Published in final edited form as:

J Marital Fam Ther. 2019 July ; 45(3): 521–533. doi:10.1111/jmft.12352.

Adult Attachment Security and Different Types of Relational Violence Victimization among College-Age Couples

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the associations between adult attachment security and different types of intimate partner violence victimization including that of emotional abuse, physical violence and sexual coercion among heterosexual couples. Participants included 87 couples with the mean age 22.3 years. An actor-partner interdependence model was fit to the data. Findings indicated that adult attachment security accounted for 15% of the variance in the emotional abuse victimization of females, 9% of the variance in the sexual coercion victimization of females, and 7% of the variance in minor physical victimization of males. This may significantly impact risk factor assessment, and contribute to improved therapeutic intervention and increased understanding of the development and progression of relationship violence.

Keywords

intimate partner violence; sexual coercion; emotional abuse; attachment; couples

Extensive research has examined the role of early life exposure to violence in the development of psychiatric disorders and the maturation of violent tendencies. For example, childhood experiences of rejection and anxiety have been shown to be associated with dysregulation of affect in later life (Creasey, 2002) and abusive behaviors during adulthood (Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009; Levendosky, Lannert, & Yalch, 2012). Further research has explored how the progression of attachment influences the development of abusive behavior patterns, identifying associations between insecure attachment in adult romantic relationships and abusive patterns of interaction including physical (Fournier, Brassard, & Shaver, 2011; Godbout et al., 2009; Kuijpers, van der Knapp, & Winkel, 2012; Rapoza & Baker, 2008), sexual (Brassard, Shaver & Lussier, 2007), and emotional abuse

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(Crawford & right, 2007; Harper, Austin, Cercone, & Arias, 2005; Riggs, Cusimano, & Benson, 2011).

While some studies have focused on predicting violence and differentiating between adult attachment style and type of violence, these associations are often examined in the context of variables such as interpersonal problems (Lawson & Malnar, 2011), or a history of exposure to violence (Godbout et al., 2009). In contrast, the current research has focused on identifying the variables that mediate between adult attachment style and violent behaviors. Viewing attachment as a continuum rather than in terms of discrete categories allows us to view the construct in a contextual frame. In other words, although adult attachment styles (classic prototypical view) help researchers understand what individuals may do when faced with emotional dysregulation, representation of attachment as a spectrum can provide insights into the dynamics of these regulation strategies (Lin, Wampler & Wampler, 2014). Furthermore, the identification of differences in how attachment security relates to variation in different manifestations of victimization could better equip clinicians in guiding treatment for specific types of victimization. Hence, the purpose of this study is to focus on the associations between attachment insecurity and various types of victimization in couples drawn from a group of university students.

Attachment Theory as it Relates to Intimate Partner Violence

John Bowlby's and Mary Ainsworth's (1991) investigations on mother-child interactions defined attachment as a strong emotional bond. Attachment security involves a behavioral system, which is based on the balance between proximity seeking (closeness), with a desire to explore (independence). In this system, attachment provides a secure base for the individual (Posada, 2013). Secure attachment fosters normative development that is carried out to adulthood through internal working models (IWMs) (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). IWMs are rapid and well conserved information processing systems undergirded by a cognitive set of beliefs about oneself, others, and the world. These beliefs provide information about how to manage distress. They also represent expectations about how needs are responded to (Krakauer, 2014).

Adult attachment styles based on IWMs in key relationships are usually conceptualized as either insecure or secure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Internal beliefs that one is worthy of love and support are linked with secure attachment patterns (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Secure attachment tends to result from experiences of consistent responsiveness to needs and signals of distress (Johnson, 2003). It is characterized by the ability to trust others and make commitments (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2003). In well-functioning relationships, secure attachment alleviates fear, minimizes the threatening appraisal of events that would weaken security and instead, activates proximity seeking. Security in adult attachment relationships can also be observed through comfort with closeness, open communication, and being able to be vulnerable in relationships (Groh, Roisman, van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012; Schachner et al., 2003). With attachment theory as a backdrop, we will review past and more recent research studies on various forms of aggression (physical, emotional, and sexual) to identify key associates of these variables in the literature. The aim of the current study was to associate

variation in various types of victimization. However, for the sake of comprehensive review in this area, we have included studies that focus on aggression as well.

