



Women's avoidant attachment, conflict solving, and relationship satisfaction through individualism and masculinity

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Abstract

The utilization of specific strategies to manage couple conflict has a differential impact on women's relationship satisfaction. However, considering that women's role within couple relationship is shaped by societal norms, such association should be examined by embracing a cross-cultural perspective. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze the effect of individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity cultural values on avoidant attachment, perceived conflict solving, and relationship satisfaction. The sample consisted of 334 women from Israel, USA, Türkiye, and Spain. An unconstrained general model elucidates the connections among relationship satisfaction, avoidant attachment, and conflict solving strategies across all countries; yet, the strength of certain associations varies based on the dimensions of masculinity and individualism. In individualistic countries, avoidant attachment predicts lower relationship satisfaction in women. The prediction of own withdrawal by avoidant attachment remains similar among women, regardless of the individualism dimension. Nevertheless, in feminine (i.e., role egalitarian) countries, the link between female's avoidant attachment and their partner's use of positive conflict solving strategies is stronger. Additionally, the withdrawal strategy predicts partner demand to a greater extent in women from feminine countries. These findings will assist professionals from different countries in developing culturally sensitive and tailored prevention and intervention tools.

Keywords Avoidant attachment · Conflict resolution · Cultural masculinity · Gender roles · Individualism · Relationship satisfaction

How partners manage conflict has significant effects on relationship satisfaction, which in turn, impacts partners' mental and physical well-being (Moral de la Rubia et al.,

2011). The strategies used to cope with conflict appear to be influenced by cultural norms, values, and beliefs (e.g., Gomez & Taylor, 2018). Certain cultural dimensions, as identified by Hofstede et al. (2010), play a significant role in shaping inter-relational codes and relationship norms. Specifically, researchers like Bretaña et al. (2019) have observed associations between individualism-collectivism (IDV) and masculinity-femininity (MAS) dimensions, which serves as a proxy for societies with varying degrees of patriarchal culture dominance) and the diverse conflict resolution strategies employed by women. In terms of IDV, countries with high scores are characterized by promoting individuals' independency and autonomy, while countries with lower scores (leaning towards the collectivism pole) emphasize harmony, altruism, and interdependency among individuals. As for masculinity (MAS), this country-level dimension reflects cultural expectations of gender roles and has been found to influence relational dynamics and how women interact with their partners during marital conflict (e.g., Kluwer & Mikula, 2002). High MAS scores indicate

Broader impact statement Unlike most studies that focus on a pattern characterized by men withdrawing from conflicts and women demanding them, our investigation takes an inverse approach. We analyze the effect of women withdrawing from conflicts and their male partners being demanding, contributing to the understand of relational dynamics in women's victimization. Additionally, rather than assuming a universal approach, this study emphasizes the cultural variability underlying women's strategies for resolving couple conflicts within couples. Furthermore, it explores how this distinctiveness influences their level of satisfaction within the relationship.

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greater differences in social roles between genders, whereas the femininity end of the continuum refers to those societies where social roles of both genders overlap (Hofstede, 2001).

Cultural norms regarding conflict management and communication codes may have a more prominent impact on women. For instance, Fernandez et al. (2014) found that differences in masculinity values (i.e., society's gender role difference) explained variations in women's emotion regulation, with women from more masculine countries more frequently employing anger as an emotion regulation mechanism. However, research on conflict resolution strategies and relationship satisfaction has generally overlooked potential differences among women from various countries. This aspect deserves a more comprehensive analysis due to the anticipated cultural variations in how women handle relationship conflicts (Bretaña et al., 2019). Neglecting such cultural differences may result in researchers incorrectly generalizing findings and family therapists and practitioners employing inadequate intervention strategies for women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, research suggests that relationship satisfaction, reflecting individuals' general evaluation about their relationship (Li & Fung, 2011), may also be affected by cultural factors (Sorokowski et al., 2017). Although most studies analyze the association between individual variables (e.g., attachment dimensions) and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Brassard et al., 2009; Molero et al., 2017), it has also been confirmed that such evaluation is subject to cultural values, norms, and expectations (Lalonde et al., 2004; Myers et al., 2005). Specifically, the level of satisfaction in a close relationship will be influenced by the extent to which the relationship meets culturally prescribed obligations and expectations (e.g., Myers et al., 2005). As Sorokowski et al. (2017) found in their meta-analysis, relationship satisfaction is influenced both by individual variables and cultural values. This simultaneous double-perspective of analysis has not been carried out for women's relationship satisfaction; yet, this issue is particularly relevant because a meta-analysis by Jackson et al. (2014) showed that women's relationship satisfaction scores were lower than men's in Asiatic cultures, although differences in relationship satisfaction between women and men from United States had not been found.

In the remaining of the Introduction, we will firstly offer a brief overview of the theoretical framework of adult attachment theory. Specifically, we will review the state-of-the-art findings on the associations among avoidant attachment, relationship satisfaction, and conflict solving strategies, examining them through the lens of IDV as a cultural dimension. Secondly, we will analyze how MAS helps in understanding individuals' perception of their own and their partner's conflict resolution strategies. Finally, we will propose an explanatory model of women's relationship satisfaction levels that takes into consideration

avoidant attachment dimension, conflict resolution strategies, as well as the cultural dimensions of IDV and MAS.

Avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction

Attachment has been widely used in research studies to explain behavioral differences in relational contexts. In the context of intimate relationships, attachment refers to the analysis of activation patterns and displayed behaviors (e.g., proximity, contact, and support) with attachment figures in threatening situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Fournier et al. (2011) proposed a model that characterizes insecure attachment considering two dimensions: anxiety (about close relationships) and avoidance (of intimacy). Anxiety pertains to an individual's excessive worry and constant monitoring of the relationship with his/her partner, often accompanied by a fear of abandonment. Avoidance, on the other hand, emphasizes independence and maintaining emotional distance from the partner.

