



ACBS VIRTUAL  
World Conference  
24-27 June 2021



UNIVERSIDADE  
PORTUCALENSE

# Psychological Quality of Life after a Marital Rupture: The role of attachment and experiential avoidance

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## INTRODUCTION

Marital rupture often culminates in a diminished perception of psychological quality of life. Attachment anxiety and mistrust as well as experiential avoidance have been linked to poorer psychological and emotional adjustment to adverse life circumstances. Notwithstanding, empirical exploration of the indirect role of experiential avoidance between individuals' attachment styles and psychological quality of life remains largely unexplored.

### Main Goal

This cross-sectional study aims to test the indirect effect of experiential avoidance on the relationship between attachment styles (anxiety and mistrust) and psychological quality of life after a marital rupture.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study includes a total sample of 122 adults, of them 96 are female (78.7%) and 26 are male (21.3%). The total participants are aged between 25 and 65 ( $M = 43.54$ ,  $SD = 8.37$ ), with males being oldest than females ( $M = 46.42$ ,  $SD = 8.79$  vs.  $M = 42.76$ ,  $SD = 8.13$ ),  $t(120) = -2.00$ ,  $p = .047$ . Regarding the level of education, almost half has a degree (45.9%).

### Procedures

Ethical and deontological requirements were followed. Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntarily and anonymity were guaranteed. The data collection was online through Google forms, using a snowball method.

### Measures

World Health Organization Quality-of-Life Scale - BREF (WHOQOL-BREF; Skevington et al., 2004; Canavarro et al., 2010) is a 26-item instrument consisting of four domains to assess quality of life. Only the psychological health (6 items), was used in the present study. Each item is scored according to a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater psychological quality of life. In the present study the Cronbach alpha was .77 for psychological domain.

**Adult Attachment Scale (AAS;** Collins & Read, 1990; Canavarro et al., 2006) consists of 18 items and is composed by three dimensions: Closeness, Dependence/Trust in others, and Anxiety. Only the last two scales were used in this study. For each sentence respondents are asked to answer according to a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Dependence or Trust in others involves the ease of maintaining mutual dependencies in relationships (e.g., "It's easy for me to depend on others"). Anxiety reflects the fear of being unloved or rejected (e.g., "I often worry that an important person could leave me"). In the present study the internal consistency for each subscale was .62 for trust subscale and .86 for anxious subscale.

**Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II;** Bond et al., 2011; Pinto-Gouveia et al., 2012) was developed according to the theoretical model of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in order to assess experiential avoidance and psychological inflexibility. The scale is a unidimensional structure and consists of 7-items which statements should be rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never true) to 7 (always true). Higher scores indicate greater psychological inflexibility, or experiential avoidance. The Portuguese version of AAQ-II showed a good internal consistency and good convergent and discriminant validities between clinical and nonclinical samples. In the present study the internal consistency was excellent (.95).

## RESULTS

### Gender differences for all variables in study

Variables	Total Sample (N = 122)	Females (n = 96)	Males (n = 26)	t(df)	Cohen' d
Anxious	2.20 (0.85)	2.27 (0.88)	1.96 (0.67)	1.68 (120)	0.37
Trust	3.51 (0.77)	3.42 (0.76)	3.82 (0.72)	-2.35 (120)*	-0.52
EA	2.45 (1.32)	2.57 (1.32)	2.01 (1.22)	1.96 (120)	0.43
Psychological QoL	3.89 (0.63)	3.82 (0.63)	4.13 (0.55)	-2.29 (120)*	-0.50

Note. \* $p < .05$ . EA = Experiential Avoidance/Psychological inflexibility

### Correlations

Variables	Anxious	Trust	EA
Anxious	-		
Trust	-.56	-	
EA	.54	-.52	-
Psychological QoL	-.48	.29	-.52

Note. All correlation coefficients are statistically significant at  $p < .01$ .

### Mediation Analysis

Two mediation analysis were conducted through the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2021). The model depicted on Figure 1 represents a mediation analysis of the experiential avoidance (EA) or psychological inflexibility in the relationship between anxious attachment style and psychological quality of life (QoL). Sex was included as covariate variable. All paths are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Results showed that the model explains 33% of the variance of psychological quality of life. The Bootstrap analysis confirmed the indirect effect of experiential avoidance or psychological inflexibility on the relationship between anxious attachment style and lower psychological quality of life,  $b = -.19$ , 95% BCa CI [-.33, -.07].

