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**SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION**  
**For Doctor of Philosophy, field 3.2 Psychology**

**ROLE OF EARLY MALADAPTIVE SCHEMAS AND ATTACHMENT  
STYLES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

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The dissertation "*Role of early maladaptive schemas and attachment styles for conflict resolution in intimate relationships*" is structured in an introductory part, seven chapters and a conclusion. It contains 233 pages, of which 190 are main text, tables and graphics, and the rest represent the used literature sources and appendices. The research done is presented in 6 figures and 55 tables. The list of used literature includes 426 sources in English, Bulgarian and Spanish. On the topic of the dissertation, 3 publications were made in scientific publications and 1 report at a scientific conference.

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The defense of the dissertation will take place on September 8, 2023 at 1:00 p.m. in auditorium 41 of the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski" at an open meeting of the selected Specialized Scientific Jury.

The dissertation and the associated documents for the defense are available at the Department of Psychology, office 60, south wing of the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski", as well as on the university website [www.uni-sofia.bg](http://www.uni-sofia.bg).

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## INTRODUCTION

Intimate relationship lies at the core of human existence. To a large extent, the quality of that relationship defines the quality of one’s life. The subjective experiences of closeness and connectedness with the romantic partner give rise to such highly valued benefits as mutual trust and validation, empathy, and acceptance. Research evidence abundantly demonstrates that couple intimacy is a significant contributing factor in positive

relationship outcomes. Partners who report high levels of Intimate relationship satisfaction tend to maintain long-term, stable relationships. Conversely, Intimate relationship dissatisfaction is one of the main reasons for relationship dissolution.

In the process of the relationship, when partners experience conflicting preferences, goals or motives, conflict can arise. How to communicate while resolving disagreements is often identified as an important problem within couples. Managing and resolving conflict is difficult, and can itself be a significant source of stress. Identifying what constitutes effective communication during conflict is thus critical to help couples resolve problems and sustain their relationships. Even the most satisfying relationship can be put at risk by unresolved conflicts and the stress associated with them.

Common sources of conflict comprise discrepancies in equity and power, financial difficulties, unmet expectations, unacceptable habits, parenting, domestic and family responsibilities, jealousy etc. Despite decades of investigations, research on what constitutes satisfactory conflict resolution in intimate relationships has failed to provide a definitive answer.

One avenue for studying the conflict resolution in adult relationships is the association with the attachment styles. Numerous studies show that mainly anxious and avoidant attachment styles play a significant role in conflict resolution (Shi, 2003). On the other hand, the secure attachment plays a bigger role when it comes to relationship satisfaction (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Roberts, 2000). Conflict resolution is an important concept of interest in terms of marital therapy and it focuses on communication strategies and expression (Epstein, Baucom, & Rankin, 1993; Fowers, 1998). Research in the past two decades have shown the significance of attachment to both conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; Feeney, 1999).

Other authors have focused on associations of the early maladaptive schemas and marital satisfaction (Khosravi, Saif & Banoo, 2007). The maladaptive schemas refer to

tendencies and traits developed very early in life, as such, they are expected to form specific behaviors, which, in turn, influence the relationship satisfaction.

Another possible actor in the conflict resolution within intimate couples, it seems, is the emotional expressivity. It has not been tested as a variable in the problematic interactions among attachment, schemas, conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction and the intention of the current work is to fill this gap.

Meanwhile, unpredictable events such as the pandemic of Coronavirus made the topic even more important and acute when couples were lockdowned together for a prolonged periods of time. Such conditions brought more conflict into couples' life and tested to the limits the strength of their relationships. (As a side effect, this situation aided data collection as social activity was minimized and this made people more willing to fill out questionnaires.)

Some of the above effects have been investigated in different countries and, to some extent, in the Bulgarian cultural framework (Petrov, 2010). However, these effects have not been studied in depth within the Bulgarian population. Driven by the necessity to fill this void, a new approach has been designed in the current work.

The mission of this investigation is answering the following questions:

1. What role do attachment styles play in the way we communicate and relate to intimate partners?
2. What strategies do people use when dealing with conflicts on an interpersonal level?
3. Are there schemas (personality traits) that explain tendencies in our behavior in connection with relationship satisfaction?
4. Does emotional expressivity play a role, and does it modulate human relationships?
5. What is the effect of all the above when it comes to romantic satisfaction?

## **Theoretical Analysis**

### **Attachment Styles**

The attachment system is seen as an important component of human genetic programming as feeding and mating (Bowlby, 1969). The work of John Bowlby strongly influences recent attempts to understand close adult relationships from attachment point of view. Central to these fundamental propositions is the role of the individual's expectations of attachment figures. Expectations about attachment figures' availability and responsiveness are believed to be incorporated into the internal models of attachment functioning. Attachment patterns reflect memories and beliefs that originate in early experiences of caring for the individual and are transferred to their new relationships, in which they play an active role in guiding perceptions and behavior. Bowlby's attachment theory focuses on the bonds between infants and their caregivers. Despite this, as pointed out by adult attachment researchers, Bowlby argues that attachment plays a fundamental role throughout the life cycle and that Attachment behavior is a characteristic of human beings "from birth to death" (Bowlby, 1979, p. 129). The main attachment types are the following: secure, anxious, avoidant and disorganized. The secure attachment refers to such relations between the primary caregiver and the baby at an early age where exploring the world around is permitted. That is based on some important presumptions of safety and comfort where no immediate threat is experienced. Secure infants—no matter how distressed the separation might be—immediately calmed down on re-establishing contact with the mother and soon returned to play. Unlike them all other attachment styles are perceived as insecure and the bond between the primary care-giver and the baby is affected in a negative way.

