

Relationship Attributions Are Not Universal: Cultural Variation in Levels and Links With Satisfaction

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Abstract

How individuals explain their partner's behavior is a key cognitive process in romantic relationships. These "relationship attributions" have been consistently linked with relationship quality, but most evidence comes from Western, individualistic contexts. The cultural psychology literature suggests that attributional processes are shaped by broader cognitive and social norms, raising questions about their universality in close relationships. In a pre-registered, cross-cultural design, individuals in romantic relationships from Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States ($N = 2,347$) reported on causal and responsibility attributions and relationship satisfaction. We tested country-level differences in levels of attributions and whether the association between attributions and satisfaction was moderated by country. Mean levels of causal and responsibility attributions differed significantly: Taiwanese participants reported the highest levels, followed by Turkey, the U.S., and Spain. Higher levels of causal and responsibility attributions were associated with lower satisfaction in all countries, but the strength of this association varied: it was strongest in Turkey and the U.S., moderate in Spain, and weakest in Taiwan. Relationship attributions are thus culturally patterned in both degree and function. These findings underscore the importance of integrating cultural context into theories of relationship cognition and caution against assuming the universality of attribution–satisfaction links.

Keywords

couples, culture, relationship attributions, relationship satisfaction

Introduction

Understanding why a partner acts the way they do is central to how couples think, feel, and behave toward one another. When a partner behaves in ways that feel hurtful or frustrating, the explanations that come to mind, whether the behavior reflects something enduring about who the

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partner is or something temporary about the situation, shape how the aggrieved partner feels, responds, and ultimately evaluates the relationship. These relationship attributions, the inferences partners draw about the causes and intentions behind each other's behavior, have been widely studied in psychological science and are consistently linked to relationship satisfaction, conflict behavior, and long-term stability (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 2000).

Two forms of attribution are especially relevant in close relationships. *Causal attributions* concern the perceived source of a partner's negative behavior, specifically whether it is seen as reflecting something stable and dispositional about the partner, such as their character or personality, or something situational and temporary, such as stress or circumstance. *Responsibility attributions* go further, capturing judgments about accountability, whether the partner acted intentionally, with selfish motives, and deserves blame for the behavior (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Partners in satisfying relationships tend to make causal attributions that explain negative partner behaviors in situational or temporary terms (e.g., "He was short with me because he had a stressful day"), and responsibility attributions that excuse their partner, seeing negative behaviors as unintentional and understandable rather than blameworthy (e.g., "He didn't mean to criticize me, it wasn't intentional").

In contrast, distressed couples exhibit the opposite pattern. They are more likely to make causal attributions that explain negative partner behaviors in terms of enduring dispositional flaws (e.g., "He was short with me because that's just the kind of person he is"), and responsibility attributions that assign intent and blame (e.g., "He criticized me on purpose to hurt me"). This pattern, in which distressed partners explain negative behaviors as reflecting stable, intentional, and blameworthy characteristics of the partner, has been consistently linked to lower relationship satisfaction, greater conflict, and poorer long-term outcomes (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 2000).

Despite the strength and consistency of these findings, a critical limitation remains unaddressed: virtually all research on relationship attributions has been conducted within individualistic, Western cultural contexts (e.g., McGorray et al., 2023; Williamson et al., 2022). As a result, it is unclear whether these attributional patterns are culturally universal or whether their meaning and relational consequences vary across cultural settings. Insights from cultural psychology suggest that attributional processes are shaped by cultural values and social structures. People socialized in individualistic cultures, such as Anglo-Western societies, are more prone to make dispositional attributions, focusing on internal traits and personal agency, rather than considering situational explanations. In contrast, individuals from collectivistic cultures, such as many East Asian societies, are more likely to emphasize situational or contextual explanations for behavior (Choi et al., 1999; Mezulis et al., 2004; Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994). Importantly, these differences extend beyond the commonly studied East-West comparison, with recent research identifying meaningful variation in attribution tendencies across Anglo-Western, East Asian, and Mediterranean regions, each showing a distinct profile (Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023). Yet it remains unclear whether these cultural differences in general attributional tendencies extend to the specific context of romantic relationships.