Physical Abuse

Past studies indicate that violent men report significantly higher levels of relationship anxiety, fear of being abandoned in relationships, and higher levels of anxious attachment to their partners than non-violent men (Holzworth-Munroe, Stuart, & Hutchinson, 1997). Insecure men also tend to report perpetrating more severe violence (Godbout et al., 2009). In addition to a direct association between exposure to violence, lack of attachment security, and subsequent perpetration, researchers discovered that childhood exposure to violence also indirectly predicted violence through low attachment security for both men and women (Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen, & Johnson, 2003). Godbout et al. (2009), found associations between childhood exposure to violence and adult relationship maladjustment. Rapoza and Baker (2008) noted that, in comparison to their non-violent counterparts, physically violent male partners tended to use more alcohol, had experienced physical abuse from both parents, and were anxiously attached to and in longer relationships with their female partner. Physically violent female partners also reported longer relationships with their male partners, more physical abuse from their fathers, higher levels of alcohol use, and more aggressive alcohol expectancies than non-violent female partners (Rapoza and Baker, 2008). Male victims of physical female partner abuse had experienced more physical abuse from their mothers, reported higher levels of alcohol use, and reciprocate violence in their relationship (Rapoza and Baker, 2008). On the other hand, when Kuijpers, van der Knapp and Winkel (2012) looked at the possible contributors to variation in having been victimized, they identified attachment avoidance coupled with higher levels of anger in victims as a risk factor. The authors suggested that those who are avoidantly attached are more likely to experience victimization due to the perpetrating partner's dysfunctional attempts to engage the avoidant partner through aggression.

Emotional abuse

Attachment security and insecurity appear to play an important role in victimization as well as perpetration of not only physical but emotional abuse within intimate relationships. Low levels of attachment security resulting from the experience of being criticized and rejected, or being told that one is unwanted or worthless, may have a deleterious effect on the healthy development of adult relationships (Riggs et al., 2011). The role of attachment security has also been investigated in the context of attempts to work through relational impasses. For instance, in problem solving situations, insecure individuals have been found to be more rejecting, less supportive, and less likely to rely on and trust each other (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Similarly, during a conflict management exercise, attachment anxiety has been found to be related to higher hostility levels, lack of mutual negotiation, and the use of coercion, pressure, threats, blame and verbal aggression (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). However, there is some evidence that these patterns can be ameliorated. For instance, past studies have shown an association between attachment security and constructive communication skills that might lessen the use of violence, aggression, and psychological abuse in arguments (Lawson & Malnar, 2011). Studies conducted with undergraduate students show that memories of psychological abuse during childhood

predicted both the perpetration and victimization of relationship aggression and conflict in later life (Crawford & Wright, 2007; Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007).

Sexual Coercion

Childhood attachment relationships with parents provide a context for children to learn mutual trust, receiving and giving care, along with negotiating closeness, distance and power. It is also within these first relational contexts that they learn about developing empathy and intimacy (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Once formed, these relational bonds carry attachment related emotions, expectations, goals, and behavioral strategies forward that influence many aspects of a person's social relationships, including sex (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Attachment security facilitates a positive and stable foundation for sexual engagement with a romantic partner (Brassard et al., 2007). Studies conducted on sexual coercion found evidence to support the relationship between childhood attachment and coercive sexual behavior (Smallbone & Dadds, 2000). Particularly, findings indicate that lower levels of attachment security are associated with lower levels of both sexual arousal and satisfaction (Flicker & Moore, 2002), higher probability of exerting physical coercion to have sex, and higher probability of being forced to participate in sexual intercourse (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003).

