

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH PROJECT:

“Investigating the Explanatory Value of the Schema Mode Model for Relationship Satisfaction: Examining Distressed Individuals and Interactional Patterns of Couples”
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Objective:

Schema Therapy has a growing evidence base and is currently utilised to treat various individual mental health conditions. Schema Modes represent the here and now state a person is in and incorporate emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. Modes are considered universal, we each engage in adaptive and maladaptive modes in differing amounts and intensities. A description of the current modes that have been found to be valid constructs is attached at the end of this document. The Mode Model of Schema Therapy has been suggested as a potential new model for use in Couples Therapy so we investigated whether modes and interactions between partners' modes can influence relationship satisfaction.

Method:

Two samples were surveyed, couples ($N = 284$) and individuals recruited via Relationships Australia ($N = 109$). Partners in the Couple Sample were matched using codes so we could connect their survey responses while they remained anonymous. We call modes of the participant whose relationship satisfaction was considered “self-modes” and their matched partner's modes “partner-modes”. Participants completed an online survey independently at a time convenient to them, containing demographic questions, the Dedication subscale of the Relationship Commitment Inventory (screening for a base level of commitment: Owen et al, 2010), the Couple Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007) and the Schema Mode Inventory ((Lobbestael, Vreeswijk, Spinhoven, Schoten & Arntz, 2010). The samples were analysed separately, as in the couples sample it was necessary to account for interdependence of satisfaction within couples.

Findings:

How well does the mode model classify relationship distress?

We separated the Relationships Australia sample of individuals into two groups based on a cut-off score for distress in the satisfaction index. We found that modes were able to successfully classify individuals into their groups at a high rate, with the distressed group showing higher maladaptive and lower adaptive self-modes. This indicated that as a whole the mode model showed a good fit for understanding relationship satisfaction.

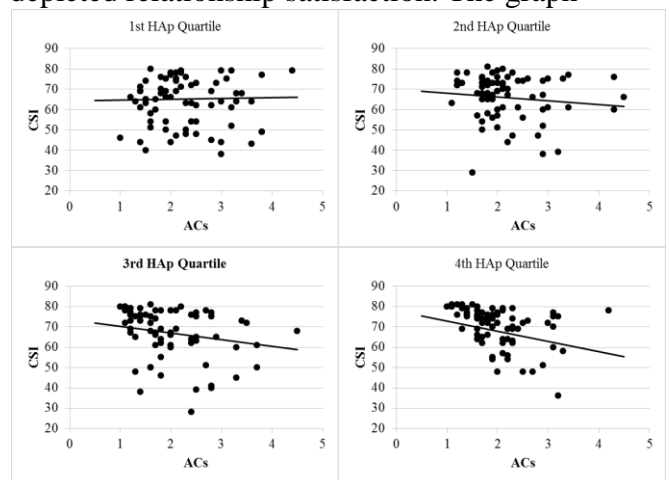
Which modes are more related to relationship satisfaction?

In the Relationships Australia sample, all adaptive self-modes positively related to satisfaction and all maladaptive self-modes negatively related to satisfaction, however the Self-Aggrandizer self-mode didn't have a significant relationship. The modes which contributed to explaining relationship satisfaction levels from strongest downward were: Happy Child, Vulnerable Child, Angry Child, Compliant Surrender, Detached Protector, Detached Self-Soother, Punitive Parent, Demanding Parent and Healthy Adult. In the couples sample, the self-modes that significantly predicted relationship satisfaction beyond the interdependence of satisfaction were similar (from strongest downwards): Happy Child, Vulnerable Child, Detached Protector, Healthy Adult, Detached Self Soother and Angry Child. Only the Angry Child mode predicted satisfaction as a partner-mode beyond the effect of it is a self-mode. Considering the nature of these modes, it makes sense that an externalizing mode such as Angry Child impacts on a partner's satisfaction; and that more internally directed modes impact more on one's own satisfaction. The results of the modes which were found in both samples to relate to satisfaction correspond to many previous studies finding hostility (e.g. Angry Child), distress (e.g. Vulnerable Child) and withdrawal (e.g. Detached modes) consistently relate negatively and problem solving (like Healthy Adult) plus intimacy (like Happy Child) are consistently positively related to relationship

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satisfaction. Interestingly, Self Aggrandizer, Bully/Attack and Enraged Child modes did not show a significant relationship to satisfaction of self or partner in the couples sample. These modes are characterised by dominating others, through superiority or aggression. It may make sense that for people endorsing these as self-modes to have a different perspective on relationship satisfaction than the general population. It also may be that limitations in the study design meant not enough people endorsed these modes to get an accurate understanding of their impacts. They may be better studied in future by use of a different cohort of participants, observation or asking partners to rate each others' modes as a cross-reference.

