

Adult Attachment as a Risk Factor for Intimate Partner Violence

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between intimate partner violence and adult attachment in a sample of 35 community couples. Both partners' attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were examined simultaneously as predictors of male-perpetrated verbal and physical intimate partner violence. Results from hierarchical regression analyses indicated high levels of female attachment anxiety predicted high levels of male-perpetrated verbal and physical violence. In contrast, male attachment was not predictive of male-perpetrated violence. These findings suggest for females, fear of abandonment and rejection may be a risk factor for becoming a victim of violence. Alternatively, exposure to violence may contribute to the development of attachment anxiety in females. Clinical implications include providing cognitive interventions to address female attachment anxiety.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence represents a significant social problem in the United States, with recent survey data indicating approximately 1.5 million women and 800,000 men have reported experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Although intimate partner violence has been examined from a range of theoretical perspectives, attachment theory has recently been identified as a way to integrate several psychosocial risk factors for violence, thus potentially providing a unifying theoretical explanation for intimate partner violence (Mahalik, Aldarondo, Gilbert-Gokhale, & Shore, 2005). In addition, attachment theory provides a useful model for understanding the perplexing co-occurrence of violence and intimacy within the same relationship (Maysseless, 1991). In this framework, violence is examined from a systems perspective, identifying violence as a means to regulate closeness and distance between partners in the relationship (Pistole, 1994). Specifically, discrepancies between preferences for intimacy and changes in the "socioemotional distance" between partners may serve as catalysts for intimate partner violence (Dutton, 1988).

Attachment theory provides a way to understand how human beings develop strong bonds with others (Bowlby, 1977). Through interactions of the child with the parent, infants develop internal working models of self, characterized by the degree of emotional dependence on others for self-validation, and working models of other, characterized by expectations about the availability of others (Bowlby, 1973). These cognitive representations, or relational schemas, shape expectations for adult peer and romantic relationships and guide an individual's behavioral responses to real or imagined separation from important attachment figures.

While many models of adult attachment have been proposed in the literature (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), a widely used model in the study of intimate partner violence is the four-category model proposed by Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991). Following directly from Bowlby's theoretical view, this model postulates two underlying dimensions - (a) a positive or negative image of the self and (b) a positive or negative image of others. This generates a model of four quadrants, each describing a separate prototype of each attachment style: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. These four styles can be further collapsed into two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. The preoccupied and fearful patterns are characterized by high attachment anxiety, or a fear of abandonment and rejection related to a negative self-model, and the fearful and dismissing patterns are characterized by high attachment avoidance, or a discomfort with closeness and intimacy related to a negative other-model. Continuous measures of these styles are often used as this allows for the study of

dimensions of attachment within each individual, rather than assigning individuals to a particular attachment style (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000).

From an attachment theory perspective, intimate partner violence can be viewed as an attempt to establish or maintain a level of personal security within the relationship. When a threat to or disruption of the attachment relationship is perceived, individuals become alarmed and the resulting anxiety leads to responses designed to preserve the attachment system (Bowlby, 1984). A violent episode may be precipitated by a real or imagined threat of abandonment or rejection by the attachment figure. Attachment theory also implies intimate partner violence may be utilized in a relationship as an attempt to regain a comfortable level of proximity with the partner as a way of dealing with the conflict created by opposing needs for closeness versus distance (Pistole, 1994). For example, an individual with high levels of attachment anxiety may respond to attachment-related cues with proximity-seeking behavior, while an individual with high levels of attachment avoidance may respond with distance-seeking behavior.

Although research demonstrates adult attachment as a risk factor of intimate partner violence. Several studies have identified a relationship between insecure attachment and intimate partner violence in male batterers, documenting higher levels of preoccupied and fearful (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994) or preoccupied and dismissing (Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, & Yerington, 2000) styles in violent males compared to nonviolent males. Similarly, research examining the attachment style of victims of male-perpetrated violence indicates the preoccupied and fearful styles are over-represented in abused women compared with nonclinical samples (Henderson, Bartholomew, & Dutton, 1997). Male and female individuals in reciprocally aggressive relationships also report higher levels of preoccupied attachment compared to those in nonaggressive relationships (Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998).