Attachment is a key variable that explains relationship satisfaction; however, meta-analytics studies (e.g., Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Li & Chan, 2012) have observed that the dimension of avoidance exerts a stronger detrimental impact on relationship satisfaction. Candel and Turliuc (2019) analyzed gender differences in the link between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction but focused only on a moderation effect, finding that the link of such attachment orientation with relationship satisfaction was weaker in Asian individuals compared to counterparts from North America and Europe. Yet, the cultural dimensions that explain such an association were unknown in their study. Furthermore, using continents as analysis units may not accurately capture cultural differences since they include countries that differ in one or more cultural dimensions known to be associated to the realm of relationships (e.g., Bretaña et al., 2019; Hofstede et al., 2010). Thus, further examination is necessitated to analyze the relationship between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction through a more fine-grained analysis: a) considering cultural values—as IDV and MAS cultural dimensions—presumed to be associated with relational questions, and b) selecting countries that differ in at least two cultural dimensions, as recommended for cross-cultural studies—and employing at least three countries—(Forbes, 2010; Van de Vijver & Leung, 2000). The current study is intended to fill this gap by answering five research questions—and by testing five corresponding hypotheses—that include the culture filter, which will be posed in the subsequent subsections.

Avoidant attachment, relationship satisfaction, and individualism

Expectations, beliefs, and values regarding relationships can be explained by cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (2001): IDV and MAS. Cultural dimensions represent patterns that vary across countries. Bretaña et al. (2019) found that females from collectivistic cultures scored higher in avoidance than women from individualistic countries. Nevertheless, they did not analyze the link between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction, which might be subject to cultural variation (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2007).

In collectivistic cultures, marital/couple relationships may serve a more pragmatic function, with love playing a less important role, and the relationship with the partner having a primary functional (economically) role compared to relationships in individualistic cultures (Ubillos & Barrientos, 2001). While collectivist cultures highly value relationships with others, intimacy and affective issues are more often shared within the extended family network rather than being limited to the couple relationship (Dion & Dion, 1993). Fuller et al. (2004) specifically suggested that in collectivistic cultures, women's relational bonds with their partners are supported by other memberships, such as familism. Conversely, romantic love holds greater importance in individualistic cultures, as close relationships contribute to personal fulfillment for each individual (Lalonde et al., 2004), potentially due to the lesser role of other family relations in fulfilling affective role. Building of this line of linking, it is expected that the avoidant attachment dimension would have a more negative impact in women from individualistic cultures compared to women from collectivist countries (*Hypotheses 1*).

In any case, the effect of attachment orientation on relational dynamics extends beyond women's relationship satisfaction in various cultures. Research demonstrates that attachment dimensions also influence how individuals resolve marital conflicts and perceive them (Bretaña et al., 2020).

Avoidant attachment and conflict solving strategies

In(adequate) conflict resolution and its impact on relationship satisfaction and couples' well-being has become a crucial area of interest for relationship researchers and therapists (McNully & Russell, 2010). Positive problem-solving implies an adequate approach in which partners communicate their needs and wishes, working together to find positive solutions to problems (Hahlweg et al., 1984). On the other hand, demand and withdrawal are frequently adopted maladaptive resolution strategies in problematic couple dynamics (Bonache et al., 2019), and they are commonly associated with lower levels of personal well-being for both oneself and

one's partner (Siffert & Schwarz, 2010). Demand conflict resolution strategy is characterized by requests to the partner to discuss the problem with the use of criticism and complain (Eldridge et al., 2007). Withdrawal strategies involve behaviors such as evasion, distancing, and escape from the conflict scenario (Eldridge et al., 2007).

Researchers have focused on understanding how individuals with high levels of avoidant attachment perceive couple conflicts and behaviors displayed during those conflicts (e.g., Bonache et al., 2019; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Those individuals who exhibit higher avoidant attachment are likely to perceive conflict situations and the behaviors of others more negatively (Crowley, 2008). These perceptions are often associated with greater tendency to engage in evasive communication (Fowler & Dillow, 2011) and to use withdrawal and distancing strategies to resolve conflicts (Crowley, 2008).

Regarding perceived partner's behavior, Frías et al. (2014) found that highly avoidant individuals perceive their partners as unsupportive leading them to believe that their partners are not employing positive conflict resolution strategies that involve agreement and negotiation to resolve conflicts (Kurdek, 1998). In fact, recent research by Bretaña et al. (2020) in a Spanish sample including female and male individuals demonstrated a link between the avoidantly attached individuals perceiving the partner as using fewer positive problem-solving strategies.

Nevertheless, there is scarcity of research that have examined how avoidant attachment is linked to the perception of partner positively solving problems across countries with different cultural values, such as variations in individualism (IDV) and masculinity-femininity (MAS) rankings. In our study, we aimed to answer this literature gap associated with cultural differences focusing on women. This choice is driven by the circumstance that women, influenced by gender socialization, often place a higher priority on preserving relationships compared to men (Cross et al., 2000). Moreover, women often display a heightened motivation to actively tackle issues to uphold the well-being of their relationships (Baker & McNulty, 2019) and are more attentive to and reflective of relational matters (e.g., Williams et al., 2009). Additionally, women tend to utilize conflict resolution strategies to a greater extent compared to men (Tamres et al., 2002). This highlights the significance of their perception of their partners' behavior and its potential influence on their assessment of relationship quality. The rationale for these cultural differential aspects is explained below.

Avoidant attachment, perceived conflict resolution strategies, and individualism

Culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals' emotion regulation and conflict management strategies (Heppner,

2008). One key cultural dimension, individualism/collectivism, influences how individuals handle conflicts in close relationships, interacting with their attachment orientations. While withdrawal and distancing conflict resolution strategies are more commonly associated with collectivistic countries as a means to promote group harmony (Friedman et al., 2010), the use of withdrawal strategy within couple relationships may vary across cultures when considering the impact of avoidant attachment on conflict behaviors. Withdrawal itself is a strategy employed by highly avoidant individuals to manage distress (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000), highlighting their need for autonomy and independence (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This need for autonomy is more prevalent in individualistic countries than in collectivistic ones (Hofstede, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2003). Therefore, the associations between the cognitive-affective inclination of seeking intimacy avoidance (i.e., avoidant attachment dimension) and the adoption of a behavioral withdrawal strategy might be stronger in individualistic countries.

