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## Adult attachment, cultural orientation, and well-being in Greece

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## ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

**Adult attachment, cultural orientation, and well-being in Greece**Konstantinos KAFETSIOS<sup>1, 2</sup>, Evangelia KATERI<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Film Studies, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece<sup>2</sup> Psychology Department, University of Crete, Rethymno, Greece

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
attachment orientations, cultural orientations, well-being	Social bonds and relationships are important determinants of well-being and happiness. Peoples' propensities for relating to individual and cultural levels can partially account for variations in well-being in different cultures. The present paper examined how adult attachment orientations, a seminal aspect of relating, and independent and interdependent self-construal, a cultural category of social relations, interrelate at an individual level to explain well-being in Greece. In a large-scale community study state secure attachment and independent and interdependent cultural orientations were all positively associated with well-being. As expected, the two relating constructs intersected so that higher interdependence was associated with higher anxiety and lower avoidance in line with expectations. Importantly, the interaction between interdependence and anxious attachment accounted for an additional part of the variance in well-being: participants higher in anxiety and interdependence had higher well-being whereas the inverse was true for participants higher in anxiety and independence. These results point to culture-specific patterns in how central relating schemas contribute to well-being <sup>1</sup> .
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Social bonds and relationships are important for well-being and happiness across cultures. Relating is a fundamental human constituent (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) and satisfying positive interactions a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Consequently, impaired social relationships are associated with poorer health, both mental and physical (House et al., 1988).

Two central aspects of relating, lying at different levels of analysis, a social and a personal one (Gaertner & al., 2012), are powerful well-being predictors. On the one hand, social constructions and norms of relating around cultural understandings of the self as independent or interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) can determine levels of well-being (Oishi et al., 2013). On the other hand, patterns of relating associated with one's attachment orientation have an important role to play in well-being and happiness across the life course (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006) and in different cultures (Merz & Consedine, 2012).

Recent years have witnessed an increased interest in the interface cultural understandings of the self and adult attachment orientations (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013; Hong et al., 2013). These two facets of

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of Professor Katerina Maridaki-Kassotaki who contributed so much to bettering Harokopion University students well-being and the communities she was part of.

relating have shown to influence a person's well-being and happiness (Friedman et al., 2010). Yet, much of the research on the intersection of attachment and culture has approached the topic at culture level, by looking at attachment orientation levels across different countries (Schmitt et al., 2004), attachment-culture fit (Friedman et al., 2010) or attachment to a particular culture (e.g., Hong, 2017). The present study examined the intersection of attachment and cultural orientations at individual level, in Greece, a culture that combines elements of individuation (Georgas, 1989) and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001).

### ***Cultural orientations and well-being***

While relationships are important across all cultures, differences in how people relate to one another are evident and can partly account for cultural variations in well-being (Diener & Suh, 2000). Whereas in interdependent societies (where people see the self as connected with, and influenced by others), a main source of well-being is to follow the cultural norm that prescribes an individual's roles and relationships (Kang et al., 2003; Kitayama & Marcus, 2000), in independent societies (where the self is more influenced by personal values and goals), it is the realization of individual goals and needs that determines well-being (Diener & Suh, 2000).

Much of the evidence documenting a connection between culture and well-being has been at culture level (i.e., correlating a culture's average level of independence and interdependence to their average level of well-being). Yet, within cultures, ample and meaningful variation of those cultural orientations can also be observed. On a personal level, individualistic values and independent cultural orientation have been consistently associated with more intense and more frequent positive emotion, whereas interdependent views of the self have been associated with less positive emotion (Scollon et al., 2004; Van Hemert et al., 2007). Studies that considered relationships between independent and interdependent self-construal on a personal level in Greece suggest that higher independent self-construal is associated with positive emotions and well-being (Kafetsios, 2011, 2018). Interdependent self-construal is also associated with well-being in Greece under certain circumstances (Kafetsios & Karaolanis, 2016).

### ***Attachment orientations and well-being***

Attachment orientations are a result of experiences with attachment figures as individuals grow older and mature, affecting social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Through repeated experiences within the context of secure or insecure attachment relationships persons shape interpersonal expectations (or working models) about the availability of attachment figures toward the self and the self toward others. These expectations generalize across relationships at different developmental stages (Main et al., 1985) and influence relational and personal well-being.

A large research body documents a direct connection between attachment orientations and wellbeing. In comparison to secure persons, insecure persons have higher levels of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and lower levels of emotional well-being (Carnelley et al., 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Lower well-being is more strongly related to anxious/preoccupied than avoidant attachment both in younger adults (Hammen et al., 1995; Mikulincer & Florian, 2001) whereas later in life avoidant attachment is related with lower well-being (Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006; Merz & Consedine, 2012).