Beyond the question of whether attribution levels differ across cultures, cultural context may also shape what those attributions mean, and therefore how consequential they are for relationship quality. Cultural differences in cognitive style suggest that relationship attributions may carry different relational weight across cultural contexts. Cultures vary in the extent to which they promote analytic versus holistic cognitive styles: analytic cognition involves a tendency to focus on objects and people independently of context, applying fixed rules and categories, while holistic cognition involves attention to relationships between objects and people and the broader context in which they are embedded (Nisbett et al., 2001; Varnum et al., 2010). These general orientations toward information processing shape how people explain behavior, such that

analytic thinkers tend to attribute behavior to stable underlying traits, while holistic thinkers are more likely to consider situational and contextual factors (Choi et al., 1999; Morris & Peng, 1994; Nisbett et al., 2001).

In analytic cognitive cultures, traits are understood as stable and fixed properties of a person, meaning that a dispositional attribution about a partner may not merely describe a single incident. It may instead reflect a judgment about who the partner fundamentally is, and an implicit prediction about how they will continue to behave. Such judgments may be relationally consequential: concluding that a partner is selfish or inconsiderate by nature may strike at the foundation of how one views the relationship and would therefore be expected to predict dissatisfaction. In holistic and dialectical cognitive cultures, by contrast, multiple and even opposing explanations for behavior can be held simultaneously, meaning that a dispositional attribution about a partner may carry less finality (Luttrell et al., 2022; Nisbett et al., 2001). It may be one interpretation among several rather than a definitive verdict on the partner's character and would therefore be expected to be less diagnostic of global relationship quality (Mezulis et al., 2004). The cultural context in which relationship attributions occur may therefore shape how strongly they predict relationship satisfaction.

The present study examines cultural variation in relationship attributions across four countries selected to represent distinct profiles of cognitive style and relational norms: Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States. The United States and Taiwan serve as cultural anchors representing contrasting cognitive styles. The United States is a prototypical analytic culture in which behavior is routinely interpreted as reflecting stable underlying traits (Na et al., 2020; Nisbett et al., 2001). In this context, dispositional attributions about a partner are culturally normative and trait-diagnostic and would therefore be expected to carry strong relational weight. Taiwan, by contrast, represents a holistic and dialectical cognitive context in which behavior is understood as contextually embedded and potentially contradictory (Luttrell et al., 2022; Nisbett et al., 2001). In this context, dispositional attributions are less normative and less final and would therefore be expected to be less diagnostic of relationship quality.

Beyond the East-West contrast represented by the U.S. and Taiwan, Spain and Turkey were included to examine relationship attributions in an understudied but culturally distinctive world region: the Mediterranean. As Mediterranean societies, they show a mixed cognitive style profile, tending toward more dispositional attribution than East Asian cultures while also exhibiting holistic elements that distinguish them from purely analytic Anglo-Western cultures (Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023). Although both countries share this broader Mediterranean profile, including both strengthens confidence that findings reflect the Mediterranean context more broadly rather than idiosyncrasies of any single country, making their joint inclusion theoretically and empirically informative (Uskul et al., 2025). This hybrid profile leads us to expect that the attribution-satisfaction link in Spain and Turkey would be moderate, stronger than in Taiwan where holistic cognition renders attributions less trait-diagnostic, but weaker than in the United States where a purely analytic cognitive style makes dispositional attributions particularly consequential for how partners are viewed.

We pursue two main aims in the present study. First, we examine cross-cultural differences in the levels of causal (i.e., dispositional) and responsibility (i.e., blaming) attributions that individuals make about their partners' behavior. Drawing from prior research on cultural variation in general attributional tendencies, we expect that individuals will differ across countries in their levels of dispositional and blaming attributions, such that the United States will show the highest levels, followed by Spain and Turkey, with Taiwan expected to show the lowest levels given its distinctive holistic cognitive profile (Choi et al., 1999; Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023). Second, we test whether the association between attributions and relationship satisfaction is moderated by country. If certain attributional styles are less culturally distinctive or less meaningful in a given context, their predictive power for relationship satisfaction may be attenuated. Conversely, in cultures where such styles reflect effortful, counter-normative cognition, they may

serve as stronger indicators of relational investment and thus be more tightly linked to satisfaction. Thus, we expect that the association between dispositional and blaming attributions and relationship satisfaction will be strongest (most negative) in the United States, which is a context that emphasizes trait-based reasoning and evaluative meaning of partner blame (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Uskul, Cross, et al., 2023). We expect it to be moderate in Spain and Turkey, where the mixed cognitive style profile attenuates the trait-diagnostic weight of attributions, and weakest in Taiwan, where dialectical cognition may render attributions less diagnostic of global relationship quality (Luttrell et al., 2022; Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023).