Although a growing body of literature demonstrates a relationship between perpetrator attachment style and violence, the attachment of the victim has been understudied. The limited research on victim attachment indicates the preoccupied and fearful patterns, characterized by attachment anxiety, are greatly over-represented in abused women (Henderson, Bartholomew, & Dutton, 1997). Although insecure attachment has been identified as a risk factor for intimate partner violence, research needs to examine the attachment styles of both partners in the relationship in order to fully understand how the attachment style of each partner affects the couple (Bartholomew, 1997). Thus, the aim of the current study is to add to the sparse literature on the relationship between attachment and intimate partner violence by examining both male and female attachment as predictors of male-perpetrated violence. Based on the literature, we hypothesized female attachment anxiety would predict male-perpetrated violence, whereas both male attachment anxiety and male attachment avoidance would predict male-perpetrated violence.

Method

Participants

Thirty-five heterosexual couples were recruited through advertisements in local newspapers. In order to participate in the study, couples were required to be together for at least 6 months. Female ages ranged from 18 to 67 ($M = 31.00$, $SD = 11.54$). Female participants were primarily Caucasian (82.9%), with 8.6% Native American, 2.9% Hispanic, and 2.9% African American, and 2.9% Asian American. Females reported earning \$0.00 to \$60,000 ($M = \$17,991.18$, $SD = \$15,566.00$). Male ages ranged from 18-69 ($M = 31.80$, $SD = 11.47$). Male participants were primarily Caucasian (82.9%), with 2.9% Hispanic, 5.7% African American, and 8.6% other. Males reported earning \$0.00 to \$100,000 ($M = \$25,825.59$, $SD = \$20,844.83$). Couples reported being together for 6 months to 17.8 years ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 5.11$) with 54.3% of couples reporting their marital status as single, 40.0% married, and 5.7% divorced.

Procedures

The data for this study were collected from couples who attended a one-hour session together. Partners were given instructions, completed informed consent, and were debriefed at the same time, but were separated into two rooms to complete their questionnaires privately. Participants completed a packet of self-administered questionnaires that included background and demographic measures and measures assessing attachment style, relationship variables, and intimate partner violence. Participants were instructed to respond to the violence questionnaire with reference to their current relationship with the participating partner. Couples were paid \$25.00 for participation in the one-hour session.

Measures

Adult attachment. The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was used to assess adult attachment. The RQ is a widely used self-report measure of adult attachment that contains four short paragraphs describing four attachment patterns: secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing. The RQ attachment ratings show convergent validity with adult attachment interview ratings (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998) and moderately high stability over eight months (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). The RQ has been widely used as a measure of attachment in studies examining intimate partner violence (Bookwala, 2002; Dutton et al., 1994; Kesner & McKenry, 1998; Mauricio & Gormley, 2001; Mahalik et al., 2005; Pistole & Tarrant, 1993).

For this study, the continuous responses on the RQ were coded into the two dimensions of adult attachment: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (see Dutton et al., 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Attachment anxiety was obtained by summing the scores of the two attachment patterns with high anxiety, preoccupied and fearful, and subtracting the sum of the scores of the two attachment patterns with low anxiety, secure and dismissing. Negative scores on the anxiety scale reflect low attachment anxiety and positive scores reflect high attachment anxiety. Similarly, attachment avoidance was obtained by summing the scores of the two attachment patterns with high avoidance, fearful and dismissing, and subtracting the sum of the scores of the two attachment patterns with low avoidance, secure and preoccupied. Negative scores on the avoidance scale reflect low attachment avoidance and positive scores reflect high attachment avoidance. These two dimensions have repeatedly been found to underlie individual differences in attachment style (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Shaver & Hazan, 1993) and are correlated with indicators of violence (Dutton et al., 1994; Smallbone & Dadds, 2001).

Physical violence. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) was used to assess the frequency of male-perpetrated physical violence. The CTS is a self-report inventory consisting of 18 behaviors that one might use during conflict with a partner. Participants rate the extent to which they have experienced each item in the past year on a 7-point Likert scale. These items are broken down into three subscales: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical violence. Only the 8-item physical violence subscale was used in this study. To compensate for potential underreporting, the highest of the female and male partner reports of male-perpetrated violence was used as the estimate of male-perpetrated violence in the past year. The physical violence subscale has good internal consistency with a coefficient alpha of .87 and demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity (Straus, 1979). Factor analysis also demonstrates that the CTS comprises both psychological and physical factors (Barling, O'Leary, Jouriles, Vivian, & MacEwen, 1987). The CTS has been widely used as a measure of male-perpetrated violence in studies examining intimate partner violence (Babcock et al., 2000; Bookwala, 2002; Henderson et al., 1997; Kesner, Julian & McKenry, 1997; Kesner & McKenry, 1998; Mauricio & Gormley, 2001).