### ***Attachment and cultural orientations***

Although secure attachment is considered as the most adaptive strategy for intimate relationships and well-being, secure attachment is not the most typical form of attachment across all cultures (Schmitt et al.,

2004). For example, in many African countries, the occurrence of insecure forms of attachment styles is high. Stressful social and economic conditions and levels of human development (e.g., health, education, high mortality rates) can shape secure or insecure orientations (Schmitt et al., 2004).

Cultural norms of relating can also shape insecure attachment orientations in a different way. In independent cultures, that tend to be Western cultures, persons are reared to be more autonomous, and hence more independent aspects of the self-develop. In interdependent cultures, which tend to be Eastern cultures, relying on others is often favored; social harmony norms, as well as dependence on others and coordinating one's needs with the needs of others, are highly valued and are associated with competence and security. These cultural differences in the conceptualization of attachment security are linked to certain behaviors that can promote adaptation to the social world. In more individualistic cultures, like in the US, individuals adapt to the environment through exploration and this adaptation entails individuation. On the contrary, in more collectivistic cultures, like in Japan, individuals adapt to their social environment through dependence and this adaptation entails fitting in with others, loyalty, and interdependence within the in-group (Rothbaum et al., 2000).

Moreover, cultural variations in attachment styles and their consequences on well-being can depend on cultural orientations (i.e., individualism/collectivism; Keller, 2013). Attachment anxiety is a relatively more common pattern in collectivistic cultures, whereas attachment avoidance seems to be a more common pattern in individualistic cultures (Harma & Sumer, 2016; Schmitt et al., 2004). Culture-fit hypothesis is one way to explain these cross-cultural variations. This hypothesis argues that the form of insecure attachment that fits the cultural values of a particular cultural orientation will lead to less adverse outcomes. For example, attachment avoidance is related to more relationship conflict, less support, and lower relationship satisfaction in collectivist cultures compared to individualistic cultures (Friedman et al., 2010). Other research also reveals that attachment avoidance in collectivist cultures, like Turkey or China, is a negative factor for maternal sensitivity (Selcuk et al., 2010), satisfaction in marriage (Harma & Sumer, 2016) and social support from family and friends (Cheng & Kwan, 2008). On the other hand, attachment anxiety is associated with more negative outcomes, like relationship conflicts in individualistic cultures (e.g., in the US; Friedman et al., 2010). Culture can also account for shifts in significant other orientation. When leader prototypicality was primed, attachment orientation (especially avoidance) fully moderated other (leader) transference expectations: avoidant participants in the US viewed a new similar-leader more positively than avoidant participants in Greece and India who viewed a new similar leader less positively (Gruda & Kafetsios, 2020).

Attachment anxiety could be more adaptive for more interdependent individuals (Kim & Zane, 2004). Individuals high on attachment anxiety have a high fear of abandonment and other-orientation (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In interdependent cultures, there are equally imbalanced boundaries between self and important others (Cross & Gore, 2004). Interdependence is also associated with relationship qualities, such as closeness, satisfaction, liking, and commitment to friendships, family, and romantic relationships (Cross et al., 2000). Individuals higher in attachment anxiety have a fear of being rejected from important others, and typically prioritize the goals of their (in-)groups, instead of their individual goals (Ein-Dor et al., 2010). Dependence on others and anxiety over acceptance is a common pattern of behavior for individuals high in attachment anxiety and it is also a common pattern of behavior for individuals high in interdependence who seek others' acceptance and depend on others in fulfilling their needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wei et al., 2004).

Conversely, attachment avoidance could be more adaptive for more independent individuals (Kim & Zane, 2004). The avoidant attachment orientation encourages emotional distance and independence

because of a fear of rejection from the attachment figure/s. An avoidant individual is less likely to seek support and less likely to provide care for their partners, values typically associated with interdependence. Avoidant persons avoid self-disclosure and they have a limited interest in learning more about the lives of their partners. In independent societies, individuality is promoted and the boundaries between the self and important others are clear and strict (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Closeness in relationships may put autonomy in danger for independent individuals (Cross et al., 2003) and this ambivalence about emotional dependence might be expressed in less affective involvement with one's partner (Dion & Dion, 1993).