### **Early Maladaptive Schemas**

Jeffrey Young's schema-focused therapy was initially created to optimize Beck's traditional cognitive therapy, integrating elements of John Bowlby's attachment theory to deepen the understanding of emotional development in children. Throughout the years, it

has been well contributed by the systemic procedural therapy of Vittorio Guidan, who also highlights the importance of the role played by the first years of life and the relationship with caregivers in the development of one's psychological self. The schema-focused model contains several significant modifications to Beck's original work (Caro, 1997). Over the years, this model has established itself as one of the most complete and integrating proposals of the cognitive school at an international level. Young developed schema therapy as a systematic approach that extends cognitive behavioral therapy by integrating techniques drawn from multiple schools of therapy. Schema therapy can be brief, intermediate, or long-term. Often the duration depends on the patient. Based on cognitive-behavioral therapy, it is expanded to give much more importance to the childhood and adolescent origins of psychological problems, introduce emotive techniques, and contemplate the therapist-patient relationship. Once the symptoms are eliminated, schema therapy is ideal for treating many characterological themes. Therapy is often undertaken with other modalities, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and psychotropic medication. Schema therapy is designed to treat the chronic characterological aspects of disorders, not the acute psychiatric symptoms (such as a depressive attack or recurrent panic disorders). According to Young (2003), EMS are stable and enduring structures of the subject's personality, which develop early and are associated with various psychopathologies. These beliefs or cognitions are formed in childhood or adolescence and trigger emotional and bodily reactions (Behary, 2011). Many schemes arise in the child's pre-verbal stage when only emotional memories and bodily sensations are stored. Later, when the child begins speaking, we develop cognitions and thoughts (Young et al., 2008).

### **Conflict Resolution Styles**

Everyday conflicts are understood as situations in which there are disagreements between at least two figures, partners, or family members (Rodrigo et al., 2005; Correa, Rodríguez, and Ceballos, 2013). The most frequent topics that couples usually face are finances, caring for children and dependents, housework, lifestyle, leisure time, freedom, family relationships, sexuality, communication, and dissatisfaction in the couple (Luján, 2006;



Oggins, 2003; Musitu and Cava, 2001). Nevertheless, knowing the couple's conflicting issues is just as important as knowing how to manage them (Reboredo, Mazadiego, and Villegas, 2011). For the resolution strategies that couples adopt, it is crucial to promote the continuity of the family projection and the well-being of its members. Numerous studies show the correlation between conflicts and marital satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 2000; Wheeler, Updegraff, & Thayer, 2010).

### **Emotional Expressivity**

Emotions are present in everyone's life, practically in everything we do. We are usually with a friend because we feel comfortable with them, we visit our grandparents because we love them, and we go to the beach at the weekend intending to have a good time. We get angry when things do not work out for us, and we are happy and satisfied when we succeed in what we have set out to do. We are afraid to fly by plane or visit the dentist's office. We feel grieved and hurt when a relative dies or happy when the person we are attracted to reciprocates. There are days when we can work or study with interest and enthusiasm and others who only feel lazy or annoyed. These and other situations in our daily life reveal the influence that emotions exert on our lives.

### **Relationship Satisfaction**

In 1947, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not simply the absence of disease or ailment,” thus formulating a broad, inclusive, and positive view of health. In 1975, the organization went one step further by considering that people's health also incorporates sexual health, defined as “the integration of somatic, ethical, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of the human being including sexuality.” Likewise, they stated three essential elements for sexual health: (a) the chance to enjoy sexual activity and reproductivity in balance with personal and social ethics; (b) the exercise of sexuality without fears, shame, guilt, myths, or fallacies; on the essence, without psychological or social factors that interfere with sexual intercourse; and (c) the performance of a sexual activity free of organic disorders, diseases or alterations that hinder it. Thus, the WHO

considers sexual health as an integral part of general health and quality of life, including human rights. However, sexual health has not been fully incorporated into health care, despite the recommendation of international organizations and the critical changes that have taken place.

## **Empirical Study**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study aims to explore the associations between adult attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles, emotional expressivity, and romantic relationship satisfaction. The specific goals of this work are stated below:

1. To investigate the adult attachment styles of a Bulgarian sample and their attribution to conflict resolution styles, early maladaptive schemas, emotional expressivity, and romantic relationship satisfaction;
2. To understand what role the early maladaptive schemas play in the connection between the attachment styles and the conflict resolution styles;
3. To provide information on whether emotional expressivity affects the connection between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction;
4. To test whether the early maladaptive schemas and the emotional expressivity mediate the relationship between attachment styles and conflict resolution styles;
5. To check whether the early maladaptive schemas and the emotional expressivity mediate between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction;
6. To find evidence of whether the attachment styles have an effect on emotional expressivity and conflict resolution;

In order to achieve these goals, the following tasks need to be performed:

- To study the theoretical aspects of attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, emotional expressivity, conflict resolution styles, and romantic relationship satisfaction.