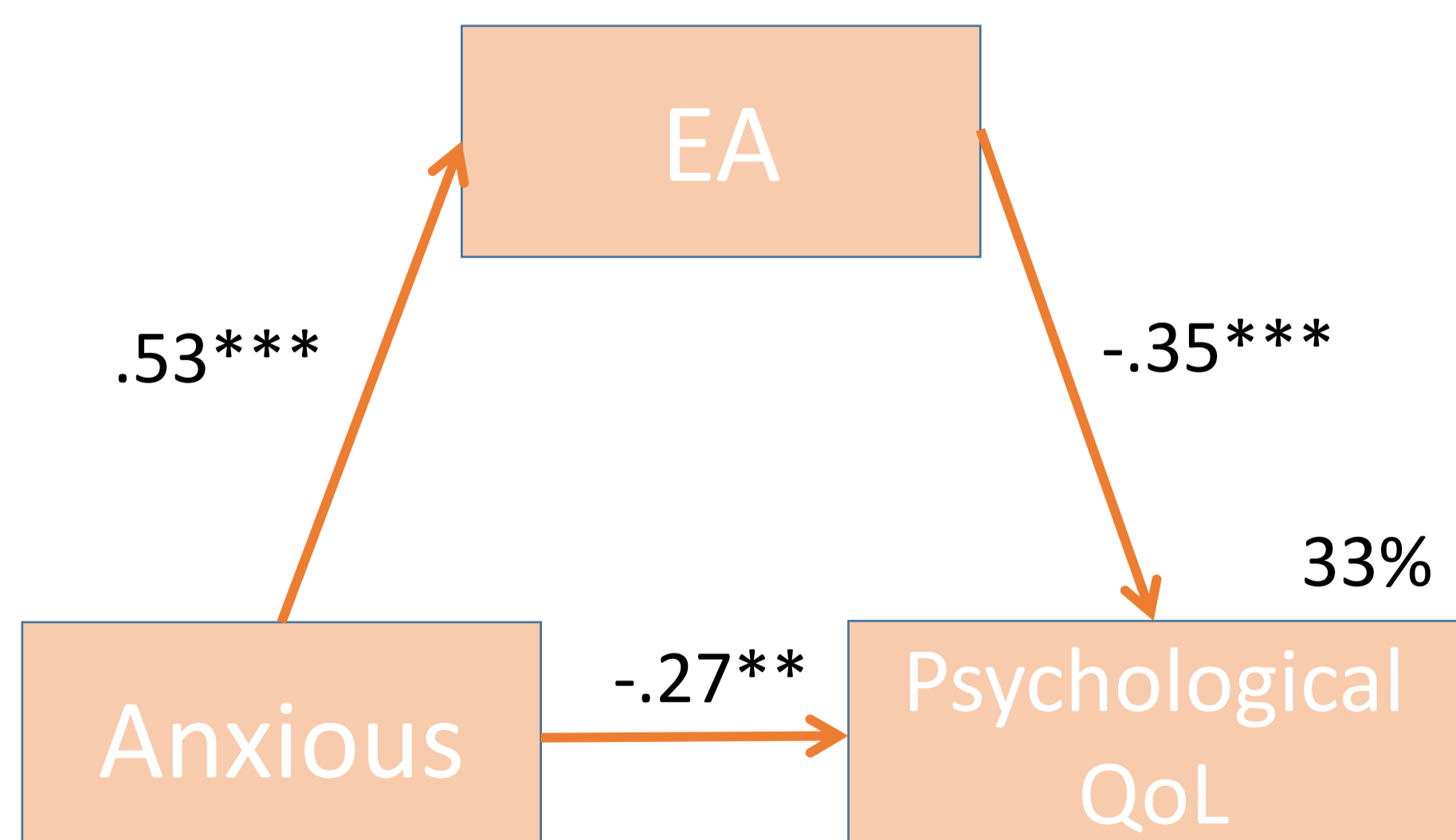


Figure 1. Mediation model of the experiential avoidance (EA) or psychological inflexibility in the relationship between anxious attachment style and psychological quality of life (QoL). \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## RESULTS (cont.)

### Mediation Analysis

The model depicted on Figure 2 represents a mediation analysis of the experiential avoidance (EA) or psychological inflexibility in the relationship between trust attachment style and psychological quality of life (QoL). Sex was included as covariate variable. All paths are statistically significant at  $p < .001$ , except the path drawn in dotted line.

This second mediation model accounted for 28% of the variance of psychological quality of life. The Bootstrap analysis confirmed the indirect effect of experiential avoidance or psychological inflexibility on the relationship between trust attachment style and psychological quality of life,  $b = .25$ , 95% BCa CI [.12, .40].