In sum, previous findings suggest that in more collectivistic cultures and for individuals higher on interdependence, attachment anxiety could be more adaptive but less so for persons higher in attachment avoidance (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013; Chen & Kwan, 2008; Friedman et al., 2010; Kim & Zane, 2004). The present study extends this research by examining the intersection of cultural and attachment orientations and their influence on persons' well-being at individual level. Theoretically, this approach is in line with social-contingent models of information processing which view cultural mindsets not so much as stable across cultures, but dependant on salient social contextual aspects that are typical for a given culture and which give rise to individualistic or collectivistic mindsets (e.g., Hong et al., 2000; Oyserman & Lee, 2008)<sup>2</sup>.

There is some evidence in that direction. Wang & Mallinrodt (2006) studied relationships between ideal attachment orientation and self-construal. Attachment anxiety was associated with higher interdependent self-construal and attachment avoidance with lower independent self-construal. In another study, avoidance was associated with lower interdependence, but no other effect was observed either in the US or in China (Zhu et al., 2016).

The aim of the present study was thus to examine the intersection of independent and interdependent cultural orientations and attachment orientations with well-being at individual level in Greece. Several studies suggest that Greece is a preponderantly collectivistic country (Kafetsios, 2006; Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2012), that also incorporates individualistic values (Georgas, 1989). Given that Greece is a mainly collectivistic country, being in a relationship is of great importance for persons' evaluations about life and their well-being.

The aim of the present study was, therefore, to examine how attachment and cultural orientations would influence well-being independently and in interaction with one another.

## Method

### Sample

The sample comprised 1294 participants (50.2% females), aged 18-59 ( $M = 37.94$ ,  $SD = 11.12$ ), from rural ( $N = 225$ ), semirural ( $N = 157$ ) and urban ( $N = 911$ ) areas in Greece (one area unknown). In each area, there were almost equal numbers of employed and unemployed persons and men and women. Questionnaires were administered through classes in Greece's Universities in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Crete. Also, participating students were encouraged to circulate the questionnaires to friends and family to complete.

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<sup>2</sup> One should also acknowledge a recent and challenging argument that cultural differences in rearing practices associated with insecure attachment are antecedent to cultural constructions of the self (Strand, 2020; Strand, Vossen, & Savage, 2019).

## Instruments

For measuring *Attachment Orientations*, we utilized the state Adult Attachment Measure (SAAM; Gillath et al., 2009), which was adapted from the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) to measure state rather than chronic attachment. Items assessed state attachment security (e.g., “Right now, I feel secure and close to other people”), state attachment avoidance (e.g., “Right now, I’m afraid someone will want to get too close to me”), and state attachment anxiety (e.g., “I really need to feel loved right now”) on a seven-point scale (1 - *disagree strongly*, to 7 - *agree strongly*). This is the first time, to our knowledge, that the scale is used in a Greek sample. Cronbach’s alphas were .87 for state security, .78 for state anxiety, and .78 for state avoidance.

*Self-Construal Scale* is a measure of trait or chronic self-construal. We used 13 items from the revised version of the SCS that consist of two orthogonal dimensions that measure the strength of independent (six items) and interdependent (seven items) self-construal. Responses were made on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The independent self-construal subscale contains items that assess uniqueness in social behavior and related cognitions and emotions (e.g., “I do my own thing, regardless of what others think”); the interdependent self-construal subscale includes items that assess connectedness in social behavior especially emotions, cognitions, and behavior with regards to in-groups (e.g., “It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group”). Several studies have shown the SCS distinguishes between independent and interdependent self-construal at the individual level (Singelis, 1994). Cronbach’s alpha was .58 for independent and .73 for interdependent self-construal.

*Well-being* was measured with the Flourishing scale Diener et al. (2010) measure of well-being. Cronbach’s alpha was .86. Trait positive affect and trait negative affect were measured with single-item scales.

## Results

Table 1 presents basic psychometric statistics and zero order correlations among the variables of interest. Age was positively related to well-being ( $r = .11, p < .01$ ), state anxiety ( $r = .07, p < .01$ ) and interdependence ( $r = .15, p < .01$ ). Females reported higher well-being, secure and anxious attachment orientations and lower avoidant attachment. Well-being was positively and strongly related to state security and state anxiety ( $r = .55, p < .01$  and  $r = .14, p < .01$  accordingly) and negatively to state avoidance ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ). Well-being was related to both independent ( $r = .34, p < .05$ ) and interdependent self-construal ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ). Lastly, as expected on the basis of previous research, anxious attachment was positively, and avoidant attachment negatively related to interdependent self-construal (see Table 2).