- To adapt instruments for the measurement of the Bulgarian population - the short form of the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Chui & Leung, 2016), the Young Schema Questionnaire - Short Form (Young & Brown, 2005), Conflict Resolution Styles (Kurdek, 1994) and Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, S. & Hendrick, C., 1988).
- To statistically analyze the connection between attachment styles and the conflict resolution
- To analyse the connection between attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction
- To design a statistical model to test the mediating roles of the early maladaptive schemas between the attachment styles and the conflict resolution
- To design a statistical model to test the mediating roles of the emotional expressivity schemas between the attachment styles and the conflict resolution
- To design a statistical model to test the mediating roles of the early maladaptive schemas between the attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction
- To design a statistical model to test the mediating roles of the emotional expressivity between the attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction
- To compare different groups on the demographic factors age and gender in terms of their relationship satisfaction
- To analyze significant correlations between the subgroups of the variables
- To analyze the predictor model(s) of the variance which explains the relationship satisfaction using multiple regression
- To lay out the clinical conclusions and implications for the practitioners in the field of psychotherapy.

### **Hypotheses**

Considering the variables of interest and taking into consideration the existing literature, the following observations have been made before specifying the hypotheses.

1. The secure attachment styles will correlate negatively with the early maladaptive schemas, the negative emotional facets, and the problem withdrawal style for conflict resolution but positively with the relationship satisfaction.
2. The insecure attachment styles will be positively correlated with the early maladaptive schemas and the conflict withdrawal resolution style but negatively with the emotional facets and the relationship satisfaction.
3. The early maladaptive schemas will correlate negatively with the relationship satisfaction.
4. The early maladaptive schemas will play a significant mediating role between attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction.
5. The early maladaptive schemas will play a significant mediating role between the attachment styles and the conflict resolution.
6. The positive emotional facet will play a significant mediating role between secure attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction

### **Instruments, Method and Procedure**

The subjects included in this study were 308 individuals aged 14 to 74 years with a mean age of 38.47 (mode = 28, median = 35, s.d. = 12.58). There were 79 male (26%) and 229 female (74%) participants. The selection criteria were that the participants currently are into or have been in a romantic relationship and are 16 years old or older. Two hundred forty-nine of the subjects were currently in a relationship, while 59 were single when filling out the questionnaires but had a romantic bond experience. The duration of the relationships for the sample ranged from 1 to 51 years (mean = 12.11, media = 7, mode = 1, s.d. 11.67). The vast majority of participants were Bulgarian (97,4%), where only single subjects were representing Norway (0,3%), Ukraine (0,3%), Cyprus (0,3%), Greece (0,3%) and were later on excluded from the sample as the primary goal of the study was to represent the Bulgarian population. All people described themselves as heterosexual.

*Table 1. Distribution of participants on gender and age.*

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Age	Under 25	5	32	37
	26-35	36	84	120
	36-45	20	45	65
	46-55	7	39	46
	Above 55	11	29	40
Education	Primary			3
	Secondary			41
	Bachelor			68
	Master			173
	Doctor			23
Total				308

The answers of 12 participants were excluded from the total number of all filled forms due to incorrect completion or dubious demographic data such as irrelevant age (under 16) or irrelevant relationship duration (20 years old with 15 years of relationship experience, etc.).

### **Psychometric characteristics of the Attachment Style Questionnaire-Short Form**

**(Chui & Leung, 2016)**

Alpha's Coefficient is used when determining the internal reliability of the scale for the Bulgarian sample. The current investigation results demonstrate the instrument's high reliability in the frame of the Bulgarian socio-cultural context. The  $\alpha$  score for the whole questionnaire is .62. The lowest subscale, "Secure Attachment Style," in terms of reliability, shows .43, while the highest, "Avoidant Attachment Style," tops at .84 (Table 2). The other two subscales, "Preoccupied" and "Dismissing" attachment styles, show

respective reliability of .84 and .66. The inter-correlations between the items of the specific scales show the same direction as in the original questionnaire (Table 2). Comparative data between the adapted questionnaire and the original is presented below.

*Table 2. Adapted Attachment Style Questionnaire Cronbach's alpha values*

Attachment Scales	Number of Items	Mean	SD.	Cronbach $\alpha$	Cronbach $\alpha$ of the original scale
Secure	3	4.0639	.64562	.427	.77
Avoidant	5	2.4526	.85843	.843	.87
Preoccupied	3	6.9708	2.81153	.780	.81
Dismissing	4	3.3945	.77904	.664	.71
Total	15	2.9997	.42809	.618	.79

### **Psychometric characteristics of the Early Maladaptive Schemas – Short Version (Young & Brown, 2005)**

Young's questionnaire on early maladaptive schemas is widely used worldwide and adapted for many different cultures. The Bulgarian version has also been validated and adapted for practitioners' use. After intensive email correspondence, a precise allowance to use the adapted Bulgarian version was not achieved. A free-to-use English test was applied for the current investigation and with fixed time limits. The items were translated and processed by language experts in Bulgarian following the standards of double translation to Bulgarian and back to English. The following psychometric data applies to the newly adapted scales for the Ph.D. investigation goals.