Current Study

Previous studies on the relationship between attachment and intimate partner violence (IPV) can be grouped into two main approaches. The first approach is represented by research that have identified key predictors of adult attachment style and conceptualized it as the mechanism between these predictors and the incidence of violence (Holzworth-Munroe et al., 1997; Brassard et al., 2007). The second approach, on the other hand, focused on the presence of mediators between adult attachment style and the incidence of violence (Corcoran, & Mallinckrodt, 2000; Doumas et al., 2008). Both paths of inquiry have led to a deeper understanding of the highly textured and complex terrain of intimate violence. In the present study, in contrast to the two established approaches, we aim to examine how attachment security, conceptualized on a continuum, is directly and proximately related to variance in different types of intimate violence victimization. This study contributes to the existing body of research by correlating attachment security and style with IPV victimization. Our use of dyadic data will add to the literature, focusing on victimization to elucidate attachment as a risk factor and a possible therapeutic target for IPV prevention.

It is important to note that our approach here does not dismiss the presence of mediating factors between attachment security and various types of violence. On the contrary, we hope that drawing connections between attachment security and specific types of violence may help inform and guide the search for the complex mechanisms by which attachment may influence and be informed by intimate violence. Furthermore, this study is designed to contribute a multi-modal conceptualization of attachment security by utilizing not only self-report measures that classify participants into different adult attachment styles, but also narrative representations that assess secure base phenomena by tapping into cognitive,

emotional and relational underpinnings of attachment security. Specifically, the primary aim of the current study is to explore the association between different types of violence (physical assault, psychological aggression and sexual coercion) in couples and the anxious and avoidant dimensions of insecure attachment, mental model of self and others, as well as secure base phenomena in both men and women.

We propose the following hypotheses:

- 1) Men and women with higher levels of attachment security (as scored by validated scales) will associate with less frequent physical victimization than men/women with lower levels of attachment security.
- 2) Men and women with higher levels of attachment security (as scored by validated scales) will associate with less frequent emotional victimization than men/women with lower levels of attachment security.
- 3) Men and women with higher levels of attachment security (as scored by validated scales) will associate with less frequent sexual victimization than men/women with lower levels of attachment security.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 87 heterosexual couples who are currently involved with each other. The average age of participants in the sample was 22.04 years ($SD = 4.57$) for females and 22.81 years ($SD = 5.21$) for males, ranging from 18 to 53. The average length of relationship in the sample was 32 months, ranging from 1 month up to 16 years. Of the 87 dyads, 8 of the couples had been dating for less than 6 months, 19 couples had a relationship length between 6 to 20 months, and 31 of the couples had been in a relationship for more than 20 months. 87% of the couples who participated in this study were unmarried at the time. Most of the participants were Caucasian ($n = 102$, 70 %), while 9% ($n = 13$) were Asian, 8% ($n = 11$) were African American, and 6% ($n = 9$) were Hispanic. It is important to note that this sample was not specifically violent, and violence was not a factor in recruitment, although statistics show that situational couple violence is more common among younger dating couples (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Additionally, it should be noted that this was not a clinical sample.

Procedures

Data was collected from a large university in the Midwestern United States. Participants were recruited through announcements in various college classrooms. Specifically, researchers distributed fliers in the classroom with contact information. Interested participants contacted the research team to arrange a meeting. During this meeting a consent process was conducted; after participants were informed about the study, they signed the consent form. Participants then filled out the self-report measures and provided a conclusion regarding a series of brief attachment based vignettes. This whole process took about 60 to 90 minutes. Participants received extra credit in a college course for their participation.

Rationale for recruiting from a university setting was ease of access to a large supply of potential participants, and proximity of participants to the research site.

Measures

Demographic Information: Information about demographic characteristics and current romantic relationships of the participants was collected. The questions on participants' characteristics included age, gender, race, education level, and SES.