In order to test relationships between attachment, cultural orientations and well-being, we conducted an hierarchical stepwise regression, regressing well-being on the two self-construal and insecure attachment orientations in the first step, and entered all interactions among those dimensions in a second step (see Table 3). Higher independent and interdependent self-construal had unique positive associations with well-being ( $\beta = .16, t = 6.6, p < .001, \beta = .20, t = 7.75, p < .001$ ). Higher state secure attachment was also strongly related to well-being as expected ( $\beta = .44, t = 6.6, p < .001$ ). As anticipated by Hypothesis 3, the interaction between attachment anxiety and interdependence was positively associated with well-being ( $\beta = .05, t = 1.92, p = .055$ ) whereas anxiety and independence were negatively associated with well-being ( $\beta = -.05, t = -2.14, p < .05$ ).

**Table 1***Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics of study main variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1	.021	.092**	.141**	.131**	-.075**	-.046	.036
2. Age		1	.115**	-.029	.078**	.001	-.018	.154**
3. Well-being			.86	.557**	.141**	-.178**	.349**	.429**
4. State security				.87	.202**	-.294**	.206**	.374**
5. State anxiety					.78	.097**	.056*	.227**
6. State avoidance						.78	-.006	-.071*
7. Independence							.58	.405**
8. Interdependence								.73
M			5.41	5.52	4.68	3.14	5.09	5.05
SD			.93	.95	1.30	1.08	.88	.82

\* Note:  $N = 1288-1294$  \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ **Table 2***Regressing State attachment on the Independent and Interdependent orientation*

	State Security		State Anxiety		State Avoidance	
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$
Independent	.07	2.34*	-.04	-1.42	.03	.868
Interdependent	.35	12.31***	.24	8.21***	-.08	-2.67**
F (2, 1285)		107.61***		35.86***		3.60*
R <sup>2</sup>		.14		.05		.01

\* Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ **Table 3***Regressing well-being on self-construal, attachment orientations, and their intersection*

	$\beta$	$t$
Independence	.16	6.60***
Interdependence	.20	7.75***
State secure	.44	17.62***
State Anxiety	.01	.01
State Avoidance	-.03	-1.45
State Anxiety x Interdependence	.05	1.92^
State Anxiety x Independence	-.05	-2.14*
State Avoidance x Interdependence	-.01	-.40
State Avoidance x Independence	.02	.68
State security x Independence	-.08	-3.25**
State security x Interdependence	.02	.80
F (11, 1276)		78.80***
R <sup>2</sup>		.40

\* Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

Researchers are increasingly aware of the need to understand the self as an organising construct operating in a social context. The present study looked at how two key relational self constructs, one societal (independent and interdependent self-construal), the other personality (state secure and insecure attachment), are associated with well-being in Greece, a collectivistic culture. At their core, the two constructs provide a compelling theoretical framework regarding issues of relating and autonomy.

Firstly, independent and interdependent self-construal orientations were both uniquely and positively associated with well-being. Independent and interdependent cultural orientations were both positively associated with well-being reflecting the combination of collectivistic and individualistic values in Greece (Georgas, 1989; Kafetsios, 2006; Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2012). It is possible that independent and interdependent aspects of the self co-exist in their function to satisfy the basic human needs of autonomy and relatedness, which are essential for the psychological well-being of individuals in any cultural context (Kagitcibasi, 1994). Yet, the relative proportion of relationships and autonomy for well-being may differ in a collectivistic culture like Greece compared to other countries higher or lower on collectivism and it is this relative proportion that can contribute to well-being.

Importantly, the results revealed that state attachment interacted with culture-specific patterns of self-construal to predict psychological well-being. Higher interdependence was associated with higher state anxiety and lower state avoidance as expected. State security was positively associated with both independent and interdependent orientations. It is indicative that the two insecure attachment orientations related mainly to the interdependent cultural orientation. Greece is a predominately collectivistic culture (Kafetsios, 2006; Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2012) and being in a relationship is of great importance for peoples' self-definition and their life evaluations and the relationship context may trigger more interdependent values (Cross & Morris, 2003; Lun et al., 2008). Attachment anxiety is congruent with interdependence, promoting closeness, while avoidance promotes emotional distance and autonomy that are both incongruent with interdependence (Friedman et al., 2010). Evidence to that is, also, that at zero-level, there was a positive relationship between anxious attachment and well-being.

Results from this study add central evidence for the intersection of two forms of relational orientation on an individual level. Participants higher in attachment anxiety and interdependence reported higher well-being whereas the inverse was true for the combination of higher anxiety and independence. Attachment anxiety could be more adaptive for more interdependent individuals (Kim & Zane, 2004) especially in interdependent contexts (Friedman et al., 2010). Individuals who are high on attachment anxiety are other-orientated. Anxious attachment involves fears of abandonment and a need for close personal contact and depending on others with them (Sorensen & Oyserman, 2010). The boundaries between self and important others are fuzzy in interdependence (Cross & Gore, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, interdependence is also associated with relationship qualities, such as closeness, satisfaction, liking, and commitment to friendships, family, and romantic relationships (Cross et al., 2000). It could be assumed, then, that individuals who are higher in attachment anxiety and have a fear of being rejected from important others are going to prioritize the goals of others especially others within in-groups, instead of their personal goals. Dependence on others and anxiety about acceptance is a common pattern of behavior for individuals high in attachment anxiety and it is, also, a common pattern of behavior for individuals high in interdependence that seek others' acceptance and depend on others in fulfilling their needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wei et al., 2004).