By integrating relationship science and cultural psychology, this study moves beyond documenting cross-cultural differences to provide a theoretically grounded account of when and why relationship attributions matter for relationship quality. Drawing on cognitive style theory, we propose that attributional processes do not carry uniform relational meaning across cultural contexts. Instead, dispositional and blaming attributions may function as “character verdicts” in analytic cognitive cultures, where they signal stable and diagnostic qualities of the partner, while carrying less definitive relational implications in more holistic contexts. By testing these predictions across four culturally distinct countries, the present study aims to clarify both the cultural patterning of relationship attributions and the conditions under which they are more or less consequential for relationship satisfaction.

Method

Transparency and Openness

Below we describe how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures relevant to the current study. This study was preregistered: the preregistration is available at <https://aspredicted.org/bgbf-6nnk.pdf>. Research materials, analysis code, and data are available at <https://osf.io/re6td/>. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the University of Texas at Austin and Koç University.

Participants

Participants in the United States were recruited via the research panel provider Dynata during April to May 2024 and were compensated the equivalent of 7.50 USD through the panel provider’s incentive system. Participants in Spain were recruited via undergraduate students trained in sampling methods, who distributed the study to eligible individuals during May 2024 and November 2024 to January 2025. Students who distributed the survey received extra credit, and participants were entered into a raffle to receive one of two 50 EUR gift cards. Participants in Taiwan were recruited via the research panel provider SurveyCake in December 2024 to January 2025 and were compensated 50 NTD through the panel provider’s incentive system. Participants in Turkey were recruited via graduate and undergraduate psychology students trained in collecting data, who distributed the study to eligible participants, as well as posters on campus and advertisements on various social media platforms from September to December 2024 and were compensated 200 TL. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the sample demographics across the four countries.

Participants were eligible to participate if they were 18 years or older and currently involved in a romantic relationship of at least 6 months. In addition, we included three attention checks in the questionnaire and excluded participants who failed one or more of these attention checks from the final sample. We also checked IP addresses and coordinates and excluded responses not originating from the intended country. After exclusions, the final analytic sample consisted of 1,004 participants from the U.S., 427 from Spain, 424 from Turkey, and 492 from Taiwan. An a

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Study Variables.

Variable	USA (n = 1,004)		Spain (n = 427)		Turkey (n = 424)		Taiwan (n = 492)		Test statistic
	Mean/Prop.	SD	Mean/Prop.	SD	Mean/Prop.	SD	Mean/Prop.	SD	
Age	44.77	17.30	42.27	13.54	33.21	8.56	36.82	9.21	84.59***
Relationship length (years)	17.88	14.94	17.31	13.62	7.73	8.29	9.38	7.67	101.19***
Subjective socioeconomic status	5.68	2.07	6.10	1.44	6.44	1.41	5.70	1.87	21.20***
Heterosexual	89%		90%		89%		82%		18.81***
Have children	70%		56%		33%		43%		198.42***
Married	81%		54%		59%		55%		162.52***
Gender									144.66***
Male	48%		39%		16%		42%		
Female	51%		60%		84%		58%		
Other	1%		<1%		<1%		0%		
Education									103.21***
<HS degree	3%		16%		1%		4%		
HS degree	25%		22%		3%		10%		
Some college	34%		10%		9%		17%		
College degree	23%		35%		49%		60%		
Graduate degree	15%		17%		39%		9%		
Relationship satisfaction	15.26	5.32	15.96	3.86	14.90	4.42	13.06	3.80	35.57***
Causal attributions	3.18	1.09	2.92	0.91	3.38	0.89	3.73	0.85	58.90***
Responsibility attributions	2.88	1.17	2.65	0.93	3.33	0.88	3.55	1.01	76.64***

Note. N = 2,347. Test statistic is F for continuous variables and χ^2 for categorical variables.
***p < .001.

priori power analysis indicated that a sample size of $n = 431$ per country was necessary in order to have 0.95 power to detect a small effect ($f = 0.10$) in analyses testing mean level differences across countries (ANCOVAs), and data collection was designed to reach this number. Although two of the countries fell slightly short of the intended sample size after the data cleaning process detailed above, the sample was still well-powered to detect a small effect.