*Table 3. Adapted Cronbach Values for YSQ-Short Form*

Early Maladaptive Schemas	Number of Items	Mean	SD.	Cronbach $\alpha$	Cronbach $\alpha$ of the original scale
Emotional deprivation	5	1.7305	1.00590	.854	.88
Abandonment	5	2.4864	1.10348	.825	.87
Defectiveness	5	1.6156	.75078	.796	.91
Emotional Inhibition	5	2.0312	1.01574	.863	.87
Enmeshment	5	1.7857	.81552	.737	.78
Subjugation	5	2.3156	.89101	.763	.82
Entitlement	5	2.9682	.85748	.585	.67
Total	35	2.1242	0.9167	.907	.82

As clearly demonstrated in Table 3, the seven applied subscales of the questionnaire for the study show similar subscales or even higher overall  $\alpha$  than the original. The highest alpha result is Emotional Inhibition with .863, while the lowest falls to .585 with the schema Entitlement. The other groups show optimal to high scores where Emotional Deprivation presents at .854, Abandonment at .825, Defectiveness at .796, Enmeshment at .737, and Subjugation at .763. The total  $\alpha$  score for the whole questionnaire tops at .907.

**Psychometric Characteristics of the Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire  
(Gross & John, 1997)**

The Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire was the only out of the five instruments used in the investigation, which was granted for direct use by the Bulgarian author who adapted it. The values obtained in the study show high reliability of the scales in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context (Table 4).

*Table 4. Cronbach Alpha Values for the Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire*

Scales	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach $\alpha$	Cronbach $\alpha$ of the original scales		
					1	2	3
Positive Emotional Expressivity	4	5.8125	1.0363	.728	.71	.65	.68
Negative Emotional Expressivity	6	5.3382	1.0579	.676	.72	.68	.68
Impulsive Emotional Expressivity	6	3.9594	1.0687	.680	.73	.78	.82
BEQ	16	5.0367	1.0543	.735	.88	.85	.85

The given results above show a satisfactory degree of reliability for all three constructs. The lowest coefficient is .67 for the Negative Emotional Expressivity, while the highest is attributed to the Positive Emotional Expressivity with .72. The psychometric characteristics of the questionnaire are similar to the original versions (Table 4). The reliability scores vary between .65 and .82, while the total scores of the adapted BEQ and the original are respectively .73 and .88.

#### **Psychometric characteristics of the Conflict Resolution Styles Questionnaire**

**(Kurdek, 1994)**

The Cronbach's coefficient was used to define the internal consistency of the Conflict Resolution Styles Questionnaire. The given results show a high degree of reliability



of the instrument. The operation was necessary as the items were cross-checked after translation between two independent English and Bulgarian experts.

*Tabla 5. Cronbach Alpha Scores for Kurdek's Conflict Resolution Styles Questionnaire*

Conflict Resolution Styles	Number of Items	Mean	SD.	Cronbach $\alpha$	Cronbach $\alpha$ of the original scale
Conflict Engagement	4	2.3945	.84979	.754	.82
Positive Problem Solving	4	3.8263	.64874	.621	.68
Problem Withdrawal	4	2.4667	.88986	.754	.66
Problem Compliance	4	2.4610	.63338	.760	.80
Total	16	2,7871	.7553	.671	.74

### **Psychometric characteristics of the Relationship Assessment**

**(Hendrick & Hendrick, 1988)**

Hendrick and Hendrick's questionnaire is the only unifactorial instrument in the study. It is represented by seven items on a single scale, all measuring general relationship satisfaction based on common characteristics such as physical attraction, emotional satisfaction, and fulfillment of needs.

*Table 6. Cronbach Alpha Coefficient for Relationship Assessment Scale*

RAS	Number of Items	Mean	SD.	Cronbach $\alpha$	Cronbach $\alpha$ of the original scale
Total	7	3.8785	.88931	.91	.92

## Results and Discussion

### Relations between Attachment Styles and Early Maladaptive Schemas, Expressivity, Conflict Resolution, and Relationship Satisfaction

In Table 7, all the variables are associated significantly and moderately to weakly. The strongest association is between the preoccupied attachment style and schema abandonment ( $r=.482$ ).

*Table 7. Pearson Correlations between Attachment Styles and Early Maladaptive Schemas.*

Variables	ASecure	AAvoid	APreoccupied	ADismissing
EDeprivation	-.285**	-.381**	.287**	.020
Abandonment	-.065	.368**	.482**	-.113*
Defectiveness	-.302**	.343**	.329**	.033
Einhibition	-.281**	.335**	.249**	.088
Enmeshment	-.035	.210**	.311**	-.135*
Subjugation	-.155**	.434**	.452**	-.069
Entitlement	-.110	.275**	.189**	.208**

Note:  $p < 0.05$  \*,  $p < 0.01$  \*\*,  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\* (Pearson  $r$ , two-tailed)

### Relations between the Attachment Styles and the Relationship Satisfaction

The relationships between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction are presented in Table 8. All correlations are significant and between moderate and strong.

