Family-of-origin, romantic attachment, and marital adjustment: a path analysis model

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Abstract

From the perspective of multigenerational theory, the constructions concerning the family-of-origin are an influencing legacy for the development of individuals throughout their life-span, including marital relationships. The present study aimed to test a model of causal links between family-of-origin, romantic attachment pattern, and adjustment to marital relationship. In order to measure the variables, 164 married adults filled out four instruments. The results suggest that the individuals’ constructions of family-of-origin predict romantic attachment pattern, while the romantic attachment predicts marital adjustment. Some limitations and implications of the study for clinical practice in family and couple therapy are discussed.

1. Introduction

From the standpoint of multigenerational theory (M. Bowen), the experiences lived in the family-of-origin represent a legacy which influences people’s development throughout their life-span, including the romantic relationships (Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001; Nichols & Schwartz, 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Whitton et al., 2008). The studies focused on various aspects of the primary experiences lived in the family-of-origin that have an impact on the development of individuals (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001): differentiation of self, emotional cutoff, relational triangles, emotional and projective processes, adaptability and cohesion of the family system, etc. Differentiation of self represents the capacity of a member to act independently, to make his or her own choices while still remaining emotionally connected with the family relational system (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Cohesion represents the extent to which the members of a family system are emotionally connected each one with the others (Olson & Gorall, 2003). The cohesion concept refers to various aspects of the family system, such as: emotional bonds, boundaries within the family system, coalitions, interests, recreational

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activities, decision-making processes, etc. From an operational perspective, adaptability is defined as the ability of a marital dyad or family system to change its power structure, roles and rules in response to various stressful situations (Olson & Gorall, 2003).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, researchers were increasingly interested in the study of romantic attachment patterns. It was shown that attachment plays an important role in the psychological and social adjustment of adults (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). During adulthood, individual differences in romantic attachment are based on the differences in the pattern of relationships between children and their figures of attachment (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Hazan and Shaver (1987) adopted the attachment patterns described by M. D. Ainsworth (secure, anxious-ambivalent and anxious-avoidant) which they considered to be conceptually similar to the styles of affectivity observed in adult relationships. Romantic attachment is important to the dynamic process of long-term regulation of the affective bonds between the partners involved in a marital couple, as well as of the parental investments of the two spouses (Del Giudice, 2011; Feeney, 1999; Marchand, 2004; Volling, Notaro, & Larsen, 1998).

The present study aimed to test a model of causal links between characteristics of the family-of-origin, the patterns of romantic attachment, and marital adjustment. Within the model, it was supposed that romantic attachment mediates the relationship between family-of-origin characteristics and marital adjustment.

2. Method

Participants. The convenience sample included 164 adults (52 males and 112 females). The participants filled out three scales and a demographic data questionnaire. The mean age of participants was 37.01 (SD = 8.26). Most of them were university graduates (81.6 %). The participants were married for the first time (91 %) or remarried. The respondents consented to participate in the study. The following two criteria for inclusion of participants in the present study were used: a) they had been married for at least one year; 2. their families-of-origin had not been single-parented or formed through remarriage. When two participants formed a marital couple they were asked to fill out the questionnaires independently.

Instruments. The differentiation of self in the family-of-origin was measured with The Differentiation in The Family System Scale (DIFS – Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992). The scale comprises 66 items designed in a circular format. In the present study, the scales of DIFS proved a good internal consistency (α ranged from .75 to .92). As indicators of the family-of-origin, the adaptability and cohesion were measured with the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES III – included in Grey Smith, 1996). The scales comprise 10 items for each dimension. The internal consistency was .79 for Adaptability and .90 for Cohesion. In order to measure romantic attachment patterns, The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR – Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) was used. The short version of this scale (12 items) showed good psychometric qualities (Wei et al., 2007). In the present study, internal consistency of the two dimensions was .68 for Anxiety and .84 for Avoidance. Marital adjustment was measured with The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS – Busby et al., 1995). The scale comprises 14 items. In this study, α was: .83 for Consensus, .79 for Cohesion, .87 for Satisfaction and .90 for all items.

Statistical procedures. The data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0 and AMOS 16.0. Because there were too few marital couples, the unit of analysis was the individual. Non-standardized and standardized values of path coefficients were estimated using the maximum likelihood technique. In the present paper, only standardized values were reported. Also, the indirect, direct and total effects were estimated. In order to assess the fit of the model to the data, the following indices were used (Byrne, 2010): GFI (goodness-of-fit index) and AGFI (adjusted goodness-of-fit index) close to 1.00, NFI (normed fit index) and CFI
(comparative fit index) greater than .95, and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) lower than .05.