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed a battery of self-report measures via an online self-report survey. When existing translations of measures did not exist, measures were translated into the local language (Castilian Spanish, Turkish, and Mandarin) by the research team. We used a team translation approach in which all tasks were first translated by a bilingual member of the research team into their native language, then reviewed and checked for accuracy in psychological, linguistic, and cultural aspects by other team members (Hambleton & de Jong, 2003; Harkness, 2003).

Measures

Relationship Attributions. Attributions that individuals make for their partner's behavior were assessed with the Relationship Attributions Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Participants were presented with two negative events that are likely to occur in an intimate relationship ("Your partner criticizes something you say" and "Your partner does not pay attention to what you are saying"). For each event, participants were asked to rate their agreement with each of six response options on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 6 = *strongly agree*). There are two subscales that capture distinct but related processes. The *causal-attribution* subscale assesses the perceived locus, globality, and stability of the cause of the negative partner behavior (e.g., "The reason my partner criticized me is not likely to change"). These items primarily reflect dispositional judgments of the partner's behavior. The *responsibility-attribution* subscale captures the extent to which participants consider their partners' behaviors to be intentional, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy (e.g., "My partner criticized me on purpose rather than unintentionally"), corresponding with blame-oriented judgments. A composite score is computed for each subscale by averaging the items in that subscale with a possible range of 1 to 6. Higher scores indicate attributions that are more dispositional and blaming, which has been considered more maladaptive in Anglo-Western samples. The research team translated this measure into Spanish, Turkish, and Mandarin. Cronbach's α for causal attributions was .74 in Spain, .81 in Taiwan, .73 in Turkey, and .82 in the U.S. Cronbach's α for responsibility attributions was, .76 in Spain, .89 in Taiwan, .72 in Turkey, and .85 in the U.S.

Relationship Satisfaction. Global sentiment toward the relationship was measured with the four-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The items assess global satisfaction (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?") and are rated on a 6-point scale (with the exception of one item that is rated on a 7-point scale); higher scores indicate higher levels of satisfaction. The four items were summed to form the scale score; the possible range is 0 to 21, and a total score less than 13.5 reflects relationship distress. An existing Turkish translation was used (Özdemir & Sağkal, 2021), and the research team translated the measure into Spanish and Mandarin. Cronbach's α was .78 in Spain, .90 in Taiwan, .95 in Turkey, and .95 in the U.S.

Demographic Covariates. Participants reported their age, education, subjective socioeconomic status, relationship length, relationship status, gender, sexual orientation, and parenting status.

Analysis Plan

Analyses were conducted in Stata 17 (StataCorp, 2021). Following the pre-registered analysis plan we first examined the raw levels of responsibility and causal attributions across countries with ANOVAs, and the zero-order associations between attributions and relationship satisfaction across countries using linear regression. Next, we incorporated demographic covariates (via ANCOVA and linear regression) to determine whether any observed cross-national differences were a result of differences between the samples. We decomposed all significant ANOVAs and ANCOVAs to determine significant pair-wise comparisons between countries. Similarly, we decomposed significant country $\times$ attributions interactions in linear regressions using simple slopes to determine the nature of the association within each country.

Two sets of robustness checks are reported in the Supplemental Material. First, we examined whether country-level differences in attribution levels and attribution-satisfaction links persisted after controlling for individual differences in cultural orientation. Second, we examined measurement equivalence of the relationship attribution subscales and relationship satisfaction measure across the four country groups. Latent variable analyses accounting for any measurement non-invariance identified were also conducted as an additional robustness check of the main findings.

Results

Demographic Characteristics and Differences Between Countries

Means and standard deviations for all study variables, as well as test statistics for between-country comparisons, are presented in Table 1. Participants across the four countries significantly differed in demographic characteristics: U.S. and Spanish participants were older on average and had longer relationship lengths compared to participants from Turkey and Taiwan. The U.S. also had higher proportions of married and childrearing participants, whereas the Turkish sample included more women and the highest proportion of participants with graduate degrees. Relationship satisfaction was highest in Spain, followed closely by the U.S., while it was somewhat lower in Turkey, and lowest in Taiwan. Correlations between the variables of interest were in the expected directions, with relationship satisfaction inversely correlated with causal ($r = -.51, p < .001$) and responsibility attributions ($r = -.48, p < .001$). Causal and responsibility attributions were strongly correlated with each other ($r = .83, p < .001$).

