

**The Relationship of Attachment
Style, Empathy, Self-Control and
Self-Esteem of the Parents with
their Quality of Marriage and
Relationship with their Children**

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Abstract

Couplehood is a relationship between two individuals, each of whom comes from a different background and possesses a different character as well as different needs, emotions, principles, values, problems, hopes and aspirations, all of which may affect the behavior of the partners and the quality of their relationship.

The nuclear family deteriorates when the physical and mental well-being of the parents and their children is detrimentally affected (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Rostami, Ghazinour, Nygren & Richter, 2014). Consequently, a variety of problems arise which reflect in the couple's deficient interpersonal relations and communication. The roots of these problems may derive in childhood, dogmatic character traits, a lack of communication skills, improper behavior and occasionally in social changes which give rise to new perceptions such as values of equality and individualism (Barzoki, Tavakoll & Burrage, 2015), ignoring the woman's needs, or her opinions (Bastani, Golzari & Zohre, 2010) as well as external stressful states experienced by the partners (at work, or health problems).

Stress in marital life may heavily burden the individual's well-being as well as marital satisfaction, and may lead to impaired parenthood and difficulties experienced by the children in adapting to the family structure (Christensen & Heavey, 1999; Zimmerman, 2010).

According to Bowlby's attachment theory and more recent studies, an individual's attachment style derives from communication experiences which developed during her or his childhood with parents. It will be the major factor affecting the quality of that individual's communication in the future with her or his partner and environment, her or his well-being, shaping the norm of that individual's actions, and her or his functioning as a parent. Research further shows that the individual's personality traits hold an important role in shaping the individual's own behavior, and her or his interpersonal relationships.

The main purpose of the current study is to examine the models of mediation and whether the relationship between attachment style (avoidance and anxiety) in parents, marital satisfaction and the quality of relationships with the children are mediated through personality variables of emotional and cognitive empathy, self-control, and

self-esteem.

The central premises of the current study are:

1. Attachment style has critical impact on the individual's functioning as a partner and parent, such that an insecure attachment style (avoidance or anxiety) harms the quality of the spousal relationship (Chung, 2014; JoeI, MacDonald & Shimotomai, 2011) and the quality of the couple's relationship with their children (Ainsworth, Blehar, Water & Wall, 2015; Kerns & Brumariu, 2014; Kerns, Mathews, Koehn, Williams & Siener-Ciesla, 2015).
2. The personality variables empathy, self-control and self-esteem are mediating variables between attachment style, the quality of the couplehood, and the quality of the couple's relationship with their children, and may compensate, in the marriage and in the relationship with children, for an insecure attachment style, thereby reducing the risk that the insecure attachment style will harm marital quality and the relationship with the children.
3. Involvement with married couples in the current study, fathers and mothers, also requires relating to the issue of gender. Gender is a primary factor influencing the relationship between parents and children. Therefore, the current study relates to gender theories by Chodorow (1974, 1978, 1979) and Gilligan's theory of moral development (1982) by way of explaining differences between the genders.

The current study was conducted between 2012 and 2013. Participants were randomly sampled from a diversity of cities: central Israel, coastal plains, southern Israel, Jerusalem and environs. The sampling included 179 married couples (N=358) who are parents of children. Data collection was conducted through self-reporting questionnaires. Data analysis involved quantitative methods, using the script for agency model examination, and the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method, in order to examine the research model in three ways: the couplehood model, the fathers model and the mothers model.

Research results indicated a large number of models that supported the agency hypothesis. It was found that the indices **empathic concern** in empathy, **self-control**

and **self-esteem** indeed mediate between attachment style on one hand, and marital satisfaction and the parent-child relationship on the other. They compensate for insecure communication and contribute to an improved relationship between the individuals comprising the couple, and between the couple and their children.

Differences were found between the model for fathers, and that for mothers:

1. Among fathers it was found that the more they abstained from communication, the more their communicative patterns with their partners were negative.
2. Among fathers it was found that the more empathy they showed, the better their relations were with their children. Among mothers, such a linkage was not found.
3. Among mothers it was found that the greater their self control, the greater their marital satisfaction. Their communication patterns with their partners were more positive as were their relationships with their children. Among fathers, such a linkage was not found.

The contribution of the current thesis is in its study of several personality variables across a variety of mediation models and the identification of the existence of indirect links between parental attachment style, marital satisfaction and the quality of the parent-child relationship. It was found that these links are mediated through personality variables: emotional and cognitive empathy, self-control and self-esteem, which compensate for insecure attachment style and thus contribute to marital quality and the parent-child relationship.

An examination of the mediation models contributed new research knowledge which may expand the theory of attachment's theoretical infrastructure and add an applicative aspect to field cases. This knowledge may help educators, parents, family therapists and marital counsellors by encouraging the couple's awareness to greater self-knowledge, such as perspective taking, empathic concern, employment of fantasy, self-control and self-esteem; and recommending models of appropriate couplehood and parenthood.