

Predicting Couple Relationship Quality from Adult Attachment and Emotional Intelligence: The Mediating Role of Empathic Communication

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Introduction paragraph beginning “Empathic communication may therefore constitute a critical mechanism...”, the definition of empathic communication is central to the article, yet this construct is less established than the other variables. The sentence “Empathic communication can be understood as the behavioral expression of emotional understanding within interpersonal exchange” provides a promising conceptual definition, but the authors should distinguish empathic communication from related constructs such as empathy, perceived partner responsiveness, emotional support, active listening, dyadic empathy, and emotional communication. This distinction is particularly necessary because several cited studies concern empathy broadly rather than a specific empathic communication construct. The manuscript would benefit from a concise conceptual boundary statement clarifying what empathic communication includes, what it excludes, and why it is modeled as a mediator rather than simply another manifestation of empathy.

In the final two paragraphs of the Introduction, the research gap remains somewhat general. The manuscript states that “fewer studies have integrated these constructs within a single explanatory model,” but this should be sharpened into a testable gap. The authors should explicitly state whether prior research has failed to test simultaneous effects of attachment anxiety,

attachment avoidance, and emotional intelligence on relationship quality through empathic communication, whether previous studies have examined only direct associations, and whether the Canadian context represents an additional empirical gap. The introduction should then conclude not only with the study aim but also with clearly formulated hypotheses—for example, negative direct effects of both attachment dimensions, a positive direct effect of emotional intelligence, corresponding paths to empathic communication, a positive mediator-to-outcome path, and three specific indirect effects.

In the Data Analysis subsection, the sentence “Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted before testing the structural model to determine whether the measurement structure adequately represented adult attachment, emotional intelligence, empathic communication, and couple relationship quality” requires substantially greater methodological detail. The authors should state the software and version used for CFA/SEM, the estimator employed, the treatment of Likert-type indicators as continuous versus ordinal, the missing-data estimator, and how latent variables were specified. If maximum likelihood was used, the manuscript should indicate whether multivariate normality was examined and whether robust maximum likelihood was considered. It is also necessary to report whether the measurement model consisted of five correlated latent factors and how multidimensional instruments such as the WLEIS and RDAS were represented.

The Methods statement regarding covariates—“Participant age, gender, relationship duration, and marital or cohabitation status were initially examined as potential covariates and were retained in the final model when they demonstrated theoretically meaningful or statistically significant associations”—raises concern about data-dependent model specification. Covariate selection based partly on statistical significance can capitalize on chance and alter the interpretation of focal coefficients. Covariates should preferably be prespecified on theoretical grounds rather than retained or removed according to observed *p*-values. The authors should state which covariates were ultimately included, why each was theoretically justified, and whether the principal results remained stable in models with and without covariate adjustment. A sensitivity analysis would strengthen the robustness of the conclusions.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the Methods subsection “Study Design and Participants,” the sentence “A total of 384 participants were recruited from several Canadian provinces through online advertisements, community organizations, social media platforms, university mailing lists, and relationship-oriented community networks” is insufficiently reproducible. The manuscript should specify the actual provinces represented, approximate recruitment period, recruitment channels used, whether advertisements were geographically targeted, and whether any incentives were provided. The authors should also clarify whether one or both members of a couple could participate. If both partners from the same couple were eligible, observations would not be statistically independent unless couple-level clustering was identified and modeled. If only one partner per relationship was permitted, the procedure used to enforce this criterion should be reported.

In the same Study Design and Participants paragraph, the selection of $N = 384$ requires formal justification. The manuscript currently presents this number as the achieved sample but does not report an a priori power analysis, SEM-based sample-size calculation, or other rationale. Because the structural model contains multiple direct and indirect pathways and uses bootstrap mediation testing, the authors should provide a power analysis based on anticipated effect sizes, desired statistical power, alpha level, and number of modeled parameters. If the number 384 was derived from a population-based sampling formula rather than power considerations, that should be stated transparently; however, an SEM study would be better justified using statistical power or Monte Carlo simulation than a generic sample-size formula.

The eligibility criteria paragraph in Methods contains a potentially important sampling restriction: “currently married or involved in a committed cohabiting romantic relationship for at least one year.” This criterion should be justified theoretically and operationally. Requiring cohabitation excludes committed dating relationships that may nevertheless be highly relevant to attachment and relationship-quality processes, while requiring at least one year of relationship duration may systematically

exclude early-stage relationships. The authors should explain why these restrictions were adopted and acknowledge that they delimit the population to established married/cohabiting couples rather than romantic couples generally. The title and abstract may need corresponding wording if the intended population is narrower than currently implied.

In the Methods subsection “Data Collection Tools,” the most serious methodological concern concerns the sentence “Empathic communication was assessed using an empathic communication measure designed to capture participants' ability to communicate understanding...” The instrument is not named, its developer is not identified, its number of items is not reported, and there is no information on prior validation. This makes the mediator impossible to reproduce and creates uncertainty about construct validity. The authors must provide the exact instrument name, citation, number of items, subscales if applicable, response options, scoring method, sample item if permitted, previous psychometric evidence, and reliability in the present sample. If the measure was researcher-developed, a full instrument-development and validation procedure is necessary, including item generation, expert review, pilot testing, factor analysis, and convergent/discriminant validity.

In the measurement description of the ECR-R, the manuscript states that “comparatively lower scores on both dimensions are indicative of greater attachment security.” This is acceptable descriptively, but the subsequent SEM does not appear to model “attachment security” as a separate construct. The authors should ensure consistent terminology throughout the manuscript and avoid interpreting low anxiety/avoidance as if a directly measured secure attachment variable had been included. More importantly, because the ECR-R contains 36 items, the authors should clarify whether SEM used all individual items, item parcels, or dimension-level composite scores as indicators. This issue is crucial for reproducing the confirmatory factor analysis and understanding how the loading ranges shown in Table 3 were generated.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.