*Table 8. Pearson Correlations between Attachment Styles and Early Maladaptive Schemas.*

Variables	ASecure	AAvoid	APreoccupied	ADismissing
RSatisfaction	.309**	-.211**	-.053	-.609**

Note:  $p < 0.05$  \*,  $p < 0.01$  \*\*,  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\* (Pearson  $r$ , two-tailed)

### **Relations between the Early Maladaptive Schemas and the Relationship Satisfaction**

Table 9 presents the correlations between the early maladaptive schemas and relationship satisfaction. All seven are significant except for one and show weak to strong connections. All relations are negative, corresponding to the original hypotheses and previous findings (Young & Brown, 2005).

*Table 9. Pearson Correlations between Early Maladaptive Schemas and Relationship Satisfaction*

Variable	Relationship Satisfaction
EDeprivation	-.558**
Abandonment	-.196*
Defectiveness	-.382**
EInhibition	-.186**
Emmeshment	-.067
Subjugation	-.279**
Entitlement	-.266**

Note:  $p < 0.05^*$ ,  $p < 0.01^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001^{***}$  (Pearson  $r$ , two-tailed)

### **Role of the Attachment Styles for the Early Maladaptive Schemas, Emotional Expressivity, Conflict Resolution Styles, and the Relationship Satisfaction**

A regression analysis was used to test the variance explained by the four independent variables: attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, expressivity, and conflict resolution styles.

## **Early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles and emotional expressivity as predictors of relationship satisfaction**

A predictive model which encompasses the attachment styles early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles and emotional expressivity was run in order to prognosticate the relationship satisfaction. Two significant predictors were found. These are the schema emotional deprivation and the problem withdrawal conflict resolution style. They alone predict 35.8% of the variance of the relationship satisfaction. The secure attachment style predicts relationship satisfaction in a positive direction ( $B=.130$ ). The emotional deprivation and problem withdrawal foresee the satisfaction in a negative way. The emotional deprivation beta is stronger and has a bigger effect ( $B=-.642$ ) while the problem withdrawal has a respective beta of  $-.181$ . In theory, when having a secure attachment style, one would freely explore the world and all of its manifestations. In this number, the relationship satisfaction would logically be greater as such individuals connect with others with an ease, openly and sincerely having no anxious or avoidant behaviors to hinder the bond. The opposite is true when analyzing the emotional deprivation and problem withdrawal. Being emotionally deprived, one would give less love, tenderness and would express feelings in an inhibited way. This together with the problem withdrawal would drag possible dissatisfaction in the partner. The presented data is shown in Table 10.

*Table 10. Regression Analysis for the Independent Variable Early Maladaptive Schemas, Conflict Resolution Styles, Emotional Expressivity and Dependent Relationship Satisfaction, N= 308*

Variables	B	T	Collinearity	Sig.
Secure Attachment Style	.130	2.705	1.102	.007
Emotional Deprivation	-.642	-10.061	1.115	.000
Problem Withdrawal	-.181	-3.549	1.051	.000
R <sup>2</sup>	.358			

### **Mediation Roles of the Variables**

Mediation analysis is an advanced statistics measure when testing whether there are any indirect effects of an X variable for a Y variable. These effects are not directly observable but hidden or mediated by other factors (M). The most important findings are presented in an organized way in tables and figures in the main text. The discussion chapter covers the most important outcomes from the model.

## **7.6. DISCUSSION**

The present analysis is based on an empirical study with 308 respondents (229 female and 79 male). It confirms the difference between men and women in expressivity, where women show higher skills than men. It was interesting to observe that the different age groups show significant differences in how the early maladaptive schemas are formed and changed with age, regardless of gender. Hypotheses were tested also about differences in relationship satisfaction according to the duration of a relationship. The higher satisfaction levels were found in longer relationships. This result is in accordance with the previous research.

Education was found to play an important role in connection with two variables: the early maladaptive schemas and the relationship satisfaction. Individuals with lower education show more severe maladaptive schemas while those with higher education show greater levels of relationship satisfaction. Not only the educational degree itself explains the relationship satisfaction, but also the current relationship status of the respondents. It turned out that the relationship status moderates relationship satisfaction but also influences attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, and expressivity. The latter opens an essential discussion for practitioners as it seems people can make significant changes in partnership, and it could be seen as a vital healthcare benefit. However, regardless of the other variables, the sole fact that an individual is in a relationship shows to be a factor of their general satisfaction in the dyad.

The first two hypotheses of the study were confirmed by performing a linear correlation analysis. It was confirmed that the secure attachment styles are associated with less maladaptive schemas (negative correlation), while the insecure attachment styles help the maintenance of the maladaptive schemas (positive correlation). The attachment styles are broadly discussed in previous studies and seen as a precursor of the schemas (Lauren, 2013), a finding, which we confirm in the current study.