Attachment Measures

Narrative Representations.—In order to assess secure base representational knowledge, participants were asked to complete stories about relationships (Waters, Rodrigues, & Ridgeway, 1998). Collecting stories from participants lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Participants were presented with four sets of attachment related scenarios with word prompts to guide their story completion. The four-story outlines that were given to participants involved either romantic partners or mother and child/baby dyads. Participants were given time to look over the outlines, and then their story completion and elaboration was recorded for later transcription. The story stems included familiar conditions that were expected to elicit attachment themes. Two stories were about adult relationships: “Jane and Bob’s camping trip,” and “The accident.” The mother-child stories were titled “Baby’s morning” and “The doctor’s office.” Scoring procedures included both content elaboration and prototypic scriptedness of the story completions, ranging from 1 (no secure base script) to 7 (secure base script) (Waters et al., 1998). Prototypic scriptedness is a way to analyze key cognitive features which underlie individuals’ attachment representations (Waters et al., 1998). The prototypic secure base script has several key components, including the tendency to explore far from the caregiver, contact with the caregiver in times of need, offering help and support when threats or difficulties arise, providing physical comfort when needed, helping to resolve difficult situations, and helping to return to exploration. These scripts are standard, and validity has been assessed by several researchers, even in different cultural settings (Vaughn et al., 2007). Cohen’s Kappa for interrater reliability between two raters was .80. The authors have used this procedure before, and examples of high and low scoring stories can be found in a previous publication (Karakurt, Silver & Keiley, 2016).

Experiences in Close Relationships: The ECR measures anxiety and avoidance dimensions of adult attachment security (Brennan, Clark, and Shaver, 1998). It consists of 36 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale. Higher scores in the anxiety dimension indicate higher levels of anxiety about rejection by others and feelings of personal unworthiness with respect to interpersonal relationships. Items such as “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them” were asked as a part of the anxiety subscale, which has 18 items. Higher scores in the avoidance dimension indicate higher levels of interpersonal distrust and avoidance of closeness with others. Items such as “Just when my partner starts to get close to me I find myself pulling away” were asked as a part of the avoidance subscale, which also has 18 items. In the current study, the avoidance dimension for females had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .88$ and the anxiety dimension of attachment had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .91$, while for males the avoidance dimension had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .93$ and the anxiety dimension of attachment had an alpha of $\alpha = .91$.

Relationship Questionnaire (RQ): RQ measures four adult attachment prototypes (secure, preoccupied (anxious), fearful and dismissing (avoidant)) via four short paragraphs (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In this questionnaire, participants were asked to rate their degree of correspondence with each paragraph on a 7-point scale. They were also asked to pick the paragraph that described them best. Test-retest reliability of the RQ was demonstrated as $\alpha = .70$ over an 8-month period (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Previous studies have demonstrated that the RQ has Satisfactory construct validity e.g., Bartholomew and Horowitz, (1991). The RQ was also used to calculate underlying attachment models. The mental model of self was calculated through the summation of the secure and dismissing (avoidant) scores, followed by the subtraction of the fearful and preoccupied (anxious) scores. Similarly, the mental model of others was calculated by adding the secure and preoccupied (anxious) scores and then subtracting the fearful and dismissing (avoidant) scores.

Violence Measures

Conflict Tactic Scale: In order to assess relationship violence, items from the modified version of the *Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2)* were used (Straus, Hamby, McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The CTS2 has 78 items, and it includes a list of actions. Participants are asked to mark the number of times they and/or their partners engaged in each of these actions. Items such as “I insulted or swore at my partner” were asked as a part of the psychological aggression subscale. Items such as “I pushed, grabbed, or hit my partner” were asked as a part of the physical aggression subscale. Items such as “I insisted on sex when my partner did not want to (but did not use physical force)” were asked as a part of the sexual coercion subscale. For each item in the scale, the statements are also restructured by replacing the subject with “my partner.” Physical assault, sexual coercion and psychological aggression variables were created by averaging the self-report on the frequency of being a victim of that action and the partner report on the frequency of perpetrating that action. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .80$ for female psychological aggression victimization, $\alpha = .77$ for female physical assault, and $\alpha = .70$ for female sexual coercion. For male participants, Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .69$ for male psychological aggression victimization, $\alpha = .79$ for male physical assault, $\alpha = .69$ and for male sexual coercion. For creating the composite variables, items from the CTS2 were used rather than the subscales. It should be noted that all participants were asked to respond regarding their current relationship only, even if they had not yet been together for 12 months.

Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ): The EAQ assesses verbal abuse, sexual abuse and threatening behavior (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). It has 66 items and each item is rated on a 4-point frequency scale (Never to Very Often). The EAQ has four subscales: isolation, degradation, sexual abuse, and property damage. Items such as “My partner tries to control whom I spend time with” were asked as a part of the isolation subscale, which has 24 items. Items such as “My partner humiliates me in front of others” were asked as a part of the degradation subscale, which has 28 items. Items such as “My partner makes me engage in sexual practices I consider perverse” were asked as a part of the sexual abuse subscale, which has 7 items. Items such as “My partner threatens to break things that are valuable to me” were asked as a part of the property damage subscale, which also has 7 items. In the

current study, we used the whole scale; alpha was $\alpha = .83$ for female emotional abuse and $\alpha = .94$ for male emotional abuse.

Composite Variables

An *attachment security* composite variable was created by using the different dimensions of attachment for more comprehensive understanding. Specifically, we averaged the secure base representational knowledge, the model of self and model of others, and the negatively keyed anxiety and avoidance dimensions of attachment. The resultant composite variable measured attachment security.

A *physical abuse* composite variable was created by averaging the items from the revised CTS (including injury and physical assault subscales). Higher scores indicated higher levels of 'physical abuse' victimization. Reliability of the physical abuse victimization composite variable was $\alpha = .71$ for females, and $\alpha = .78$ for males. Initial statistics indicated that the physical abuse variables for both males and females were not normally distributed. In order to achieve normality, quantile normalization was utilized.

The *emotional abuse* composite variable was created by averaging the emotional abuse questionnaire (the EAQ) and psychological aggression victimization subscale of the revised CTS. Higher scores indicated higher levels of emotional abuse victimization. Reliability of the emotional abuse victimization composite variable was $\alpha = .89$ for females, and $\alpha = .93$ for males. In order to achieve normality, quantile normalization was utilized.

A *sexual coercion* variable was created by averaging the sexual coercion subscale of the CTS and the sexual abuse subscale of the EAQ. Higher scores indicated higher levels of 'sexual coercion' victimization. Reliability of the sexual coercion victimization composite variable was $\alpha = .69$ for females, and $\alpha = .70$ for males. Normality was achieved through utilizing quantile normalization.

Results

Descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation values, and the inter-correlations for scores on attachment security and victimization variables are presented in Table 1.

Data analysis

Statistical Analysis - Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) with Path Analysis—Due to the dyadic nature of the data, each participant's responses could not be considered as independent from their partners (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Therefore, dyadic data was analyzed with the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook, & Kenny, 2005). By including both actor effects (modeled associations between one partner's predictive and outcome variables) and partner effects (modeled associations between one partner's predictive variables and the other partner's outcome variables), the APIM allows for modeling of variables across dyads. In other words, APIM employs multilevel modeling that allows for individual data to be nested and analyzed in a dyadic unit (Miller & Johnson, 2014). Furthermore, in our analysis, all the variables were entered to the model simultaneously to account for the co-occurrence of the three types of relationship violence,

rather than having a separate model for each of the three types of relationship violence. This way the shared variance between these three types of relationship violence in the same relationship was modelled through the matrices (Maximum Likelihood Modeling).

In the current study, the APIM model was fit and tested using path analysis to examine the relationship between male and female scores on attachment security as well as different types of intimate violence (emotional abuse, sexual coercion and physical assault). In this particular model, each partner's adult attachment style can be associated with variation in their own victimization of various types. Additionally, APIM allowed us to simultaneously model the association between one partner's adult attachment style and the other partner's victimization of various types. SPSS and AMOS 22 were chosen as the software packages with which to conduct the analyses. AMOS uses all available data for parameter estimation under the assumption that data are missing at random, with the full-information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) feature to appropriately account for missing data (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Model fit was assessed by the following criteria: $\chi^2/df < 5$, (Wheaton, Muthen, & Alwin, 1977) as well as AGFI and confirmatory fit index (CFI).