Culture may also help explain differences in how highly avoidant individuals perceive their partners' behaviors during conflicts. While there are limited studies on this specific topic, a handful of studies has examined a proxy variable: perceived social support from the partner. Specifically, Ho et al. (2010) noticed that the avoidant orientation of attachment was linked with lower perceived partner support in a university sample from Hong-Kong (a collectivistic country) to a higher extent compared to an American sample (an individualistic country). A similar result was observed by Friedman et al. (2010), who showed that the relationships between avoidant attachment and decreased perceived partner's support was stronger in collectivistic countries (i.e., Hong-Kong and Mexico) than in an individualistic culture (i.e., USA). Although social support remains in the affective sphere (rather than the cognitive nature of perception), due to its links with the use of problem-solving strategy (Kaur, 2017), it is reasonable to expect that the trend of stronger effect in individualistic countries would also apply to how partners are perceived to employ problem-solving strategies.

A closer look at the gender perspective shows research evidence pointing to women's higher tendency than men to use positive problem-solving strategies—active coping, planning, and problem-focused coping—(e.g., Tamres et al., 2002). These results might be interpreted, in turn, as perceiving that their male partners use positive problem-solving strategy less frequently by opposition and according to their expectation standards. Tamres et al.'s (2002) research, however, was conducted in English-speaking and highly individualistic countries according to Hofstede's (2010) ranking: United States, Canada, England, Australia, Ireland, and New-Zealand. Conversely, societally reinforced relational expectations (Williams et al., 2009) may be amplified in

women from collectivistic countries, where the emphasis on interdependence and relationship with others is stronger (Hofstede, 2001). Consequently, women in collectivistic countries may experience higher normative pressure to maintain relationships through problem-solving and mutual communication (Tamres et al., 2002). In sum, we expect that women scoring higher in avoidant attachment will show the following patterns: a) they will exhibit higher levels of withdrawal conflict strategy in individualist countries compared to women from collectivistic countries (*Hypotheses 2*), and b) they will perceive their male partners as using positive problem-solving strategies to a lesser extent in collectivistic countries compared to women from individualistic countries (*Hypotheses 3*).

Conflict solving, relationship satisfaction, and country-level masculinity-femininity

In addition to individualism, masculinity is another relevant cultural dimension that influences individuals' regulation of themselves in couple conflicts and how these strategies impact their relationship satisfaction. Masculinity reflects societal expectations of gender roles and can have an effect on how women resolve conflicts with their male partners in couple relationships (e.g., Kluwer & Mikula, 2002).

Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe (2006) analyzed the association of withdrawal and demand with culture, without examining the interaction between these two strategies. They found that demand was more frequent in women in egalitarian relationships, while women in less egalitarian relationships used demand and withdrawal to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, these results were analyzed at an individual-level, focusing on gender-role levels between the two partners, rather than at the cultural-level, which considers variations in gender-role norms across cultures. To understand how individual variability in dealing with conflict with male partners may be influenced by cultural values and norms, it is essential to examine this phenomenon at a more macro level, considering cultural differences in gender-role normative differentiation (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2006).

When it comes to perception and how demand and withdrawal are perceived to be deployed by the partner, gender role-based differences have been reported. Kluwer and Mikula (2002) found that in egalitarian marriages, which are more normative in feminine countries, asymmetric conflict resolution strategies (demand-withdrawal) were more salient compared to traditional marriages with stronger roles differences between women and men. Women from more traditional marriages (a proxy for masculinity societies at the cultural level) tend to notice less conflict and are more prone to use negotiation to reach consensus on gender roles, norms, and relationships rules (VanYperen & Buunk, 1991). In contrast, relationship

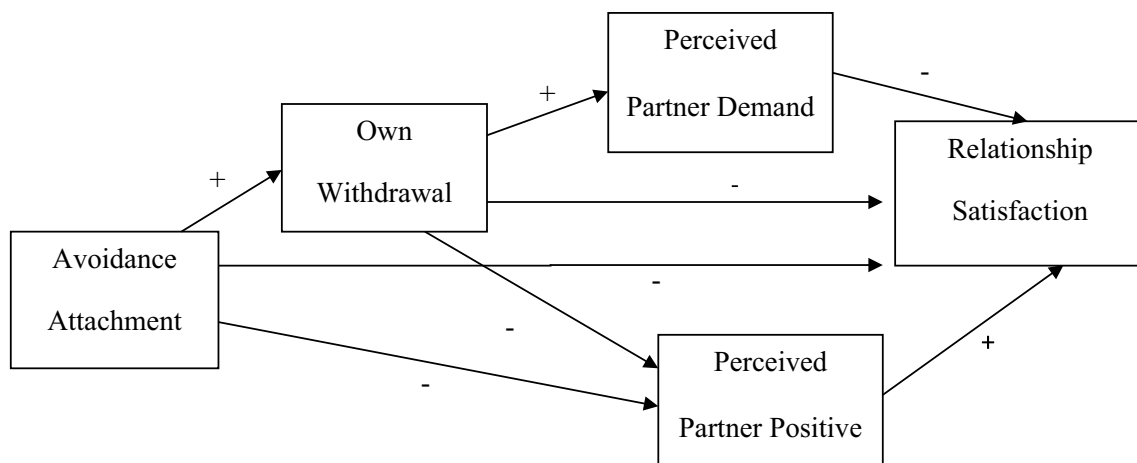


Fig. 1 Path model of women's couple satisfaction

roles and rules are less determined in egalitarian marriages (Kluwer & Mikula, 2002), allowing both partners to discuss matters more openly without normative obligations to comply with male partners' decisions (Pratto & Walker, 2004). Thus, women in egalitarian marriages (a proxy for feminine societies at the country level) are more likely to stand up for their position and well-being in the close relationship and perceive greater conflict with their partner (Buunk et al., 2000). This scenario suggests a higher use of asymmetric (i.e., with different aim/function) relational conflict dynamics where demand and withdrawal are more prevalent. Nevertheless, the results observed by Kluwer and Mikula (2002) are based on a single country (the Netherlands), where relational norms do not differ for the examined sample. In summary, we may expect that the association between own withdrawal perception and perceived partner demand to be stronger among women from feminine countries than among women from masculine ones (*Hypothesis 4*).