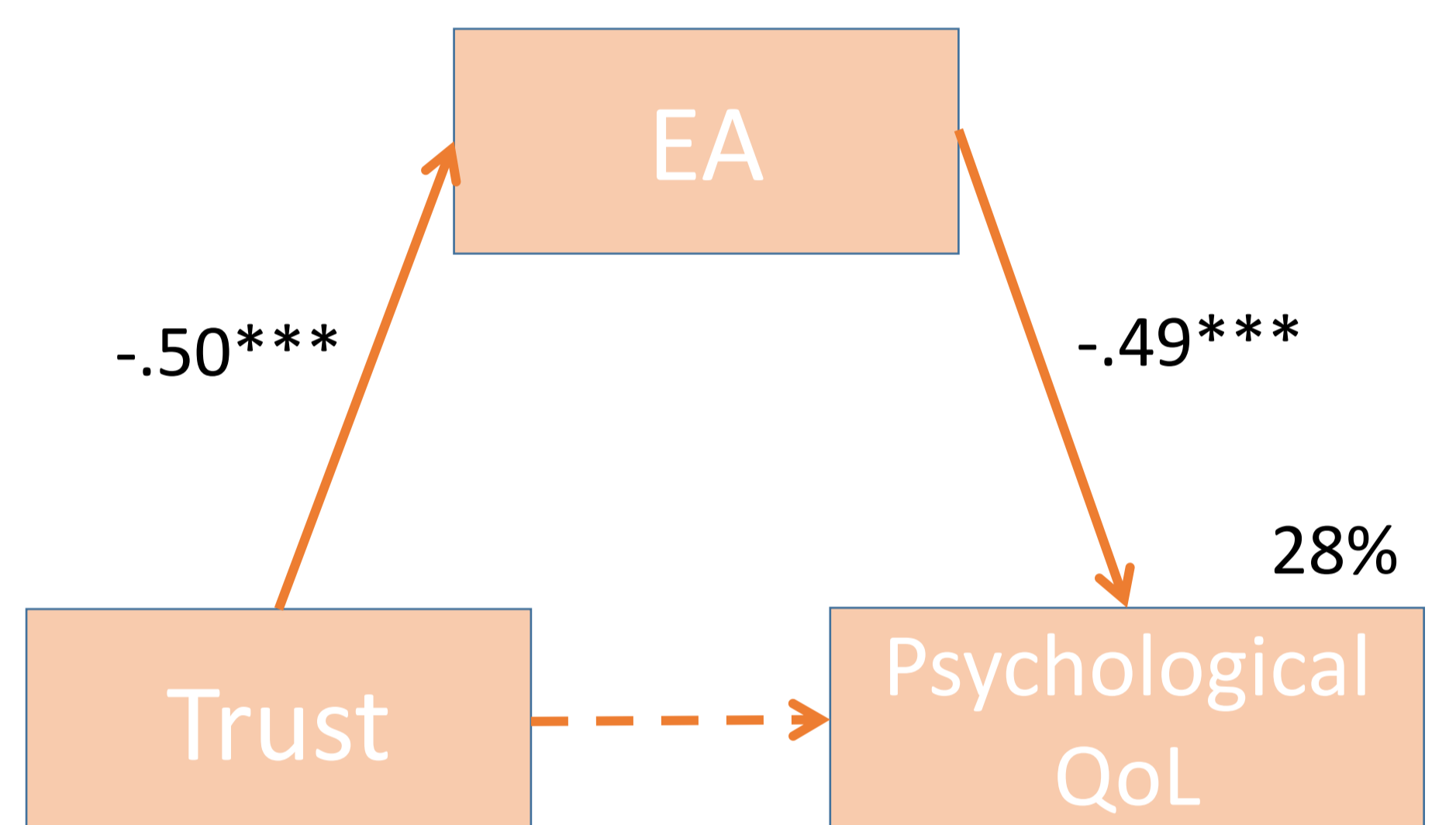


Figure 2. Mediation model of the experiential avoidance (EA) or psychological inflexibility in the relationship between trust attachment style and psychological quality of life (QoL). \*\*\* $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

- ✓ Results show that individuals with an attachment style characterized by anxiety and mistrust report a poorer psychological quality of life, particularly when they present a rigid and inflexible behavioral repertoire.
- ✓ This is particularly true for individuals with a mistrust attachment style, considering that experiential avoidance/psychological inflexibility fully mediates the association between this trait and psychological quality of life.
- ✓ This highlights the importance to promote psychological flexibility, acceptance and emotional awareness in individuals who have experienced a marital rupture, particularly the ones with anxious and mistrusting forms of attachment, considering that this may positively influence their psychological quality of life.

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