Another central hypothesis of the study was whether the secure attachment style is associated with higher relationship satisfaction and the insecure attachment styles - to lower satisfaction. Such a connection was proven to be significant and corresponded to other studies (Annette, 2013). In our study, one of the strongest associations was found between dismissing attachment and relationship satisfaction with a strong negative correlation ( $R = -.609$ ).

Additionally, it was confirmed that the secure attachment style is associated with higher probability of positive problem-solving but links negatively with problem withdrawal.

The secure attachment style is linked with emotional expressivity: all expressivity facets correlate positively with the secure attachment. The avoidant attachment links

negatively to the negative expressivity. Other investigators have observed that avoidant behaviors tend to create hesitance regarding expressivity (Melley, 2003). The same applies to the preoccupied attachment styles, which lead to higher negative and impulsive expressivity, (Searle, 1999).

One of the primary connections which lead to broad implications for practitioners is between the early maladaptive schemas and the conflict resolution styles. Specific factors drive conflict engagement, most of which consist of general fears theorized as schemas. Emotional deprivation, abandonment, defectiveness, enmeshment, and subjugation correlate positively with the engagement in conflicts within the couple. The same schemas have an opposite connection with the problem-solving approach, as internally a solution to a problem is seen as a positive outcome. In contrast, the schemas contain negative connotations and open an avenue for specific difficulties. Problem withdrawal and problem compliance are associated similarly with the schemas: positively, as supported by other authors, (Janovsky, 2020).

The early maladaptive schemas are associated with lower relationship satisfaction, as hypothesized. Emotional deprivation has a strong negative correlation with satisfaction  $R = -.558$ , but other schemas demonstrate relative strength. Such are defectiveness, subjugation, and entitlement ( $R = -.382$ ,  $R = -.279$ , and  $R = -.266$ ). The early maladaptive schemas are one of the most interesting concepts for modern researchers due to their implications for practical psychological intervention schools.

The early maladaptive schemas show a logical and consistent connection with emotional expressivity. The positive expressivity facets link negatively with the schemas. The strongest one is with emotional inhibition ( $R = -.411$ ). The impulsive facet has, again, a negative link to positive expressivity, while the impulsive facet - to higher abandonment and enmeshment schemas. Schemas tend to be impulsive (subconscious) and a natural response to critical situations where the general fear they represent is activated.

Emotional expressivity moderates the conflict resolution styles, where conflict engagement positively interacts with all conflict resolution styles, but the strongest

association is with the impulsive facet. The more an individual is prone to impulsivity, the more conflicts will be observed. The same direction is seen for the positive and negative facets but to a milder extent. It could be concluded that people would not hesitate to enter into a conflict regardless of their typical expressivity. According to the findings, when a tendency to comply (problem compliance resolution style) is found, typically impulsive and negative facets of expressivity would be expected. Emotional expressivity alone does not contribute significantly to relationship satisfaction, although the positive facet correlates with higher satisfaction positively.

The conflict resolution styles contribute to relationship satisfaction. A positive association was found between positive problem-solving and relationship satisfaction, while all the others are negative in terms of satisfaction. It implies that conflict engagement, problem withdrawal, and problem compliance are associated with relationship satisfaction.

Furthermore, it is both theoretically and practically worth noting that, according to this study, some of the attachment styles significantly predict the emotional expressivity. However, the expected prediction of the variety is generally low and does not meet the standards of a scientific contribution. Having these direct low effects in the findings prompts the search of indirect influences presented later on in the mediation analysis. Even so and although the weak predictive ability, the model shows that the preoccupied and avoidant attachment lead to negative expressivity while the secure attachment foresees the positive expressivity. It is interesting to note down that the secure and preoccupied attachment lead to impulsive expressivity. That could be attributed to a greater perceived freedom when showing emotions with the secure attachment as such individuals freely connect to changing environment while preoccupied are over-protective, thus more easily entering impulsiveness. The negative expressivity is also influenced by the avoidant attachment ( $B = -.171$ ). It means that it is expected for individuals with such attachment to fall into sharing more negative emotions with others.



The secure and preoccupied attachment styles play a role in connection with the relationship satisfaction as well. The secure confirms the expectations that with each additional unit the satisfaction would rise ( $B = .293$ ) while the preoccupied has the opposite effect; the satisfaction decreases ( $B = -.183$ ).

For what it concerns the conflict resolution styles, the attachment styles as a whole are poor predictors with no explicative power. Even so, the preoccupied attachment predicts a small effect on the conflict engagement while the secure attachment explains the positive conflict resolutions style. These results come as no surprise as such theoretical concepts have been observed earlier. The same applies for the avoidant attachment style as it predicts the problem withdrawal resolution style. It is even clear from a semantic point of view that being avoidant would lead to withdrawal and such statistics have been demonstrated in the sample.