Finally, we test Bretaña et al.'s (2020) relational model cross-culturally (see Fig. 1). Our proposal involves examining the links between the avoidant orientation of attachment and both own perceived and partner (perceived) conflict resolution strategies, as well as the mediational effect of the conflict solving in the association between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction, through cultural dimensions. The interactive conflict perception pattern in our study is based on the withdrawal-demand model introduced by Bonache et al. (2019), and it has been comprehensively described in previous research by Bretaña et al. (2020). This implies a hypothesis of an overall model that may be applicable to all cultures (*Hypothesis 5*).

Aim and hypotheses

Our study was developed to look into the effects of individualism and masculinity cultural values on avoidant attachment, (perceived) conflict solving strategies, and relationship satisfaction. For the sake of clarity, we summarize here all the hypotheses. The first hypotheses (H1 to H4) deal with cultural differences in the association of some variables (i.e., specific paths) of the model. The last hypothesis (H5) aims at testing a model on interrelated variables that explain women's relationship satisfaction from the mentioned variables. (i.e., the configural invariance).

Hypothesis 1: The expected association between the avoidant orientation of attachment and decreased relationship satisfaction will be stronger among women from individualistic countries compared to women from collectivist countries.

Hypothesis 2: Women scoring higher in avoidant attachment will exhibit higher levels of withdrawal conflict strategy in individualist countries compared to women from collectivistic countries.

Hypothesis 3: Women reporting higher avoidant attachment will feel their partners as using positive problem-solving strategies to a lesser extent in collectivistic countries compared to women from individualistic countries.

Hypothesis 4: The association between two asymmetrical conflict solving strategies—specifically, own withdrawal perception and partner demand perception—will be stronger among women from feminine countries than among women from masculine countries.

Hypothesis 5: A configural cross-cultural model is proposed to explain women's relationship satisfaction.

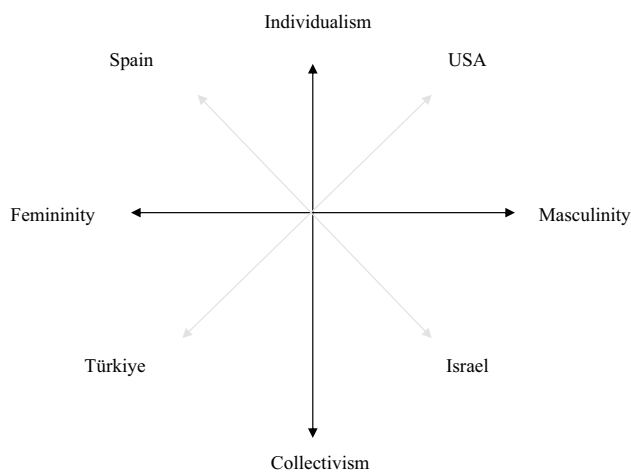


Fig. 2 Country display based on individualism-collectivism (IDV) and masculinity-femininity (MAS). *Note.* The vertical line represents the dimension of individualism (IDV), while the horizontal line represents the dimension of Masculinity (MAS)

Women reporting higher avoidant attachment will show a higher perception of their own conflict resolution strategy (withdrawal) and their partner's conflict resolution strategies (demand and positive problem-solving), which, in turn, will be associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

The current study

Four countries that are representative of the IDV and MAS cultural dimensions were analyzed (see Fig. 2). Türkiye was considered a collectivistic and feminine country, valuing consensus and promoting equality and friendliness (Hofstede, 2001). Spain was categorized as an individualistic (Páez & Zubietta, 2004) and feminine country (Hofstede, 2001). The USA was classified as an individualistic country with a leaning towards masculinity (Hofstede, 2001). Lastly, Israel was identified as a collectivist society with a strong sense of regional patriotism (Sagy et al., 1999; Triandis, 1995); and regarding MAS, Israel has generally been considered in an intermediate position between masculinity and femininity but was selected and classified as masculine for the study because it is positioned as more masculine in comparison to Spain and Türkiye.

Methods

Participants

We estimated the size of the sample with GPower v.3.1 (Faul et al., 2009). We utilized results from Candell and Turliuc's (2019) meta-analysis, in which authors found a

medium association between these two variables for women ($r = -.45$). In our study, with an alpha of .05 and power of .95, a sample of $N = 45$ was required. Since two multigroup models were proposed for each model, the hypothetical sample size would be 90 individuals. Our sample was made of 332 women (48.1% from Spain, 25.5% from Israel, 14.5% from USA, and 11.8% from Türkiye). Their mean age was 35.2 ($SD = 11.57$), mean for relationship length was 11.75 ($SD = 11.62$), and 67.2% were married, 32.1% cohabiting, and 0.7% were only dating. The majority women had a single child (54.8%). Regarding education, 2.7% had primary education, 19.2% had completed secondary education, 8.4% had college-level education, and 60.8% had completed university studies. As for religion, in Israel, 53.3% were Jewish and 39% Christians; in USA, 40.8% were Catholic Christians, 22.4% were Protestant Christians, and 28.6% identified as followers of a different religion; in Türkiye, 91.3% were Sunni Muslims, and 4.3% were Shia Muslims; and in Spain, 62.1% were Catholic Christians and 34.6% were atheist.