APIM findings indicate that the proposed model provides a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(9, N=87) = 11.203, p > .05$) in that the ratio of χ^2 statistics to the degrees of freedom was 1.25. Figure 1 presents the findings of this analysis. Results also indicated that the model provided a good fit to the data, as demonstrated with high values for AGFI = .99 and CFI = .98, together with an acceptable value of RMSEA = .05. It should be noted that high values of AGFI and CFI demonstrate better fit to the data, while low values of RMSEA indicate better fit to the data (Wheaton, Muthen, & Alwin, 1977). The significant standardized actor and partner effects relating to those victimization variables are summarized in Figure 1. Correlation coefficients (r) are presented below, indicating the level of interaction between actor/partner security and victimization effects. These values are noted in Figure 1, along with double-headed arrows to illustrate bi-directionality of the effects.

Results of estimated actor effects: Significant actor effects for females exist and indicate that female attachment security has a significant, negative direct effect on female emotional abuse victimization ($\beta = -.21, r = -.35, p < .01$) and female sexual coercion victimization ($\beta = -.18, r = -.30, p < .05$), controlling for all else in the model. However, female attachment security had no significant actor effects on female physical violence. No significant male actor effects were identified for male emotional abuse, physical violence, or sexual coercion victimization.

Results of estimated partner effects: Female attachment security does not have any significant partner effects on male emotional abuse, physical violence, or sexual coercion victimization variables. A significant partner effect for males does exist, indicating that male attachment security has a significant partner effect on female physical violence victimization ($\beta = -.20, r = -.27, p < .05$), controlling for all else in the model. Male attachment security has no significant partner effects on female emotional abuse or sexual coercion victimization variables.

Given the above stated β and r values, it is clear that attachment security has a negative effect on IPV variables. The fitted model accounted for 15% variance of the female emotional abuse victimization, 9% variance of the female physical violence victimization, 9% variance of female sexual coercion victimization, 6% variance of male sexual coercion victimization, 7% variance of male physical violence victimization, and finally 7% variance of male emotional abuse victimization. Although small portions of variation in male victimization were accounted for by the model, none of the regression paths relating to male victimization were statistically significant. We also conducted post hoc power analysis with AMOS, using R^2 statistics based on Lowry and Gaskin (2014)'s method, in combination with Kenny, Kash and Cook (2006)'s method. Results indicated enough power for the estimations.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess the association between attachment security and the victimization of emotional abuse, sexual coercion, and physical violence in heterosexual dyadic relationships. Our results partially support the notion that low attachment security is associated with higher risk of victimization (Kuijpers, van der Knapp & Winkel, 2012). In the current study, the results suggest that securely attached women are less likely to be victims of emotional and sexual abuse, or that attachment insecurity is associated with victimization. While our data show that insecure attachment is associated with IPV victimization, longitudinal studies are needed to determine if secure attachment reduces susceptibility to abusive relationships, or if IPV causes victims to develop attachment insecurity. Furthermore, our findings indicate that an individual's attachment security in and of itself can be related to variation in that individual's victimization, even when controlling for the partner's attachment security. This is in contrast to previous research, which primarily highlights the *perpetrator's* emotional state as an important contributor to psychological and other types of victimization (Higgins & McCabe, 2003; Riggs et al., 2011).

This study also demonstrates that individual attachment security in this population sample did not significantly relate to variation in partner emotional/sexual abuse victimization. It is important to recognize that the cross-sectional nature of this study is such that the relationship between secure attachment and emotional/sexual abuse may be reversed, meaning emotional abuse and sexual coercion victimization may actually influence the presence or absence of attachment security in women. We did not identify similar actor effects for men, possibly indicating gender-specific experiences of sexual and emotional intimacy, but further research would be required to verify such a theory. Previous literature suggests no such gender differences when using adult attachment style to predict victimization by physical or psychological abuse. However, these results are consistent with our previous research into secure base narrative representations and IPV, where we found that secure base representational knowledge has no significant actor or partner effects for males, but significant negative direct actor and partner effects for females (Karakurt, Silver & Keiley, 2016).

