Journal of Family Violence, Vol. 20, No. 4, August 2005 (© 2005)
DOI: 10.1007/s10896-005-5985-y

When Loving Means Hurting: An Exploration of Attachment and Intimate Abuse In a Community Sample

Antonia J. Z. Henderson,[1,3] Kim Bartholomew,[1,3] Shanna J. Trinke,[2] and Marilyn J. Kwong[1]

Intimate relationship abuse can be understood by considering two critical tenets of attachment. First, attachment fulfills a basic need for survival. Thus, the tenacity of the attachment bond is independent of relationship quality. Second, individuals whose attachment needs have been frustrated may strike out violently to regain proximity to the perceived loss of an intimate partner. We examined how individual differences in attachment were associated with women's and men's relationship abuse. A telephone survey assessed levels of psychological and physical abuse in 1249 Vancouver residents. Of these, 128 completed an attachment interview exploring their interpersonal relationships. Hierarchical regressions revealed that attachment variables contributed significant variance to prediction of both receipt and perpetration of psychological and physical abuse, with preoccupied attachment acting as an independent predictor. There was no evidence that gender moderated these associations. The findings suggest that attachment preoccupation in either partner may increase likelihood of abuse in couples.

KEY WORDS: intimate abuse; relationship abuse; adult attachment; attachment behavior.

INTRODUCTION

How do we understand relationships in which abuse appears to be inextricably linked with intimacy? How is it that someone can love, defend, and remain attached to a partner who is psychologically or physically abusive? And how is it that an individual can be assaultive toward someone whom he or she can't bear to be without? These apparent paradoxes can be understood by looking at two critical tenets of attachment. First, attachment fulfills a basic need for survival (Bowlby, 1988). Thus, the tenacity of the attachment bond is dependent more on maintaining a link to the perceived safety of the attachment figure than to the quality of the attachment relationship. Second, individuals whose attachment needs have been frustrated throughout their relationship history and who feel particularly vulnerable to the potential loss of an attachment figure may strike out violently in order to regain proximity to an intimate partner (Bartholomew *et al*., 2001). In the following subsections of this introduction, we expand on this attachment model, explore how it relates to intimate abuse, and review previous research on attachment and relationship abuse. Then we proceed to overview the current study.

Attachment

According to attachment theory, internal representations or *working models* of close attachment relationships begin in childhood and are incorporated into the developing personality structure, eventually guiding the formation of later social relations outside the family (Bowlby, 1973). Bowlby proposed that these internal working models reflect the extent to which individuals believe themselves worthy of love and attention from others (the self-model) and the extent to which they believe that others will

[1]Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
[2]University of Manitoba, Dauphin, Manitoba, Canada.
[3]To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6; e-mail: bartholo@sfu.ca and zamoyska@shaw.ca.

respond to them in a supportive way (the other model). Research in adult peer attachment originated with Hazan and Shaver (1987) who demonstrated conceptual parallels between affectional bonds that are formed between adults and affectional bonds formed between children and their caregivers. Throughout development, changes occur in the content and structure of an individual's attachment relationships, shifting from asymmetric complimentary attachments (such as the infant–caregiver relationship) to more symmetric or reciprocal attachments (such as adult romantic attachment relationships). Hazan and Zeifman (1994) found that the transfer from complimentary to reciprocal attachments is gradual and that during early adulthood sexual partners tend to ascend to the top of the attachment hierarchy and assume the position as primary attachment figures.

To assess individual differences in adult attachment orientations, Bartholomew incorporated Bowlby's conception of self and other representations in a two-dimensional model of adult attachment (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Bartholomew identified four prototypic attachment patterns in terms of the intersection of Bowlby's two dimensions of self and other (see Fig. 1). The positivity of the self-dimension, or one's sense of internalized self-worth, is reflected in an individual's tendency to be self-confident rather than anxious in close relationships. The positivity of the other dimension, or the perceived supportiveness of close others, is reflected in a tendency to seek out others for support, rather than avoid intimacy. The *secure* pattern (positive view of self and others) is characterized by high self-esteem, and an ability to establish and maintain close intimate bonds with others without losing a sense of self. The *fearful* pattern (negative view of self and others) is characterized by low self-esteem and active avoidance of intimacy due to fear of rejection. This fear, however, is coupled with a desire for social contact and approval, resulting in conflicting attachment needs of closeness and distance. The *preoccupied* pattern (negative view of self and positive view of others) is characterized by low self-worth, excessive dependency on others' love and approval in close relationships, and an overinvolved, demanding interpersonal style. The *dismissing* pattern (positive view of self and negative view of others) is characterized by a compulsive self-reliance and a defensive downplaying of the importance of intimate relationships.