The early maladaptive schemas also play a weak role for the conflict resolution styles. With a minimal effect, the schema abandonment could slightly increase chances for conflict engagement. In theory it has been widely shown that one of the typical defensive mechanisms of the abandonment is being over protective and always seeking reassurance thus immersing in more possible conflicts as a result. On the other hand, the schema subjugation has a negative direction when explaining positive problem solving strategies, meaning that the more the subjugation is active the less satisfaction is reached. Finally, the schema emotional inhibition plays an explicative role for the problem withdrawal ( $B = .230$ ). Inhibiting emotions logically leads to a tendency of not immersing into conflicts and giving in as shown with this sample. Similarly, the schema subjugation explains the problem compliance ( $B = .312$ ). Subjugation or being submissive in a relation is associated to more obedient behaviors such as being compliant in order to reach a solution. All those effects, however, in our study have shown minimal effects and practically no explanatory power.

The maladaptive schemas in the current study explain a greater but still moderate amount of the variance of the relationship satisfaction ( $R^2 = 32\%$ ). Two predictors

(emotional deprivation and defectiveness) play a significant and important role in the relationship. They both have a negative beta score (respectively  $B = -.490$  and  $B = -.138$ ) which allows an interpretation of less expected satisfaction in a relation when these schemas are active. The contribution of the early maladaptive schemas for the emotional expressivity also predicts the emotional expressivity. It is found that the schema emotional inhibition ( $B = -.455$ ) explains the positive expressivity in a negative direction meaning that the positive expressivity would decrease together with the inhibition schema. On the other hand, the impulsive emotional expressivity is influenced by three schemas (abandonment, emotional inhibition and enmeshment). More impulsiveness is expected with the abandonment and enmeshment schemas as such individuals have little perceived control when in a relationship which makes them eager to monitor and search for reassurance in the communication and expression. The emotional inhibition has a negative connection and leads to less predicted impulsivity ( $B = -.292$ ). The negative expressivity facet is the last which sustains a predictive load and there are four schemas which play a role: abandonment, defectiveness, emotional inhibition and entitlement. The one with greatest effect is the emotional inhibition ( $B = -.422$ ) showing that when the emotions are impeded by the individual, less negativity is demonstrated.

Another pair of two regression models which predict variables in this study are the negative and impulsive expressivity facets which explain the conflict engagement in a positive way. However, these findings have a very small overall explicative effect and should be taken cautiously. The negative expressivity facet also plays a minimal role for the positive resolution but with a negative mark meaning that it contributes to a smaller chance for constructive outcome of an argument. Lastly, the problem withdrawal resolution styles shows a negative predictive direction for the relationship satisfaction ( $B = -.282$ ) which is logically supported by other studies. The theory supposes that one gives in when faced with a conflictive situation and that leads to unsolved conflicts which turns the relationship in a toxic direction. In general, the emotional expressivity facets do not reach more than 10.4% of predictive effect for the conflict resolution styles and all the finding regarding this connection should be taken cautiously.

Finally, the attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, conflict resolution styles and emotional expressivity were tested as predictors for the relationship satisfaction. Three significant predictors were found. The specific significant variables which play a predictive role are the secure attachment style, the schema emotional deprivation and the problem withdrawal resolution style. They explain 35.8% of the variance of the relationship satisfaction. There are two negative effects (respectively  $B = -.642$  and  $B = -.181$ ) having the emotional deprivation and problem withdrawal. It could be concluded that these three variables play an important part in explaining the satisfaction in couples and might serve as a tool for practitioners. Being emotionally deprived would lead to lesser tendency to show love, tenderness and one would be hesitant to satisfy these basic romantic needs. Withdrawing from a problem would be another issue when it comes to satisfaction as it would hinder any probable agreements when a conflict occurs. The opposite is true for the secure attachment style as it adds to the general satisfaction ( $B = .130$ ). Individuals with such an attachment style are open to discover and benefit from open communication and contact with the partner.

One of the study's main hypotheses were made regarding the indirect links between the studied variables studied with mediation analysis. It was a fundamental approach as three of the variables are theoretically derived or mediate in a certain way the relationship between attachment styles and romantic satisfaction. The early maladaptive schemas are a concept that lies upon the attachment theory and is established as a product of the interaction between individuals. The latter implies that the attachment was developed at an earlier stage, but other processes are "hidden" behind it. That is the reason why the schemas should be tested as mediators. Other scientists have proposed such models as well, (Masoodi, 2016). On the other hand, conflict resolution styles and emotional expressivity are acquired through experience and could influence specific interactions.

In the results from this study a direct effect of attachment styles on relationship satisfaction was not found, instead, it was mediated by the schemas. The emotional deprivation and the defectiveness mediate the interaction in a significant way. This finding implies that the two schemas influence attachment and satisfaction. According to the model, it would be irrelevant to make any interventions directly in the attachment. The schemas need to be considered as a mediator.

The conflict resolution styles present a significant mediator between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction. The problem withdrawal is mediating and has a positive direction ( $B=.4019$ ) with the attachment styles and a negative ( $B=-.2226$ ) with relationship satisfaction. This implies that when an individual presents avoidant attachment, it will lead to a withdrawal strategy toward conflicts. However, the ultimate effect of the interaction would mark a lowered relationship satisfaction. It should be noted that, according to the data, the avoidant attachment itself would not explain the relationship satisfaction itself in a significant way.