In the current study, the findings suggest that male attachment security is related to variation in female physical violence victimization when controlling for all else in the model. It also appears that female attachment insecurity did not explain variance in either male or female physical violence victimization. Fournier and colleagues (2011) looked for mechanisms that explain the association between attachment security and violence. They found that attachment anxiety of male partners in heterosexual relationships was associated significantly with physical abuse. Doumas, Pearson, Elgin, and McKinley (2008) found that attachment anxiety of females was associated with both male and female physical violence perpetration. They also found that mismatch of male avoidance and female anxiety is related to physical violence among couples. Given existing literature, we expected to observe an inverse effect between violence perpetration and attachment security, and in this research we did see that correlation for males, where male attachment security had a significant effect on female physical abuse victimization. This finding is consistent with past research, which has often found perpetrator emotional state and attachment strategies to be primarily predictive of violence, rather than those of the victim. For example, in heterosexual couples where there had been male perpetration of violence, Allison, Bartholomew, Mayseless & Dutton (2008) found that violence was used as a mechanism for forcing the attention of one's partner as a "pursuit" effort or as a means of pushing a partner away in an attempt to "distance" (p. 125). Additionally, our previous analysis showed that female attachment insecurity as assessed by secure base narrative representations has a significant partner effect on male psychological and physical abuse victimization, perhaps as a dysfunctional response to unrecognized or unmet needs for support (Karakurt, Silver & Keiley, 2016).

The link between demand/withdrawal pattern and intimate partner violence was also demonstrated by Berns, Jacobson, and Gottman (1999). It is interesting that the same effect was not observed for female attachment in the current study. We did not identify any effect of actor/partner adult attachment styles on any type of male victimization, and only observed a male actor effect for physical violence perpetration. It is possible that cultural expectations associated with gender influence the relationship between adult attachment style and victimization/perpetration (Founier, Brassard, & Shaver, 2011). Societal and cultural influences on 'normal' gender-specific behavior traits may significantly affect the association and interplay of attachment and IPV. In fact, Moore et al. (2008) found that stress relating to various domains of masculine gender role representations predicted different types of aggression. Moore and colleagues discussed how gender role stress (such as the fear or failing in domains such as work, sexual performance, or wanting to avoid appearing feminine) were predictive of coercion and abuse of differing types. This brings to bear the importance of not only understanding how attachment relates to violence victimization and perpetration, but also understanding the potential gender-based fears that undergird attachment presentations in romantic relationships.

Limitations and future research

Although our findings lead to further areas of inquiry, including expanding our understanding of what attachment processes can account for partner victimization and how to measure them, the current study is not without limitation. In addition to acknowledging

the presence of a direct negative effect linking attachment security to violence, the study results indicate further information on specific potential mechanisms of influence.

This persistent association between male and female perpetration of various types of violence, controlling for attachment security in the relationship, is evidence of the myriad factors which must be considered to explain variation in violence. Therefore, further research in this area to continue to texturize and boost understanding of the complex processes of IPV is important. The current study focused on heterosexual relationships. Some gender differentials were discovered in the patterns of association of our study variables. Namely, the associations between attachment and IPV victimization were variable for men and women. As such, it will be important to understand how gender influences the meaning of attachment security. There is a definite need to understand what potential moderators and mediators may operate in the association of attachment security and violence perpetration. Future publications will present data regarding attachment security and aggression.

Another limitation of the study may arise from drawing participants from a university sample. The sample size was also limiting, which influences the generalizability of the findings reported here. To understand how the results we identified demonstrate the role of attachment security in IPV victimization, it will be necessary to conduct further research with a considerably larger and more diverse sample.

Clinical implications

The most poignant clinical implication of these findings may be the potential importance of attachment security in preventing victimization, or inversely, the power of different types of violence to disrupt attachment security in intimate relationships. While we do not explore ways to enhance attachment security in this study, many studies have looked at emotional regulation as a way to modulation attachment (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Enhancing attachment security through the targeting of emotional regulation processes of both victims and perpetrators may be a critical factor in preventing victimization, as this may reduce perpetrators' abusive behaviors and may reduce victims' vulnerability by increasing resilience. Shaver and Mikulincer (2007) endorse the possibility of the renegotiation of emotion regulation strategies in the context of explaining the early etiology of adult attachment style and its generally stable maintenance over time. As such, we would advocate for the use of clinical strategies that support flexible emotion regulation strategies in adults who are at risk for IPV perpetration or victimization. Additionally, there are differing theoretical reasons for violence in those with various adult attachment styles (Kuijpers, van der Knapp & Winkel, 2012). As such, the expression of violence in the context of avoidant versus anxious attachment may hold very different implications for relationships as well as for intervention strategies.