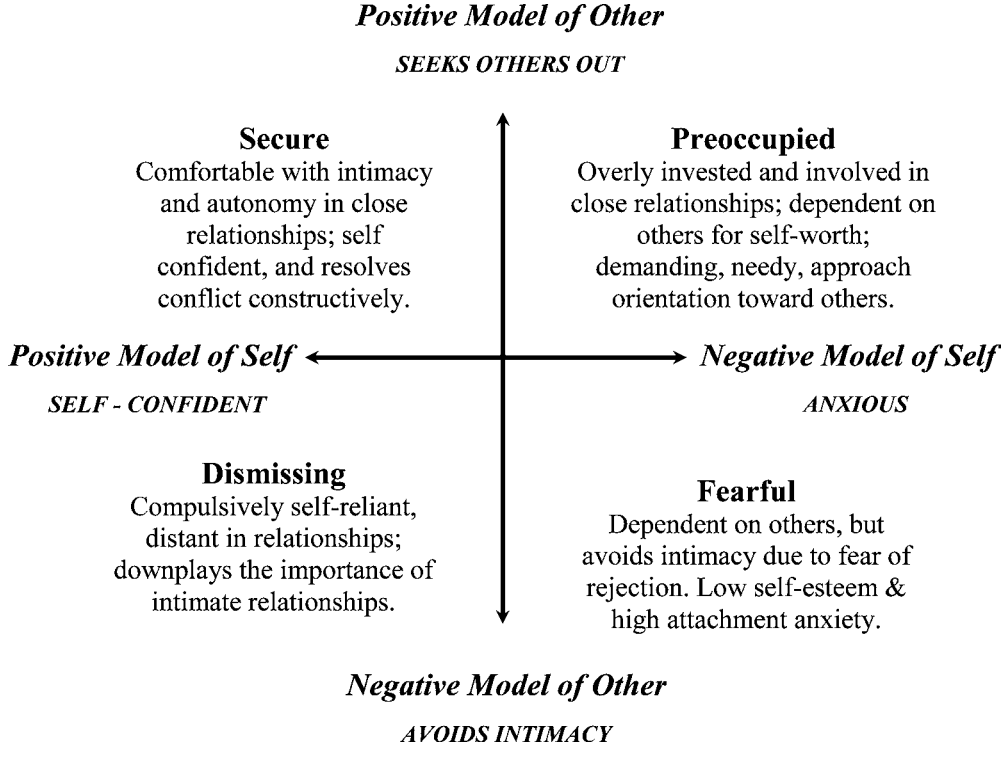

Fig. 1. Bartholomew's two-dimensional model of attachment.

Attachment and Abuse Victimization

Bowlby (1973, 1982) maintained that the strength of attachment bonds is unrelated to quality of attachment relationships. Threatened individuals will seek proximity to their attachment figure, thereby activating the *attachment system* and facilitating the formation of attachment bonds. Moreover, individuals will seek proximity to an attachment figure even when the attachment figure is the original source of the threat. Further, because a punitive attachment figure will set up the circumstances for the attachment system to be activated, the attachment bond will not only persist but may even be actively enhanced (Bowlby, 1982). For instance, a parent's rejection of a child's efforts to be close often evokes precisely the opposite effect to what was intended. Fearful that proximity to the parent is being jeopardized, a child may become even more clingy in an effort to maintain proximity (see Crittenden, 1988, 1992).