Instruments

Sociodemographic information Individuals completed a sociodemographic sheet. These following variables were collected: gender, age, country, relationship length, gender, education, children, relationship status, and erotic orientation.¹

Experiences in close relationships (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998; in its Spanish version by Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2007; Hebrew and Turkish versions by Bretaña et al., 2019). The ECR is a commonly employed instrument composed of 36 self-reported items rated on a Likert-7 scale (from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*) and tapping two subscales, which assesses attachment orientations: anxiety and avoidance. In this study only avoidance was used; it measures individuals' comfort with emotional closeness to others (e.g., I try to avoid getting too close to my partner). Higher scores are indicative of higher avoidance. Cronbach alphas were as follows: .86 (Israel), .87 (USA), .81 (Türkiye), and .85 (Spain).

Revised conflict inventory (CI-R; Ridley et al., 2001; Spanish, Hebrew, and Turkish versions by Bretaña et al., 2019). The CI-R assesses conflict resolution strategies in couples using 13 items through three dimensions: positive problem-solving, withdrawal, and demand. The inventory assesses

¹ Since the initial number of women self-describing themselves as homosexual or bisexual was very low ($n < 10$) and all of them were located in Spain, a decision was made to not include them in this study to avoid representativeness bias. The provided sample size is the one used eventually for the analysis.

positive conflict resolution strategies that facilitate negotiation and compromise formation during conflicts (e.g., coming up with ideas). Withdrawal incorporates items related to avoiding the conflict (e.g., stopping the discussion early). Demand is a strategy that includes items involving high levels of criticism, attack or losing control (e.g., blaming the partner). Participants rated the frequency of strategy — three subscales— for themselves (CI-Self) and their partners (CI-Partner) on a 7-Likert scale (1 = *never*; to 7 = *always*). Higher scores represent a higher tendency to use (or to perceive the use by her partner) each conflict resolution strategy. Cronbach alphas were between acceptable and good for the subscale of withdrawal in CI-Self: $\alpha = .42$ for Israel,² $\alpha = .60$ for USA, $\alpha = .81$ for Türkiye, and $\alpha = .70$ for Spain. Cronbach alphas for CI-Partner in demand subscale were good: $\alpha = .76$ for Israel, $\alpha = .76$ for USA, $\alpha = .92$ for Türkiye, and $\alpha = .66$ for Spain. For positive problem solving perceived in the partner (CI-Partner), Cronbach alphas values were also good: .75 (Israel), .72 (USA), .68 (Türkiye), and .80 (Spain).

Relationship assessment scale (RAS; original by Hendrick, 1988; in Spanish: Molero et al., 2016; and in Hebrew and Turkish: Bretaña et al., 2019). Individuals responded about their satisfaction with their relationship with seven items (e.g., to what extent are you satisfied with your current relationship?), on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all satisfied*; 7 = *very satisfied*). Cronbach alphas were .78 (Israel), .81 (USA), .81 (Türkiye), and .83 (Spain).

Data at country-level The scores of Individualism-Collectivism (IDV) and Masculinity-Femininity (MAS) were collected from Hofstede's (2001) study. For the model testing analyses, two composites were made for cultural values.

Procedure

After institutional consent was obtained from the main author, collaborators from the countries collected data, which took place in 2010. Following the approach taken by other cross-cultural researchers in comparative studies (e.g., Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2011; Obioma et al., 2022), women were recruited using a snowball sampling procedure, which is a cost-effective, useful, and practical sampling strategy highly employed (for instance, see meta-analyses: Berry et al., 2012; Connelly & Ones, 2010). By starting with a common point

of reference (university students' contacts), it is likely that the subsamples across countries would have a similar composition in terms of sociodemographic variables. Participants were individually contacted, and upon receiving instructions for completing the survey, they filled them out and returned them back in sealed envelopes to guarantee anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was provided.

Data analysis

Structural equivalence across countries for all instruments had been previously tested in Bretaña et al. (2019). We used path analysis to examine our expectations concerning pathways between avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction through conflict resolution strategies. The model estimation employed the maximum likelihood method; AMOS v.23 was used for that purpose. We tested the model through multi-group analyses to detect differences across countries based on the two cultural dimensions. To test our hypotheses, we used χ^2 differences' test (Bou & Satorra, 2007). This analysis compares the size of β values of the regression models across countries. Finally, to examine the mediation role of specific variables, bootstrapping method was employed to evaluate indirect effects.

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive (M and SD) values for the target variables, categorized according to the country values used in the study. Table 2 provides the correlations among the target variables for countries classified as individualistic versus collectivistic. Correlations between avoidant attachment dimension and own conflict withdrawal were positive but small in women from both individualistic countries ($r = .24, p = .00$) and collectivistic countries ($r = .38, p = .00$); the magnitude of these correlations were similar ($z = -1.53, p = .08$). However, the correlations between avoidant attachment and (perceived) partner withdrawal were of different magnitude ($z = 2.10, p = .03$) for individualistic and collectivistic countries. The correlations for individualistic countries were statistically significant but small ($r = .29, p = .00$), whereas no correlations appeared in collectivistic countries ($r = .06, p = .52$). Finally, there were cultural dissimilarities in the magnitude of the correlations between avoidant attachment dimension and relationship satisfaction ($z = -4.52, p = .00$); the correlation was of medium size ($r = -.56, p = .00$) for women from individualistic countries, whereas it was of small size ($r = -.12, p = .18$) for women from collectivistic countries.

Table 3 displays the correlations between target variables in masculine and in feminine countries. In general,

² The low score in alpha value in CI-Withdrawal in Israel ($\alpha = .45$) may be explained by the existence of item #10 ('think of leaving the marriage'), which is awkward in that culture. Although divorce rates are increasing, marriage dissolution is not common yet (Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011).