Levels of Relationship Attributions Across Countries

There was a significant overall difference in the level of causal attributions and responsibility attributions across countries. Post hoc tests indicated that the level of causal attributions and responsibility attributions in each country significantly differed from every other country, such that individuals in Taiwan had the highest levels of causal and responsibility attributions, followed by Turkey, the U.S., then Spain (see Table 2).

The next set of analyses added demographic covariates (i.e., age, education, subjective SES, length of relationship in years, relationship status, gender, sexual orientation, and whether or not they have children). The pattern of results was the same, such that after controlling for demographics, there was still a significant overall difference in the level of causal attributions and

Table 2. Results of ANOVAs Testing for Differences in Levels of Attributions Across Countries.

Country	Causal attributions		Responsibility attributions	
	No covariates	Demographic covariates	No covariates	Demographic covariates
U.S.	3.18 _a	3.14 _a	2.88 _a	2.84 _a
Spain	2.92 _b	2.93 _b	2.65 _b	2.65 _b
Turkey	3.38 _c	3.44 _c	3.33 _c	3.35 _c
Taiwan	3.73 _d	3.74 _d	3.55 _d	3.56 _d
F	58.90***	19.89***	76.64***	24.25***
Effect size	0.07	0.10	0.09	0.12

Note. Effect size is η^2 . Subscripts indicate significant pair-wise comparisons within each column. Countries that share the same subscript are not significantly different from each other at $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Simple Slopes Derived From Linear Regression Analyses Testing the Association Between Attributions and Relationship Satisfaction.

Country	Causal attributions		Responsibility attributions model	
	No covariates	Demographic covariates	No covariates	Demographic covariates
U.S.	-2.77*** _a	-2.64*** _a	-2.52*** _a	-2.34*** _a
Spain	-1.77*** _b	-1.72*** _b	-1.63*** _b	-1.54*** _b
Turkey	-2.99*** _a	-2.82*** _a	-2.90*** _a	-2.79*** _a
Taiwan	-0.64*** _c	-0.69*** _c	-0.65*** _c	-0.71*** _c
F	31.68***	27.46***	33.25***	27.12***

Note. Subscripts indicate significant pair-wise comparisons within a column. Countries that share the same subscript are not significantly different from each other at $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

responsibility attributions across countries and post hoc tests found significant differences between all countries (see Table 2).

Association Between Relationship Attributions and Relationship Satisfaction Across Countries

There were significant country $\times$ attributions interactions for causal and responsibility attributions, indicating that the association between attributions and relationship satisfaction differed across countries (see Table S1 for the full results of the regression analyses). These significant interactions were decomposed into simple slopes (see Table 3), which indicated that the associations between attributions and relationship satisfaction were significant and negative in all countries. This means that in all four countries higher levels of causal and responsibility attributions were associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction. However, the magnitude of this association significantly varied. For causal attributions, the U.S. and Turkey had the strongest association (slopes of -2.77 (95% CI [-2.99, -2.54]) and -2.99 (95% CI [-3.41, -2.56]) respectively), which did not significantly differ from each other, followed by Spain (slope = -1.77 (95% CI [-2.18, -1.36])), then Taiwan (slope = -0.64 (95% CI [-1.06, -0.23])).

For responsibility attributions the same pattern emerged: the U.S. and Turkey had the strongest association (slopes of -2.52 (95% CI $[-2.73, -2.31]$) and -2.90 (95% CI $[-3.33, -2.47]$) respectively), which did not significantly differ from each other, followed by Spain (slope = -1.63 (95% CI $[-2.03, -1.22]$)), then Taiwan (slope = -0.65 (95% CI $[-1.00, -0.29]$)).

Next, demographic covariates were added to the regression models. Results of both models followed the same pattern, such that there were significant country $\times$ attributions interactions (see Table S2 for the full results of the regression analyses). These significant interactions were decomposed into simple slopes (see Table 3), which indicated that the associations between attributions and relationship satisfaction were significant and negative in all countries. Once again, the magnitude of this association significantly varied, such that the U.S. and Turkey had the strongest association (which did not significantly differ), followed by Spain, then Taiwan.