Emotional expressivity is not seen as a mediator in the process. However, it is worth mentioning that when they are run as mediators, the association between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction is significant.

The relationship between attachment and conflict resolution styles opens another discussion. The early maladaptive schema abandonment plays a mediation role between the insecure attachment and the negative conflict resolution style.

### **Conclusion**

As it was shown in the results, the attachment styles play an important role for the conflict resolution styles. More specifically, the problem withdrawal has a negative association with the secure attachment style. Negative direction of the interaction was shown between the negative emotional facet and the relationship satisfaction. It means that developing such an expressivity facet influences relationships between partners and should be considered as a factor. It was found in this investigation that the the insecure

attachment (avoidant and preoccupied) have an effect on the early maladaptive schemas and the conflict withdrawal resolution styles. Contrary to what was true for the attachment styles, the maladaptive schemas have a negative influence for the relationship satisfaction as expected. Thirdly, the maladaptive schemas by themselves predict less relationship satisfaction overall. This finding gives a good opportunity for practitioners to test and relate to such marital cases where specific maladaptive schemas influence and explain any possible negative outcomes from the relationship of the couple. Even more, the early maladaptive schemas do not just associate negatively with the relationship satisfaction, but they also mediate the processes between the attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction. It was further discovered during the course of the investigation that the schemas emotional deprivation and defectiveness have the most powerful significant effect as mediators between these two variables. The early maladaptive schemas also mediate the conflict resolution where the schema abandonment influences the relationship significantly. Lastly, the final hypothesis that the positive emotional facet will play a significant mediating role between the secure attachment styles and the relationship satisfaction was not justified. It turned out that instead the impulsive emotional facet mediates the relationship. It could be deduced that such a result is logical as when an individual is being expressively disinhibited, that leads to a greater probability of a conflictive engagement.

The growing interest in the last few decades towards attachment styles advocates the needs of society when it comes to interconnections between individuals. When John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth developed their theory, it was a breakthrough in the field of psychodynamics and a massive explicative instrument for consultants around the globe. Their work inspired an infinite investigative perspective, raising many questions among professionals and their clients. The socio-economical background of the 21<sup>st</sup> century poses serious strains on romantic experiences. One challenge psychologists face is finding strategies and practices that would provide remedies to these problems. Such could be found in the early maladaptive schemas introduced by Jeffrey Young. They provoked high academic interest during the last few decades. The schemas' indispensable effect in

understanding romantic relationships lies in their behavioral nature. Such paradigms not only explain but also open up a chance for intervention. Emotional inhibition and defectiveness are observable in our everyday routines and habits. By recognizing tendencies, individuals could form better relationships, and such a change is possible not just by accepting attachment styles but by acting through schemas. Other important factors, such as conflict resolution styles and emotional expressivity, add to the general understanding of personal suffering in intimacy and beyond. It is in the hands of researchers to invest in further discoveries and bring a higher quality of life to the community. It seems to be a specific mission devoted to people's general psychological and physical health. A cause that is never-ending and a challenge widely accepted in psychological laboratories in the academic universe.

### **Contributions of the Dissertation**

The present work is the first study of intimate relationships to encompass a wide range of core aspects of intimate relationships in a single integrative model. Included are attachment styles, early maladaptive schemas, emotional expressivity, conflict resolution styles, and romantic relationship satisfaction. The present study shows both direct relationships between the variables and mediating effects.

The product of the dissertation is also the adaptation for the Bulgarian socio-cultural context of four questionnaires, which allow assessment of a) possible early maladaptive schemes, b) conflict resolution styles in intimate relationships, c) attachment styles through a short scale and d) satisfaction from romantic relationships. Using them can contribute to understanding a number of reasons why romantic relationships change over time.

It has been shown that there are not only direct relationships between secure attachment style and relationship satisfaction, but also indirect influences between them. As expected, secure attachment has a positive effect on romantic satisfaction, as found in previous research (Petrov, 2011). However, the present study shows which variables indirectly influence (mediate) the

relationship between attachment styles and intimate relationship satisfaction in a Bulgarian sample for the first time.

It has been established that in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context the emotional deprivation scheme has an important indirect effect on relationships. Such an outcome gives therapists a chance to focus on early maladaptive schemas, assess them, and focus their intervention there. In addition, with some missing direct explanations, problem avoidance was shown to mediate the relationship between attachment styles and relationship satisfaction.

The above findings can be taken into account by psychotherapists, while the adapted questionnaires can be applied for research purposes and in the counseling process.

### **Publications of the dissertation content**

Marinov, V. (2023). Predictive Model of the Relationship Satisfaction. *Diogen (accepted for publication)*

Marinov, V. (2022). Mediation Roles of the Early Maladaptive Schemas for the Relationship Satisfaction. *Annual of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" Faculty of Philosophy, Psychology*, Volume 112, pp. 149-170.

Marinov, V. (2020). „The role of the attachment styles for conflict resolution in intimate relationships“. *Annual of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" Faculty of Philosophy, Psychology*, Volume 110, pp. 176-188.