3. Results

The hypothesized model (see Figure 1) proved a good fit to the data, with NFI slightly lower than .95, CFI greater than .95, and RMSEA equal to .05. Due to the unsatisfactory values of GFI and AGFI, some pos-hoc analyses were conducted. According to the reported normative data, the scores on adaptability and cohesion correlate to some extent (Olson & Gorall, 2003). Therefore, the covariance between the error terms of the two family-of-origin indicators was set. Thus, the adjusted model showed a slightly better fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 42.41$, $df = 31$, $p > .05$, $\chi^2/df = 1.36$, GFI = .95, AGFI = .91, NFI = .95, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04).

Note: $\chi^2 = 50.18$, $df = 32$, $p < .05$, $\chi^2/df = 1.56$, GFI = .94, AGFI = .90, NFI = .94, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .05. In order to simplify the model, errors were omitted from figure.

* $p < .05$

Fig. 1. The model of links between family-of-origin, romantic attachment, and marital adjustment (standardized path coefficients)

Adaptability, cohesion, participant-father differentiation, participant-mother differentiation, and mother-father differentiation were significant indicators of the family-of-origin latent variable. The mother-father differentiation ($\beta = .92$, $p < .05$) and participant-father differentiation ($\beta = .87$, $p < .05$) were the strongest indicators. Compared to anxiety ($\beta = .53$, $p < .05$), avoidance ($\beta = .82$, $p < .05$) was a stronger indicator of romantic attachment. Also, consensus ($\beta = .87$, $p < .05$), cohesion ($\beta = .71$, $p < .05$) and satisfaction ($\beta = .82$, $p < .05$) were significant indicators of the marital adjustment.

The family-of-origin had no significant effect on marital adjustment ($\beta = .03$, $p > .05$). The effect of family-of-origin on romantic attachment was significant ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .05$). Family-of-origin had a negative influence on romantic attachment. The participants reporting higher level of adaptability, cohesion, and differentiation of self in their own family-of-origin tended to express lower insecure attachment (anxiety or avoidance). On the other hand, romantic attachment had a significant effect on marital adjustment ($\beta = -.98$, $p < .05$). Higher level of insecure attachment was associated with lower level of marital adjustment.

In order to test whether romantic attachment is mediating the causal relationship between family-of-origin and marital adjustment of the participants, the conditions recommended by Baron and Kenny...
(1986) were used: a) the independent variable (family-of-origin) must be significantly related to the mediator (romantic attachment); b) the independent variable must be significantly related to the dependent variable (marital adjustment); c) the mediator must be significantly related to the dependent variable when the dependent variable is regressed on the independent variable and the mediator; d) the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable should no longer be significant when the independent variable and the mediator are regressed on the dependent variable.

The mediation hypothesis was not supported. The family-of-origin had a significant effect on romantic attachment, thus meeting the first condition recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). According to the third condition, the effect of romantic attachment on marital adjustment was significant. The estimation of parameters showed no significant direct effect of the family-of-origin on the level of marital adjustment. Thus, the second condition recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) was not supported. Moreover, the causal relationship between the family-of-origin and marital adjustment was significant (and the size of indirect effect was greater than the magnitude of direct effect) when the effect of romantic attachment on marital adjustment was controlled for ($\beta$ for indirect effect = .38, $p < .05$), thus leaving without support the fourth condition recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Using the model of the intergenerational transmission of family emotional and communication patterns, the present study aimed to test a working model of causal relationships between the family-of-origin of marital partners, romantic attachment, and marital adjustment. It is not the family-of-origin itself that influences people’s life and close relationships, but their own mental constructions about the reality of their family-of-origin.

We hypothesized that romantic attachment is a mediator of the relationship between the individuals’ mental constructions of their family-of-origin and their adjustment to the marital relationship. The hypothesis was tested using structural equation modelling, as well as the conditions suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The hypothesis was not supported. However, the family-of-origin had a significant effect on the participant’s romantic attachment patterns. Also, the effect of romantic attachment pattern on marital adjustment was significant.

The present study has some methodological limitations. First, findings were based exclusively on self-reported data. Consequently, a portion of the variance in the observed variables may be due to the idiosyncratic manner in which an individual responds to the measures regarding some personal attributes (Marchand, 2004). Second, the findings were based on data from a relatively small convenience sample, through a cross-sectional design. Therefore, the findings should be generalized with caution.

Overall, the findings of the present study provided some empirical support on the role of the family-of-origin in romantic attachment, as well as on the role of romantic attachment in the marital adjustment of adults. There are several practical implications of the findings. Researchers and practitioners in the field of couple and family therapy have focused their attention on the manner in which family resources could be used in the process of therapeutic change (Laham, 1990; Nichols & Schwartz, 2001; Nichols, 2003). Working with the spouses’ constructions related to their ongoing relationship, the therapists can help them rebuild their family past, leaving an opened door for the exploration of family-of-origin resources, less visible at the beginning of the therapy, to the benefit of their current marital relationship.

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