Robustness Checks

As a first robustness check, we examined whether country-level differences in attribution levels and attribution-satisfaction links persisted after accounting for individual differences in cultural orientation. Results (which are reported in the Supplemental Material) indicated that country-level differences in the association between attributions and relationship satisfaction remained fully robust. Country-level differences in attribution levels also generally remained robust, with two exceptions: Taiwan and Turkey were no longer significantly different from each other, and the U.S. and Spain were no longer significantly different from each other. This suggests that country-level differences in attribution levels are only partially accounted for by individual differences in cultural orientation, and that other aspects of cultural context contribute to the observed patterns.

We also examined measurement equivalence of the relationship attribution subscales and relationship satisfaction measure across the four country groups using alignment optimization and sequential CFA-based invariance testing respectively. Both attribution subscales showed acceptable approximate measurement equivalence, with fewer than 25% of parameters flagged as non-invariant (19% for the causal subscale and 15% for the responsibility subscale; Cieciuch et al., 2018). The relationship satisfaction measure achieved metric but not scalar invariance. Latent variable analyses accounting for measurement non-invariance produced results that converged closely with the main manuscript findings, with the same country ordering and pattern of significant differences emerging under both analytic approaches. This convergence suggests that the observed cross-cultural differences in attribution-satisfaction associations are unlikely to be driven by measurement artifacts. However, given the lack of full scalar invariance, mean-level comparisons should be interpreted with some caution. Full measurement equivalence results and latent variable analyses are reported in the Supplemental Material.

Discussion

The present study examined cross-cultural differences in the levels of causal (i.e., dispositional) and responsibility (i.e., blaming) attributions partners make in romantic relationships, as well as the extent to which these attributions predict relationship satisfaction. Several clear patterns emerged. First, there was a consistent cross-cultural rank ordering of attribution levels: Taiwanese participants reported the highest mean levels of both causal and responsibility attributions, followed by participants from Turkey, the United States, and Spain. Second, country moderated the strength of the association between attributions and relationship satisfaction. Although the association was negative in all four countries, it was strongest in Turkey and the United States, moderate in Spain, and weakest in Taiwan. The cross-cultural differences in levels and associations with satisfaction were robust: they remained significant even after controlling for demographic

covariates and individual differences in cultural orientation. The persistence of effects after accounting for self-construal suggests that other cultural processes beyond broad independent–interdependent distinctions may better explain variation in attribution levels and meanings across countries. Overall, this pattern of results invites a contextual, rather than universal, interpretation of the “adaptiveness” of specific attributional processes.

Perhaps the most striking result was that Taiwanese participants were most likely to explain their partner’s negative behaviors as reflecting stable character flaws and to assign blame and intent to their partner, yet the link between these attributions and relationship satisfaction was weakest in Taiwan. This finding diverges from much of the general attributions literature, which shows East Asians to be less likely than Westerners to make dispositional attributions (Choi et al., 1999; Morris & Peng, 1994). However, other work suggests that East Asians may be more willing than Westerners to internalize negative events in close relationships. A large meta-analysis found that the self-serving attributional bias, in which individuals internalize positive events and externalize negative ones, is weaker, and sometimes reversed, in East Asian contexts, such that individuals more often attribute negative events to internal causes (Mezulis et al., 2004). Consistent with this, Taiwanese mothers were more likely than American mothers to attribute children’s misbehavior to internal, stable attributes, whereas American mothers tended to internalize positive behaviors and externalize negative ones (Chiang et al., 2000). Together, these findings suggest that Taiwanese individuals may be especially likely to blame close family members for negative behavior. In this context, criticism may be framed as an expression of responsibility within close relationships rather than as evidence of a partner’s enduring flaw.

Further, cultural theories of dialecticism suggest that Taiwanese individuals are more comfortable entertaining seemingly contradictory explanations (Luttrell et al., 2022). For example, a Taiwanese partner who attributes criticism to a stable character flaw may simultaneously acknowledge situational factors, such as stress or circumstance, as contributing causes. This co-occurrence of explanations may reduce the finality of any single attribution, making dispositional judgments less definitive and therefore less damaging to relationship satisfaction. Taken together, these cultural frameworks help explain why dispositional and blaming attributions were elevated but relatively non-diagnostic of relationship quality in Taiwan. It is also worth noting, however, that measurement equivalence analyses indicated partial non-invariance of item intercepts for the attribution subscales, particularly for Taiwan. This raises the possibility that the unexpectedly high attribution levels observed in Taiwan may partly reflect differences in how participants use response scales rather than true differences in attribution tendencies. Latent variable analyses accounting for this non-invariance produced largely convergent results, however, supporting the robustness of the observed pattern.