Although Bowlby's theory may be applicable to any victimized individual, this concept has been most extensively applied to battered women. Dutton and Painter (1981) proposed a theory of traumatic bonding, which suggests that the power imbalance and intermittency of abuse typical of abusive relationships enhances the strength of emotional bonds to abusive partners. This theory was validated in a study by Dutton and Painter (1993), which showed that women were more strongly attached to their assaultive partners when there was more abuse and the abuse was inconsistent. Dutton and Painter's theory incorporates the concept of attachment processes, but does not address individual differences in attachment which may be associated with the receipt of relationship abuse. In a sample of women who had recently left an abusive relationship, Henderson *et al*. (1997) found that 88% of the women had a predominant attachment pattern associated with a negative self-model (fearful or preoccupied), at least double that of a typical nonclinical sample (e.g., Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Further, findings suggested that preoccupied women may be at increased risk for returning to abusive partners (based on their ratings of intentions and feelings), whereas fearful women may have more difficulty disengaging initially (based on abusive relationships of longer duration). Associations between attachment anxiety and abuse receipt also have been found for both men and women in college samples (e.g., Bartholomew *et al*., 2001; Roberts & Noller, 1998).

Attachment and Abuse Perpetration

There also is evidence of an association between attachment anxiety and perpetration of violence, with research focusing predominantly on male perpetration. Dutton and associates found that assaultive men were more likely to be fearful and preoccupied and less likely to be secure than a matched comparison group (Dutton *et al*., 1994). Further, fearfulness and preoccupation were positively correlated with the perpetration of psychological abuse and a constellation of dysfunctional personality traits (anger, jealousy, Borderline Personality Organization, and trauma). Dutton and colleagues explain these findings in terms of "intimacy anger," suggesting that a violent man's assaultive episodes represent an adult parallel to the angry protest behavior exhibited by an infant when separated from an attachment figure. They suggest that a man's violence is often precipitated by the perceived loss of an attachment partner and demonstrates an active effort to bring the attachment figure back. Thus, both fearful and preoccupied individuals, characterized by attachment anxiety, are at risk for high levels of intimacy-anger.

Associations between attachment anxiety and male intimate violence have been replicated in nonclinical samples. Notably, Holtzworth-Munroe *et al*. (1997) found that violent men, relative to nonviolent men, reported being more anxiously attached to their wives, needing more nurturance from their wives, and being more jealous. Specifically, violent men were less likely to be secure, and more likely more likely to be fearful and preoccupied, than nonviolent men. Similarly, Kesner *et al*. (1997) demonstrated the unique effect of attachment related variables on male violence.

Babcock *et al*. (2000) found that during laboratory arguments between partners, men who were distressed and preoccupied responded with violence when their wives withdrew from the conflict. The link between violence perpetration and attachment anxiety also has been observed in a sample of gay men. Landolt and Dutton (1997) found that psychological and, to a lesser extent, physical abuse in male same-sex relationships was negatively associated with secure attachment and positively associated with fearful and preoccupied attachment. These results suggest that attachment anxiety may be a trigger for perpetration of violence, at least in men.

Attachment and Abuse Victimization and Perpetration

A few studies have looked at both victimization and perpetration in intimate relationships, for both women and men. Consistent with previous research, experiences of abuse (both perpetrated and received) have been linked with the anxiety dimension in Bartholomew's model (i.e. fearful and preoccupied attachment). For example,

Roberts and Noller (1998) found an association between anxiety over abandonment and the perpetration of abuse for both men and women. Men's anxiety also was associated with their receipt of abuse. As well, Bookwala and Zdaniuk (1998) found that students involved in reciprocally aggressive relationships scored higher on preoccupied and fearful attachment than did students in nonaggressive relationships.

Rationale for the Current Study

Although there has been considerable research looking at attachment and abuse, studies to date have had limited generalizability. Research has tended to focus on female victims from battered-women's shelters (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Henderson *et al*., 1997), male perpetrators from treatment programs or men chosen for high rates of violence (Dutton *et al*., 1994; Holtzworth-Munroe *et al*., 1997), and convenience samples such as college students (e.g., O'Hearn & Davis, 1997). However, no studies to date have looked at attachment and abuse in a broad based community sample. In the current work, we conducted a relationship violence survey with a community sample recruited through random-digit dialing. We further broadened the range of individuals included by assessing relationship abuse that had occurred *ever* in participants' romantic relationships. Typically, abuse surveys focus on participants currently in relationships and/or abuse that has occurred in the past 12 months. However, limiting the assessment of abuse to recent experiences of abuse excludes a large proportion of relevant participants.