The role of cultural understanding of the self has long been recognised (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and the present study only further validates its importance for well-being. Furthermore, these analyses bring forward the importance of cultural variations in attachment orientations and the consequences of attachment styles on well-being. Even though the secure attachment style promotes well-being by satisfying the basic human need for belonging, attachment relationships with well-being can also depend on cultural values especially that of individualism/collectivism in relation to culture's central norms regarding self and other orientation (Cross & Morris, 2003; Keller, 2013). In Greece, where collectivism predominates, anxious attachment and its combination with interdependent fit the cultural values of collectivism and this fit promotes well-being. Overall, results are in keeping with a recent behavioral systems view of intersections between attachment and culture (Strand, Vossen, & Savage, 2019). Yet, further research is needed to ascertain the causal connection between insecure attachment and cultural constructions of the self (Strand, 2020).

The study had several advantages. Namely, this was a large-scale community study involving participants from different backgrounds (e.g., equal number of employed and unemployed persons). Yet, there are also known limitations. Findings are based on self-report data and various factors can influence how people introspect on their own psychological processes both limiting rendering causal connections between the examined constructs. Moreover, attachment was measured as a state, and further work is needed to examine whether and how chronic facets of attachment orientations interact with persons' cultural orientations to influence well-being.

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## Δεσμός ενηλίκων, πολιτισμικός προσανατολισμός, και ψυχική ευεξία στην Ελλάδα

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προσανατολισμοί δεσμού, πολιτισμικοί προσανατολισμοί, ψυχική ευεξία	Οι κοινωνικές και διαπροσωπικές σχέσεις επηρεάζουν σημαντικά την ψυχική ευεξία και τη χαρά. Η τάση των ανθρώπων για σχέση σε ατομικό και πολιτισμικό επίπεδο μπορεί να επηρεάσουν, ως έναν βαθμό, την ψυχική ευεξία σε διαφορετικά πολιτισμικά πλαίσια. Το παρόν άρθρο διερεύνησε τον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι προσανατολισμοί δεσμού των ενηλίκων, μια σημαντική πλευρά των διαπροσωπικών σχέσεων, και η ανεξάρτητη και η αλληλοεξαρτώμενη κατασκευή εαυτού, μια πολιτισμική κατηγορία των κοινωνικών σχέσεων, αλληλοσυνδέονται σε ατομικό επίπεδο και μπορούν να προβλέψουν τη ψυχική ευεξία στην Ελλάδα. Σε μία μεγάλης κλίμακας κοινοτική έρευνα, διαπιστώθηκε ότι ο ασφαλής τύπος δεσμού, όπως και η κατασκευή εαυτού, ανεξάρτητη και αλληλοεξαρτώμενη, συνδέονταν θετικά με την ψυχική ευεξία. Όπως προβλεπόταν, οι δύο συνδεόμενες έννοιες αλληλεπιδρούν, με τα υψηλότερα επίπεδα αλληλεξαρτώμενης κατασκευής του εαυτού να συνδέονται με υψηλότερα επίπεδα άγχους και χαμηλότερα επίπεδα αποφυγής, σε συμφωνία με τις υποθέσεις. Σημαντικό ήταν, επίσης, το εύρημα ότι η αλληλεπίδραση μεταξύ αλληλεξάρτησης και έμμονου τύπου δεσμού εξηγούσε ένα σημαντικό ποσοστό της διακύμανσης της ψυχικής ευεξίας: Οι συμμετέχοντες με υψηλότερα επίπεδα έμμονου τύπου δεσμού και αλληλεξάρτητης κατασκευής εαυτού παρουσίαζαν υψηλότερη ψυχική ευεξία, ενώ το αντίστροφο συνέβαινε για τους συμμετέχοντες με υψηλά επίπεδα εμμονής και ανεξάρτητης κατασκευής του εαυτού. Τα αποτελέσματα αυτά αναδεικνύουν τον ρόλο των πολιτισμικών προτύπων στον τρόπο που τα κεντρικά σχήματα σχέσεων συμβάλουν στην ψυχική ευεξία.
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