The U.S. participants reported moderately high scores on causal and responsibility attributions and a steep negative slope linking them to satisfaction. This pattern replicates decades of relationship attribution research conducted in the U.S. (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), which concluded that dispositional and blame attributions are bad for relationships. However, given that this conclusion was not supported universally across all samples in the current study, a cultural explanation is more appropriate than a universal truism. The cognitive style in the United States is strongly analytic and encourages individuals to infer stable traits behind behavior (Nisbett et al., 2001; Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023). As a result, when a partner is blamed, the behavior is seen as evidence of a deep-seated character flaw rather than a temporary state. At the same time, U.S. relationship culture emphasizes idealization: partners are expected to affirm one another and maintain highly positive views (Murray & Holmes, 1997). Dispositional blame ruptures these “rose-colored glasses,” undermining satisfaction. These effects are further amplified by widespread entity theories of personality in the U.S., which treat traits as fixed and unchangeable (Hong et al., 1999). Thus, in the U.S. context, the trait-diagnostic

nature of dispositional attributions, combined with expectations of positivity, makes this cognition a particularly powerful predictor of dissatisfaction.

Turkish participants similarly reported high levels of dispositional and blaming attributions and showed a strong negative link between these attributions and relationship satisfaction. As an analytic cognitive culture, Turkey shares with the United States a tendency to interpret behavior as reflecting stable underlying traits (Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023), meaning that dispositional attributions about a partner are likely to function as character verdicts that carry significant relational weight. This may help explain why the attribution-satisfaction link was similarly strong in both countries. Beyond cognitive style, Turkey's classification as a culture of honor provides additional context for understanding how blame operates in this cultural setting. In honor cultures, interpersonal behavior reflects not only on the individual but also on the family's reputation, such that perceived wrongdoing carries social and moral weight that extends beyond the immediate relationship and becomes a shared resource (Uskul, Cross, et al., 2023). In this context, partner blame may function as a threat to social standing and potentially amplify its consequences for relationship satisfaction.

Finally, Spanish participants reported the lowest mean levels of dispositional and blaming attributions and a moderate link between these attributions and relationship satisfaction. Like the United States and Turkey, Spain shows an analytic attribution style that would be expected to render dispositional attributions trait-diagnostic and relationally consequential (Uskul, Kirchner-Häusler, et al., 2023). However, Spain's cultural norms may modify this baseline in important ways. Spanish cultural norms emphasize warmth, emotional expressiveness, and strong family obligation (Garzón, 2000), and honor values are salient, but tempered by *simpatía*, the cultural preference for maintaining pleasant social ambience and avoiding overt criticism of close others (Mosquera et al., 2000, 2002; Triandis et al., 1984). Together, these norms discourage explicit partner blame, helping to explain the overall low levels of dispositional and blaming attributions observed in the Spanish sample. When dispositional blame does occur in this context, it may signal that harmony norms have already been breached, making it stand out as a particularly meaningful indicator of relational strain. Thus, in Spain, the analytic tendency to read behavior in trait-diagnostic terms may be tempered by cultural norms that suppress blame expression, producing a moderate rather than strong attribution-satisfaction link.

Limitations

Although our findings highlight important cultural differences in both the level and meaning of relationship attributions, they should be interpreted with caution. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; dissatisfaction may foster more negative attributions just as negative attributions may erode satisfaction. Longitudinal work suggests that changes in satisfaction often precede changes in attributions, indicating that attributional processes may function more as dynamic states that fluctuate with relationship quality rather than as stable traits (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). Dyadic and multi-wave designs will be important for clarifying these bidirectional processes in different cultural contexts. Second, the Relationship Attributions Measure was developed in an Anglo-Western context, and its items may not fully reflect attributional reasoning most salient in non-Western cultures. In particular, the measure assesses causal attributions on a single continuum from situational to dispositional, meaning that it does not allow for the independent assessment of situational and dispositional attributions. A participant who simultaneously holds both types of attributions would be indistinguishable from one who weakly endorses either. This limitation is especially relevant for understanding the Taiwan findings, where dialectical cognition may lead individuals to hold situational and dispositional attributions simultaneously, which is a pattern the current measure cannot detect. Future research would benefit from instruments that assess situational and dispositional attributions as independent