To cover the full range of abusive experiences, we included measures of both physical and psychological abuse. We used an expanded version of the physical assault subscale of the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus *et al*., 1996), a commonly used abuse measure. We also developed a 13-item measure of psychological abuse, as psychological abuse has been found to be highly correlated with, and a precursor of, physical abuse (e.g., Murphy & O'Leary, 1989). Moreover, there is evidence that psychological abuse is at least as damaging to individuals' psychological well-being as physical abuse (Follingstad *et al*., 1990) and is predictive of relationship dysfunction and deterioration (e.g., Murphy & O'Leary, 1989).

Most studies on attachment and abuse have focused on male perpetrators (e.g., Dutton *et al*., 1994; Holtzworth-Munroe *et al*., 1997) or female victims (e.g., Dutton & Painter, 1981), assuming that men are the exclusive aggressors and women the sole victims in abusive relationships. However, both men and women can perpetrate and be the victims of violence, and women show comparable rates of perpetrated violence as do men (e.g., Archer, 2000; Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998; Roberts & Noller, 1998). A study by Magdol and colleagues (1997) suggested that there may be different predictors of violence for men and women; but to date, there have been too few studies addressing women's perpetration of abuse or men's victimization to see consistent patterns of potential predictors (see also Archer, 2000). Therefore, we examined whether the associations between attachment and abusive behaviors were moderated by gender.

Interview measures are ideal for assessing psychological processes that may not be available to participants' conscious awareness and therefore not easily accessed by self-reports (Bartholomew *et al*., 2000). Therefore, in the current study we assessed attachment based on in-depth attachment interviews. In contrast, much of the previous research on attachment and abuse has relied on self-report measures of attachment (e.g., Dutton *et al*., 1994; Roberts & Noller, 1998). Moreover, the few previous studies to incorporate interview measures of attachment have tended to focus only on male perpetration or female receipt of abuse (e.g., Henderson *et al*., 1997; Holtzworth-Munroe *et al*., 1997).

Studies exploring attachment and abuse have rarely taken into consideration the potential bidirectionality of relationship abuse (see O'Hearn & Davis, 1997, for an exception). However, surveys have indicated that many participants who report having been the recipients of intimate abuse acknowledge that they have been perpetrators as well. Stets and Straus (1990), for example, found that of those participants surveyed who reported any intimate abuse, 49% reported that both partners had been perpetrators (see also Magdol *et al*., 1977; Morse, 1995). Thus it is difficult to disentangle what is related to receipt, what is related to perpetration, and what is related to both. Therefore, we assessed the independent predictors of abuse receipt and perpetration.

In summary, we explored the associations between attachment and experiences of relationship abuse in order to understand how internalized representations of secure or insecure attachment could be a resource, or an impediment, to healthy relationship functioning. We sought to integrate the depth of previous research using attachment interviews with the breadth of large-scale survey research. By recruiting the sample from a large community survey, and assessing men's and women's receipt and perpetration of both physical and psychological abuse, we sought to extend the generalizability of previous studies. Finally, we controlled for bidirectionality of abuse in order to identify whether attachment differentially predicts abuse receipt and perpetration.

METHOD

Procedure

The study consisted of two phases: a telephone survey and a follow-up in-person interview session with a subsample of those reached in the initial survey. Men and women, 19 years or older, from the City of Vancouver were contacted via a standard random digit dialing procedure. (For details of the sampling procedure refer to Kwong *et al*., 2003.) Six-hundred and fourteen men and 635 women completed the telephone survey portion. This 15–20 min survey assessed participants' demographic profiles and levels of experienced psychological and physical abuse in their intimate relationships.

Of the original survey participants, 666 (53.3%) agreed to be re-contacted and 128 participants (68 women and 60 men) completed a follow-up interview session.[4] This study focuses on this smaller sample of 128. The follow-up interview sessions took place in four university or hospital locations in the city. All participants completed self-report measures not relevant to this report and took part in an in-depth attachment interview. The follow-up session took 2.5–3 h to complete, and participants were paid a $20.00 honorarium for their involvement.