Table 1 Descriptive data of study variables broken by to country values

	Individualism (<i>n</i> = 200) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Collectivism (<i>n</i> = 132) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Masculinity (<i>n</i> = 135) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Femininity (<i>n</i> = 197) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Avoidant Attachment	2.13 (0.76)	3.17 (1.25)	2.66 (0.97)	2.47 (1.19)
Conflict Solving - Own				
Positive	4.83 (0.91)	4.46 (1.11)	4.57 (1.02)	4.76 (0.99)
Demand	1.43 (0.54)	1.79 (1.01)	1.63 (0.64)	1.54 (0.86)
Withdrawal	2.78 (0.90)	2.86 (1.05)	2.77 (0.81)	2.89 (1.05)
Conflict Solving - Partner				
Positive	4.24 (1.20)	4.16 (1.34)	4.23 (1.22)	4.19 (1.29)
Demand	1.29 (0.53)	1.69 (1.15)	1.45 (0.67)	1.43 (0.96)
Withdrawal	2.60 (0.91)	2.62 (1.13)	2.55 (0.97)	2.64 (1.03)
Relationship Satisfaction	6.15 (0.67)	6.04 (1.37)	6.00 (0.78)	6.18 (1.14)

Table 2 Inter-correlations between target variables in individualistic vs. collectivistic countries

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Avoidance Attachment	–	–.20**	.19**	.24**	–.24**	.18**	.29**	–.56**
2. Own Positive	–.30**	–	–.13	–.29**	.63**	–.20**	–.12	.37**
3. Own Demand	.21*	.01	–	.39**	–.18**	.53**	.26**	–.27**
4. Own Withdrawal	.38**	.07	.62**	–	–.26**	.17*	.27**	–.35**
5. Partner Positive	–.20*	.45**	.09	.01	–	–.35**	–.43**	.54**
6. Partner Demand	.12	.06	.65**	.52**	.00	–	.26**	–.39**
7. Partner Withdrawal	.06	.09	.44**	.44**	.01	.59**	–	–.34**
8. Relationship Satisfaction	–.12	.11	–.18*	–.16	.20*	–.30**	–.13	–

The correlations for individualistic countries are presented in the upper portion of the diagonal; the correlations for collectivistic countries are presented in the lower portion of the diagonal

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3 Inter-Correlations between target variables in masculine vs. feminine countries

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Avoidance Attachment	–	–.31**	.22*	.23**	.00	.13	.00	–.25**
2. Own Positive	–.30**	–	–.30**	–.21**	.48**	–.17*	.01	.40**
3. Own Demand	.30**	.17*	–	.27**	–.12	.57**	.21**	–.38**
4. Own Withdrawal	.33**	–.09	.58**	–	–.17*	.23**	.33**	–.34**
5. Partner Positive	–.32**	.59**	.00	–.13	–	–.32**	–.32**	.50**
6. Partner Demand	.27**	–.03	.66**	.42**	–.05	–	.27**	–.60**
7. Partner Withdrawal	.20**	–.04	.43**	.36**	–.17	.53**	–	–.29**
8. Relationship Satisfaction	–.25**	.12	–.15*	–.19**	.25**	–.24**	–.17*	–

The correlations for masculine countries are presented in the upper portion of the diagonal; the correlations for feminine countries are presented in the lower portion of the diagonal

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

the correlations between both own and perceived problem-solving strategies and relationship satisfaction were higher in women from masculine countries than from feminine countries. Specifically, there are differences in the magnitude of the correlation between relationship satisfaction and own positive ($z = 2.68, p = .00$), between relationship satisfaction

and own demand ($z = -2.21, p = .02$), between relationship satisfaction and partner positive ($z = 2.60, p = .00$), and between relationship satisfaction and partner demand ($z = 3.97, p = .00$).

We had proposed a conflict resolution model applicable to women from different countries (see Fig. 2). With the

Table 4 Fit Indexes of the model to predict couple satisfaction through individualism country dimension

Model		X^2	df	X^2/df	p	AGFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	LO90	HI90
1	<i>Unconstrained</i>	4.37	2	2.19	.11	.92	.91	.99	.06	.00	.14
2	Structural weights	42.08	10	4.20	.00	.86	.75	.85	.10	.07	.13
3	Structural covariances	68.02	11	6.18	.00	.78	.59	.71	.12	.10	.15
4	Structural residual	312.07	16	19.50	.00	.52	-.4	.00	.24	.22	.26

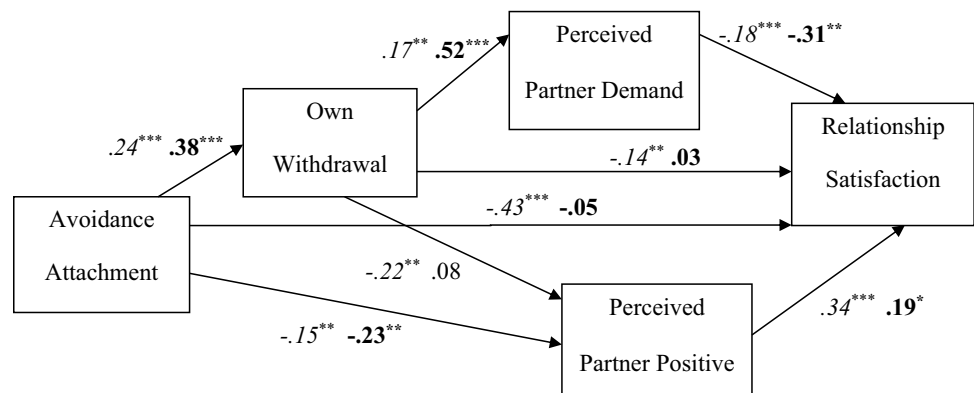
The most restrictive model that demonstrated a good fit is indicated by italic font. In italics the most parsimonious model

Table 5 Fit indexes of the model to predict couple satisfaction through masculinity countries