While the findings of this study cannot be generalized without care to any individual client couple, it is important for therapists to be mindful in their work with heterosexual couples that gender may play an important role in understanding the process of violence in a couple. This points us to continued research in this area to uncover other associated variables that account for the variation in victimization of an emotional, sexual, and physical nature for

men and women. Results of this study might eventually be used to determine risk factors for screening, or even to implement specific treatments tailored around attachment security, but extensive research is still needed before clinicians can begin adjusting therapeutic strategies in response to this data.

It is also important to note that the current findings offer another key conceptualization to consider in understanding female victimization, particularly of emotional abuse. Assessing adult attachment style may open a critical window into understanding how low levels of female attachment security are a part of a relational cycle which may be caused by emotional/sexual abuse or may predispose an individual to heightened risk of emotional/sexual abuse. An area for further exploration is how attachment security reflects the safety and security of one's partner. That is to say, a new and meaningful part of measuring dyadic attachment could involve asking respondents how they care for and protect the emotional, physical and sexual security of their partners. This could better enlighten clinicians and researchers alike as to how partners' attachment (particularly anxious or avoidant attachment styles) in the relationship may facilitate the development of negative relationship dynamics, which in turn create an environment conducive to an increased risk of IPV. Indeed, this study and related future research examining attachment security as a risk factor for IPV victimization and perpetration would directly impact family therapists. If attachment insecurity can be definitively linked to a propensity to commit IPV or a vulnerability to exploitation through abuse, therapists may have a valid therapeutic target to significantly reduce perpetration and victimization. This is incredibly important, for the countless victims trapped in an abusive relationship but unable or unwilling to seek help, for the individuals who are on the verge of perpetrating abuse, and for the vulnerable individuals who are not yet victims but are at risk of future violence and abuse by a romantic partner.

Conclusion

Our data shows that insecure attachment among women is associated with IPV victimization, and that male attachment insecurity is associated with female physical violence victimization. The dyadic nature of this data adds considerably to the literature on attachment security and IPV. It will propel research into clinical interventions for IPV prevention and treatment, aiding in the identification of risk factors and therapeutic targets. It is crucial to note that accounting for variation in victimization seems to be a process of knowing what type of victimization is being investigated, and whose attachment security is used as a predictor: that of the self or one's partner. In short, this study is a step toward understanding the role attachment plays in the victimization of violence in dyadic relationships, and further studies examining similar questions are critical to advance our understanding and intervention in relational violence.

Acknowledgments

This publication was made possible in part by NIH/NCRR CTSA KL2TR000440. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH.

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Figure 1.

Path Analysis: Attachment, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual coercion (non-standardized coefficients with estimated correlations in parentheses).

Table 1.

Summary of Intercorrelations for Scores on Attachment Security, Sexual Coercion, Physical Violence, and Emotional abuse for Males (N=87), and Females (N=87)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Female Attachment Security M=.12, S.D. = 1.59	—							
2. Female Emotional Abuse Victimization M=.99, S.D. =.18	-.41**	—						
3. Female Sexual Coercion Victimization M=1.85, S.D. =.35	-.32*	.30*	—					
4. Female Physical Violence Victimization M=.05, S.D. =.10	-.12	.51***	-.00	—				
5. Male Attachment Security M=.54, S.D. = 1.26	.05	-.16	-.00	-.28	—			
6. Male Emotional abuse Victimization M= 1.12, S.D. = .28	-.03	.47**	.27	.37*	-.22	—		
7. Male Sexual Coercion Victimization M=.32, S.D. = .32	.23*	-.27	.86***	.02	-.04	.38*	—	
8. Male Physical Violence Victimization M=.10, S.D. =.18	-.24	.39**	.24	.70***	-.19	.56***	.21	—

* $p<.05$

** $p<.01$

*** $p<.001$