidance	-0.40	-2.52*	0.015
Self-disclosure (Negative Emotions)	0.09	0.61	0.54

Note. $R^2 = .29$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .00$ for Model 1 ($p > .05$); $\Delta R^2 = .01$ for Model 2 ($p > .05$).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Results – Self-disclosure + Relationship Quality

- Attachment avoidance was the only significant predictor in both models. Unlike previous findings with Western samples (e.g., Feeney, 1999), self-disclosure of both positive and negative emotions did not add to the prediction of relationship quality, after attachment dimensions were controlled for.



Discussion

Cultural Similarities

- Both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were associated with lower relationship quality
- ⇒ Supports Bowlby's (1969) contention: key elements of attachment theory are relatively consistent across cultures
- Both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were associated with less emotional self-disclosure.
- Self-disclosure was also positively associated with relationship quality.
- ⇒ Consistent with findings established using Western samples (eg., Feeney, 1999; Laurenceau et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988)

Cultural Differences

- Attachment anxiety and avoidance were not associated with a greater use of psychological aggression during conflict

=> Inconsistent with findings established in Western cultures (ie., that anxious individuals engage in more conflict escalation behaviours, or that both anxious and avoidant individuals have difficulties managing conflict)

Cultural Differences

- Attachment avoidance was not associated with a lower use of self or perceived partner negotiation during conflict

⇒ Incongruent with the widely held assumption that avoidant individuals respond to conflict by withdrawing

Results do not support assumption that insecure attachment is associated with poorer emotion regulation strategies during conflict

Cultural Differences

- Individuals who were higher in attachment anxiety reported *more* negotiation used by their partners during conflict

⇒ Congruent with norms in a collectivistic culture
e.g., tendency to avoid open conflict, anxiety more accepted in a relationship

Cultural Differences

- Attachment avoidance was a significantly better predictor of relationship quality than attachment anxiety
- Consistent with previous research conducted with Asian samples (eg., Friedman et al., 2010; Schmitt et al., 2004)

=> Attachment anxiety fits relatively well in collectivistic cultures – culturally functional



Cultural Differences

- Emotional control (operationalized as the level of emotional self-disclosure in the current study) did not add to the explanation of relationship quality, over and above attachment style
- Contrary to previous findings from Western samples (ie., Feeney, 1999)
- Possible reasons: methodological concerns and cultural norms



Implications

- Cross-cultural differences in the way attachment influences relationship quality
- Cross-cultural differences in the way attachment influences dynamics within a relationship (ie., disclosure, conflict management)
- Inconsistencies and gaps in the conceptualization of emotion control => Need to understand emotion regulation in multiple contexts

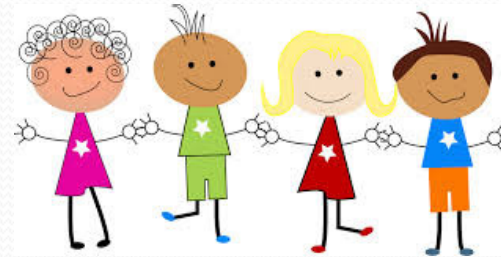


Limitations & Future Directions

- Study only recruited individuals, rather than couples
- Lack of comparison group
- Future research could look at including partners and comparison group of participants from a more individualistic culture

Conclusion

- Effects of culture cannot be ignored!
- Intercultural marriages are also becoming increasingly common -> cultural differences in relational expectations also become more relevant
- Need to better our understanding of cross-cultural similarities and differences in attachment dynamics





Thank you!😊