Results

Two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship of female and male attachment to male-perpetrated verbal and physical aggression. For each analysis, female attachment anxiety, female attachment avoidance, male attachment anxiety, and male attachment avoidance were entered simultaneously. As hypothesized, results of the regression analyses indicated female attachment anxiety significantly predicted both male-perpetrated verbal and physical aggression, whereas female attachment avoidance did not significantly predict male-perpetrated violence (see Table 1). Contrary to our hypotheses, neither male attachment anxiety nor male attachment avoidance significantly predicted male-perpetrated aggression.

Table 1. Standardized Beta Weights for Male-perpetrated Verbal and Physical Aggression

Standardized Beta Coefficient B		
Predictors	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression
Female Anxiety	.40*	.57**
Female Avoidance	.26	.17
Male Anxiety	.02	-.24
Male Avoidance	-.02	-.02
Adjusted R2	.20*	.27**

*p<.05, **p<.01.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to add to the sparse literature on the relationship between attachment and intimate partner violence by examining both male and female attachment as predictors of male-perpetrated violence. Results supported the hypothesis that female attachment anxiety would predict male-perpetrated violence. In contrast, our results did not support the hypotheses regarding male attachment in that neither male attachment anxiety nor attachment avoidance predicted male-perpetrated violence.

Consistent with previous research linking female preoccupied and fearful attachment to male-perpetrated violence (Henderson et al., 1997), results indicated female attachment anxiety is related to male-perpetrated violence. Contrary to research identifying a relationship between male attachment and male-perpetrated violence (Babock et al., 2000; Dutton et al., 1994; Mahalik et al., 2005; Mauricio & Gormeley, 2001), however, we did not find a significant main effect for either male attachment anxiety or male attachment avoidance. The discrepancy in these findings is likely due to the samples studied, in that this study examined violence in a community sample of couples with low levels of violence, whereas several of the studies linking male attachment style to male-perpetrated violence were conducted with clinical samples of male batterers only. Further, these studies only examined male attachment style and used only the male's report of violence rather than a combined couples' report used in this study.

While the present study contributes to our understanding of the association between attachment relationships and intimate partner violence, several limitations should be noted. First, information in this study was obtained through self-report, potentially leading to biased or distorted reporting. To mitigate this problem, particularly the tendency to underreport perpetration of physical violence, we used a combined report of both partners' reports of violence. Therefore, if either partner reported a violent event, this was added to the violence score. Next, the participants in this study were primarily Caucasian, thus limiting the generalizability of the results. It is also important to note that the levels of violence reported in this community sample are low and, therefore, differentiate this sample from clinical samples used in other research. The violence reported in this study likely reflects "common couple violence" rather than the "patriarchal terrorism" identified as battering used by males to control their partners (Johnson, 1995).

A final interpretational consideration is related to the correlational nature of this study. Theoretically, however, attachment begins in childhood, and thus, precedes romantic relationships. Therefore, it is likely that attachment precedes relationship violence, although this has not been longitudinally demonstrated. A longitudinal design would add to the current literature by addressing the causal direction between attachment and intimate partner violence, as well as the mechanisms that operate to perpetuate this relationship.

The results of this study have both clinical and research implications. Although our results are consistent with Kessner and McKenry (1998), we are not suggesting that females with attachment anxiety are evoking violence from their male partners. However, an association between attachment anxiety and male-perpetrated violence was evident and the specifics of this association remain unclear. These findings suggest for females, being afraid of abandonment and rejection may be a risk factor for becoming a victim of intimate partner violence. Alternatively, exposure to male-perpetrated violence may contribute to the development of attachment anxiety in females. Clinical implications

include providing cognitive interventions to address female attachment anxiety. Addressing attachment as a predictor to intimate partner violence may contribute to a reduction in violence. Future research should focus on an intervention model focusing on attachment patterns to determine if it will decrease the violence levels and increase commitment and satisfaction in relationships.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Diana Dumas for the outstanding mentorship she has offered me not only with this project but the entire process of becoming an academic professional. Her willingness to assist me and provide guidance is unparalleled and greatly appreciated.

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