Model		X^2	df	X^2/df	p	AGFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	LO90	HI90
1	<i>Unconstrained</i>	4.93	2	2.47	.08	.91	.87	.99	.06	.00	.15
2	Structural weights	33.57	10	3.36	.00	.88	.78	.89	.08	.05	.11
3	Structural covariances	39.95	11	3.63	.00	.87	.76	.87	.09	.06	.12
4	Structural residual	127.58	16	7.97	.00	.81	.38	.50	.14	.12	.17

The most restrictive model that demonstrated a good fit is indicated by italic font. In italics the most parsimonious model

Fig. 3 Path model of women’s couple satisfaction through individualism/collectivism. *Note.* Values in italics are for women from individualistic cultures and values in bold are for women from collectivistic cultures. The beta coefficients are standardized. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

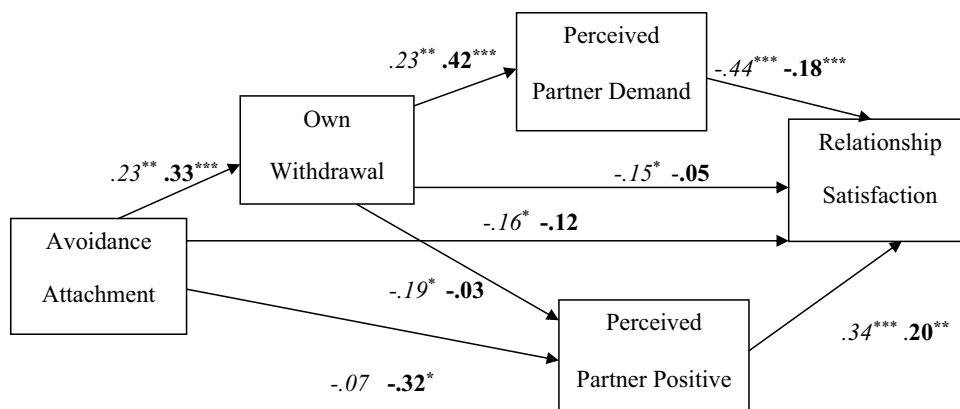


aim of examining cultural differences in the model due to IDV, we carried out a multi-group analysis. Countries were clustered according to IDV levels: high (individualistic) vs. low (collectivistic). Table 4 shows that the model fit was good across women from individualistic and collectivistic countries ($\chi^2/df=2.19, p=.11, AGFI=.92, TLI=.91, CFI=.99, RMSEA=.06, LO90=.00$ y $HI90=.14$). The second multi-group analysis was carried out with masculine (high MAS levels) and feminine (low MAS levels) countries. Table 5 shows that the model fit was good across women from masculine and feminine countries ($\chi^2/df=2.47, p=.08, AGFI=.91, TLI=.87, CFI=.99, RMSEA=.06, LO90=.00$ y $HI90=.14$). The unconstrained model was the most parsimonious in both cases; it implies that the data of the two groups fit the model separately, and that no further equality constraints were imposed, other than the observed variables in the model.

Hypothesis 1

To determine whether women with high scores on the avoidant attachment dimension from individualistic countries had lower relationship satisfaction scores compared to their counterparts from collectivistic countries (Hypothesis 1), we conducted χ^2 test for differences analysis. As shown in Fig. 3, the (negative) value for individualistic countries ($\beta = -.43, p = .00$) was larger than the value for collectivistic countries ($\beta = -.05, p = .58$). In the comparison model, we found that with a 5% confidence level, we did not reject the alternative hypothesis. This suggests that there were significant differences in the variances between the two groups (the fit of the unconstrained model was $\chi^2 = 2.95, df = 2, p = 0.05$; while the χ^2 difference test fit was $\chi^2 = 4.70, df = 3, p = .00$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Fig. 4 Path model of women's couple satisfaction through masculinity/femininity. *Note.* Values in italics are for women from masculine cultures and values in bold are for women from feminine cultures. The beta coefficients are standardized. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$



Hypothesis 2

Two hypotheses were formulated regarding the effect of the avoidant attachment dimension on own and (perceived) partner conflict solving strategies. Hypothesis 2 predicted that avoidant attachment would have a stronger effect on own withdrawal in women from individualistic countries ($\beta = .22, p = .00$) compared to collectivistic countries ($\beta = .32, p = .00$). The model comparison indicated that, with a 5% confidence level, we accepted the null hypothesis. We assumed that the variances of the two groups were similar ($\chi^2 = 2.01, df = 3, p = .70$); the Hypothesis 2, therefore, was not confirmed.

Hypothesis 3

We hypothesized that in collectivistic cultures, women scoring higher in avoidant attachment would perceive their partner as less likely to use positive problem-solving strategy compared to women from individualistic cultures (Hypothesis 3). The obtained χ^2 test difference (see Fig. 3) showed that, at a 5% confidence level, the variances of both groups were not significantly different ($\chi^2 = 1.97, df = 3, p = .91$), indicating similar values for both the individualistic countries ($\beta = -.13, p = .06$) and the collectivistic countries ($\beta = -.17, p = .07$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported (Fig. 4).

Hypothesis 4

Regarding the MAS cultural dimension, as hypothesized, the relationship between the two maladaptive conflict resolution strategies (withdrawal/demand pattern) was stronger in women from feminine countries ($\beta = .42, p = .00$) compared to women from masculine cultures ($\beta = .23, p = .01$). Using the χ^2 test difference, we found that, at a 5% confidence level, the alternative hypothesis was supported. The variances of the two groups were significantly different ($\chi^2 = 3.16, df = 3, p = .03$), confirming Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 5

Finally, regarding the overall relational model (see Fig. 2), Hypothesis 5 was confirmed based on the fit indexes described above. Although we did not hypothesize any cross-cultural differences in our study, careful investigation was undertaken to test the mediating role of (perceived) demand conflict strategy by the partner in the relationship between withdrawal (own) and relationship satisfaction. The results revealed that there was an indirect effect between own withdrawal and relationship satisfaction, mediated by perceived partner demand in feminine countries (standardized indirect effect = $-.08, p = .00$). This mediation effect was statistically significant (95% CI = $-.14$ to $-.03$), indicating a complete mediation where the link between withdrawal (own) and relationship satisfaction was explained through perceived partner demand. In masculine countries, a significant indirect effect was observed, indicating the influence of partner perceived demand on the relationship between on withdrawal and relationship satisfaction (standardized indirect effect = $-.12, p = .00$), which was statistically significant (95% CI = $-.22$ to $-.05$, respectively).³ However, in this case, the mediation was partial because there was a direct effect between withdrawal (own) and relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .14, p = .02$).