Do our partners' modes influence how our self-modes effect our relationship satisfaction? We found that for each negative self-mode (aside from Self-Aggrandizer, Bully/Attack and Enraged Child, and Vulnerable Child) the level of either one or both of the partner's adaptive modes could reduce their impact on relationship satisfaction. When partners are low in healthy modes, even low levels of an unhealthy self-mode deplete relationship satisfaction. But, when partners had higher adaptive modes, it was like a buffer effect, as there had to be higher levels of negative self-modes before they depleted relationship satisfaction. The graph gives an example to help explain this: the top left scatterplot is of couples where the partner is in the lowest 25% (quartile) of scores on the Healthy Adult mode, and shows that even participants with low scores on the Angry Child self-mode (horizontal axis) show lower satisfaction levels (e.g. under 60 on the vertical axis). The bottom right scatterplot shows couples where the partner is in the highest 25% of scores on the Healthy Adult mode, and shows that only at higher levels of Angry Child self-mode were low satisfaction levels reported.



Some negative self-modes only showed buffering interactions with the Healthy Adult partner-mode: Angry Child, Impulsive Child, Detached Protector and Demanding Parent. For these modes that involve hostile, impulsive, withdrawing, or overly self-demanding features, an assertive, limit setting, problem solving response considering needs of both partners might be more useful to maintain relationship satisfaction. However, for the Compliant Surrender mode, the Happy Child appears to be the best partner response to protect the relationship, perhaps because reassurance, connection and warmth would support a more passive partner. Some self-modes showed this positive buffering from both of the partner's healthy modes. For Undisciplined Child, Detached Self-Soother and Punitive Parent, having a partner engage either in Healthy Adult or Happy Child could protect the relationship against the types of undisciplined, compulsive, or guilt driven behaviours characterising these modes. Somewhat unexpectedly, the Vulnerable Child mode did not show a significant buffer by partners' healthy modes. This may mean a person in such a vulnerable, distressed state would need more individual support beyond what a partner can offer to protect the relationship, however a Happy Child mode did show a mild effect.

Conclusion: Whilst more research is needed to address limitations, this preliminary evidence could be said to confirm the usefulness of the Schema Mode Model as a way to understand how patterns of interaction can influence relationship satisfaction levels. The study highlights the utility of couples to build their adaptive responding to enable buffering against the damaging effects of maladaptive modes that we all can tend to engage in temporarily. A Schema Mode Model therefore appears to be useful to learn to respond to one another in a way to best enhance each other's relationship satisfaction.

Appendix One: Description of Modes

- **Adaptive Modes**

- *Healthy Adult* is a mode of healthy self-regulation, someone in this mode would be successfully performing appropriate adult activities, balancing needs of the self and others assertively, e.g. using problem solving whilst in touch with core emotions.
- *Happy Child* is a mode characterised by connection seeking and loving attention, when someone in the mode would feel their core emotional needs are met and can be playful, spontaneous and happy.

Maladaptive modes can be classified into: Child, Parent and Coping Modes:

- **Maladaptive Child Modes** are considered survival based responses to when emotional core needs are not met or are threatened. They represent basic emotions and are considered to link closely with activated body systems.
 - *Vulnerable Child* is characterised by feelings of fear, sadness, helplessness and being overwhelmed. It is likened to what a child might feel if they are not receiving the care from adults needed to survive: a feeling of being empty, alone, unloved, unlovable.
 - *Angry Child* is characterised by feeling angry and frustrated, likened to how a child may initially react in response to when their core needs aren't met. Behaviourally it may look like venting anger in inappropriate ways or making demands and appearing entitled or spoiled.
 - *Enraged Child* is a mode like when a child is displaying of out of control anger, to the extent of resulting in hurting people or objects.
 - *Impulsive Child* is a state of acting on selfish desires or impulses from moment to moment in an uncontrolled manner, disregarding others' needs.
 - *Undisciplined Child* is a state of being unable to force one-self to finish routine or boring tasks, getting frustrated in the process.
- **Maladaptive Parent Modes** relate to being absorbed in negative messages and appraisals a child may have heard which have since been internalized, e.g. negative core beliefs and negative automatic thoughts.
 - *Punitive Parent* is a state focussed internally on being criticizing and punishing toward the self. This mode includes feeling guilt or that you deserve punishment.
 - *Demanding Parent* is a state focussed on internal pressure to meet high standards, feeling it wrong to express feelings or act spontaneously due to needing to be the "best" or do the "right" thing.
- **Maladaptive Coping Modes** are coping response behaviours categorised as surrender, freeze, flight or fight type responses.
 - **Surrender**
 - *Compliant Surrender* is a mode suggested as having an attachment seeking function, by acting in a passive, submissive, reassurance-seeking or self-deprecating way, avoiding conflict or rejection; not being assertive so healthy needs may not be met.
 - **Avoidance**
 - *Detached Protector* is a mode state likened to a passive withdrawal or "freeze" response to avoid harm. This can include shutting off emotion (including by way of substance use, binge eating, self-harm), rejecting help from others and feeling empty.
 - *Detached Self-Soother* is a mode involving more active withdrawal, like a "flight" response in trying to protect the self. This can include engaging in activities to soothe, stimulate or distract, which may be addictive/compulsive and damaging in excess.
 - **Overcompensation: "fight" responses.**
 - *Self Aggrandizer* is a mode which presents as entitled, competitive, grandiose or status-seeking. It can include showing little empathy for others, expecting special treatment and admiration to others' detriment.
 - *Bully and Attack* is a mode of directly harming others in a targeted way.