dimensions, allowing for the possibility of co-occurrence. Incorporating qualitative or emic approaches could also identify culturally specific attributional themes that standardized scales overlook. Third, the current study, consistent with the relationship attribution literature, focused on attributions for negative partner behaviors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992; Karney & Bradbury, 2000). However, given that this focus itself reflects an Anglo-Western research tradition, future work should examine whether attributions for positive partner behaviors play a more prominent role in relationship quality in other cultural contexts.

Several additional limitations relate to the samples and generalizability of the findings. Although demographic covariates were controlled for in the analyses, characteristics of our samples still constrain generalizability. For example, the Turkish sample included relatively few men, and both the Turkish and Taiwanese samples contained a higher proportion of university-educated participants than the U.S. or Spanish samples. Future research should aim for more demographically balanced recruitment across contexts. Additionally, measurement equivalence analyses indicated partial invariance for the relationship attribution subscales and metric but not scalar invariance for the relationship satisfaction measure. While the main findings were robust across both observed variable and latent variable analytic approaches, the partial non-equivalence of item intercepts means that some observed country differences in levels of attributions may partly reflect differences in how participants use response scales rather than true differences in the underlying constructs. Future research should work toward developing and validating relationship attribution measures specifically designed for cross-cultural use. Finally, our study was limited to four countries: Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States. Although these countries were selected to represent distinct cultural profiles and to extend cross-cultural relationship research beyond the commonly studied East-West comparison, they cannot capture the full diversity of cultural variation worldwide. Moreover, countries are not perfectly homogeneous cultural units, and within-country cultural variation exists that the current study was not able to capture. Additional work in other cultural settings, and with culturally diverse samples within countries, will be essential for testing the generalizability of the patterns observed here.

Clinical Implications

The present findings also carry tentative implications for culturally sensitive relationship intervention. Attribution retraining, which is the process of helping partners shift from dispositional to situational explanations for negative partner behavior, is an established technique within cognitive-behavioral couples therapy, developed primarily in Anglo-Western contexts (Epstein & Zheng, 2017). The current findings suggest that the relational consequences of dispositional and blaming attributions may vary substantially across cultural contexts, with stronger links to relationship dissatisfaction in the United States and Turkey than in Taiwan or Spain. This raises the possibility that attribution-focused interventions may be more impactful in some cultural contexts than others, and that clinicians working across cultural settings may benefit from calibrating the emphasis placed on attribution retraining accordingly. At the same time, the finding that dispositional and blaming attributions were elevated in Taiwan, despite their weaker link to satisfaction, suggests that clinicians should not assume that elevated causal and responsibility attributions alone signal relational distress. Caution is warranted in translating these findings directly into clinical practice, as the present study was not designed to test intervention efficacy, and the cultural factors that moderate attribution-satisfaction links are likely complex and multiply determined. Nevertheless, these results underscore the value of incorporating cultural context into models of relationship dysfunction and highlight the need for cross-cultural validation of attribution-based interventions.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings highlight important boundary conditions for relationship attribution theory. Classic models derived in the U.S. do not generalize uniformly; instead, the predictive power of attributions varies across cultural contexts. Across all four countries, higher levels of causal and responsibility attributions were associated with lower relationship satisfaction, but the strength of this link differed across countries. These conclusions are supported by several methodological strengths, including a large multi-country sample of more than 2,300 participants, pre-registered hypotheses and analysis plans, and controls for a wide range of demographic covariates and individual-level indicators of cultural orientation. Additionally, these results caution against assuming that social-cognitive processes studied in interactions with acquaintances or colleagues operate identically in intimate partnerships. Most cultural psychology research has focused on non-intimate contexts, but our results underscore the need to study cognitive processes specifically within romantic relationships, where cultural scripts may shape their meaning in a different manner.

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Data Availability Statement

Data, materials, and analysis code are available at <https://osf.io/re6td>.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Preregistration

This study was preregistered: the preregistration is available at <https://aspredicted.org/bgbf-6nnk.pdf>.

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