Discussion

The present study had to main objectives. Firstly, we aimed to analyze differences in relational and conflict patterns among females from four different nations. Secondly, we sought to examine the impact of avoidant attachment and perceived conflict strategies on relationship satisfaction,

³ The confidence interval is based on bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5000 bootstrap samples.

taking into account the cultural values of individualism and masculinity. Our results revealed the presence of a predictive model that explains women's relationship satisfaction based on avoidant attachment and their own as well as perceived partner's conflict resolution strategies. Furthermore, the cultural dimensions of individualism and masculinity contribute to a better understanding of how women from different countries manage conflict in close relationships, accounting for cultural variations in the strength of these predictions. The main findings are discussed below.

Individualism, attachment, and (perceived) partner's conflict solving

Regarding the influence of the avoidant attachment dimension on women's perception of their partner's conflict resolution strategy, no differences were found between individualistic and collectivistic countries. Thus, women's avoidant attachment orientation leads them to perceive their partners' conflict management in a similar manner across all countries, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. To the best of our knowledge, this association had not been previously examined. Ho et al. (2010) investigated a proxy variable (i.e., perceived partner support) and found that the cultural dimension of individualism moderated the link between avoidant attachment and perceived partner support. Some authors (Ho et al., 2010; Mak et al., 2010) have also observed that the association between avoidant attachment and perceived partner support was stronger in a collectivistic country (China-Hong Kong) compared to an individualistic country (USA). As Mak et al. (2010) concluded, relationship satisfaction in collectivistic cultures is more dependent on the perception of support received from the partner, whereas relationship satisfaction in individualistic cultures is more closely associated with external factors of the relationship.

Masculinity, attachment, and (perceived) own and partner's conflict solving

The cultural dimension of femininity yielded interesting results. Firstly, we found that avoidant attachment was linked with lower perception of partner's use of positive problem solving in women from feminine countries. This could be explained by the fact that in feminine countries, where the social values are caring for others and gender roles equity (Hofstede et al., 2010), men may be more skilled in the relationship sphere (Hofstede et al., 2010). Women from feminine countries, in turn, may hold higher expectations regarding their partner's ability and/or attitude to effectively solve conflicts and, thus, a higher use of positive problem-solving strategies by their partner.

Secondly, the withdrawal/demand pattern was understood differently based on cultural femininity, an aspect that has received limited attention in the existing literature (Bretaña et al., 2020). Our study uncovered that the connections among withdrawal and demand were stronger in women from feminine countries, which aligns with previous findings at the individual level by Kluwer and Mikula (2002). This congruence between patterns at both the individual and country levels suggest the existence of isomorphism in this variable, indicating that the connections among own withdrawal and perceived partner demand at the individual level may hold the same significance at the cultural level (Van de Vijver et al., 2008).

From an individual perspective, withdrawal as a conflict strategy has been linked with lower relationship satisfaction (Bretaña et al., 2022, 2023; Gesell et al., 2020). In societies characterized by marked role differentiation, more commonly found in male-dominated societies, may result in women often assume a more passive and non-confrontational role during conflicts within couple (e.g., Johnson, 2006; Smedley et al., 2021; Straus & Gozjolko, 2014). This perceived inferiority and lack of control among women may contribute to suppressed emotions and behaviors, ultimately leading to diminished relationship satisfaction.

Limitations and future directions

Notwithstanding the significance of our study, some constraints may be mentioned. First, only two countries per each country dimension were examined in our study. Therefore, the origin of such differences may be associated to a proxy variable of the cultural dimension of individualism; for example, Hong-Kong and USA also differed in the cultural dimension of power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Second, this study is focused only on two country dimensions (i.e., individualism and masculinity), while there are also some other cultural dimensions that may be considered: for example, percentage of religious beliefs, rate of arranged marriages, or women occupying positions of leadership.

Future research needs to examine more countries that are representative of each cultural dimension as well as factors susceptible to be analyzed both at the individual (i.e., egalitarianism) and the country level (i.e., MAS). Likewise, future research would benefit from a more precise analysis to discern whether the construct of equality of roles (or egalitarianism) would have the same meaning at both the individual and cultural levels (Schwartz, 1994), and include both levels in the examination. Additionally, future studies could be designed to include a wider representation of countries that differ in cultural (e.g., ethnicity, religion, and power distance) and individual characteristics (e.g., gender-role division within the relationship, perceived social support, and partner's behavioral efficacy in dealing with the conflict).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study has revealed intriguing cultural differences in relational and coping patterns among women from different countries, highlighting the influence of cultural values, norms, and beliefs on their relational behaviors (e.g., Gomez & Taylor, 2018; Paradis & Maffini, 2021). These findings hold valuable insights for therapists and practitioners working with couples from different cultural backgrounds. By understanding the factors that impact women's relationship satisfaction, professionals across different countries can develop prevention and intervention tools that are culturally sensitive and tailored to individual needs, including the consideration of power imbalance of racialized women whose male partners' ethnicity belong to majority cultures (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019). It is crucial to have accurate representations of relational dynamics within various cultures are imperative to avoid generalization errors (Seale, 2020) and the unnecessary pathologization of women facing relationship concerns (Wang & Scalise, 2010).

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Data availability The datasets generated during and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality reasons, as specified in the ethical consent approved by the university ethics committee.

Declarations

Ethics approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) (Date: 25/10/2016, No. M10/2016/131).

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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