Participants

Table I lists the demographic characteristics of the follow-up participants. Participants were predominantly single, well educated, and of British background. The mean age was 37.4 years ($SD = 12.6$). Although abuse levels were comparable between the survey and the follow-up samples, there was one notable difference between the two groups. Unlike the follow-up interviews which required English fluency, the survey was translated into Mandarin and Cantonese. Thus, a smaller proportion of Chinese and East Asian participants took part in the follow-up (7.1%) than completed the survey (19.7%).

[4]Our goal was to recruit a sample of approximately 150 participants for the follow-up interview sessions. From the pool of 666 participants who agreed to be recontacted, we called individuals until we had sufficient numbers for the follow-up. Of the 371 participants we attempted to reach, 128 completed the follow-up session (34.5%), 115 were never reached, 88 declined when they were informed of what the follow-up session entailed, and 40 other participants were scheduled but were eventually unable to take part in the follow-up.

Table I. Demographic Characteristics of Follow-Up Participants

Demographic characteristics	Proportion (%)
Marital status	
Single and never married	40.6
Married	19.5
Living with a partner	18.8
Divorced and not living with a partner	14.1
Separated	4.7
Widowed	2.3
Education	
High school	16.4
College or university	61.8
Post-graduate	21.8
Ethnicity	
British	38.3
Other European	28.1
Chinese/East Asian	7.1
Latin, Central, or South American	3.1
Not specified	10.2
Other	12.5
Income	
Less than $20,000	28.1
$20,000 to $29,900	25.0
$30,000 to $39,900	17.2
$40,000 to $49,900	10.9
More than $50,000	16.4

Note. $N = 128$ (68 women and 60 men).

Measures

Telephone Survey Abuse Scales

Both psychological and physical abuse were assessed in the telephone survey. To assess the extent to which both partners in a relationship engage in physical attacks on each other we used the physical abuse subscale of the Conflicts Tactics Scale 2 (CTS2; Straus *et al*., 1996) with two modifications. First, we separated the item "punched or hit with something that could hurt" into two separate items: "punched" and "hit with something that could hurt." Second, we added one item: "scratched or bit." The modified scale includes 14 items, ranging from relatively mild acts of physical conflict (e.g., "Have you ever pushed a partner?"), to acts of more severe physical abuse ("Have you ever burned or scalded a partner on purpose?"). A 13-item psychological abuse measure was based on the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI; Tolman, 1989), but shortened in order to accommodate the limitations of a telephone survey and modified to be appropriate for both men and women. Like Tolman's, our scale includes items assessing dominating/isolating behaviors (e.g., "Have you ever limited a partner's contact with

others, such as family or friends?") and verbal/emotional abuse (e.g., "Have you ever insulted or sworn at a partner?").

For each item on the psychological and physical abuse scales, participants were asked if they had ever executed a specific behavior towards a partner (*Ever Perpetration*). If yes, they were asked how often this had occurred in the past year (*Current Perpetration*). Next, they were asked if a partner had directed the same behavior towards them (*Ever Receipt*), and if so, how many times in the last year had this occurred (*Current Receipt*). In order to include participants both currently involved and not involved in a romantic relationship, we focused on abuse experienced throughout participants' relationship histories (the "ever" variables). Thus, we computed four relationship abuse variables: (1) ever psychological receipt, (2) ever physical receipt, (4) ever psychological perpetration, and (5) ever physical perpetration. Abuse scores were derived by totaling the number of different acts endorsed, a method shown to be a reliable estimate of severity of abuse (Moffit *et al*., 1997). Alphas for the abuse variables were as follows: ever psychological receipt = .64, ever physical receipt = .83, ever psychological perpetration = .62, and ever physical perpetration = .81.

History of Attachments Interview (HAI)

The HAI is a semistructured 1.5–2 h interview combining the key components of the Family Attachment Interview (FAI; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and the Peer Attachment Interview (PAI; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The HAI takes participants through a chronological history of their relationship experiences from the family of origin to current relationships with close friends and romantic partners. It explores such content areas as conflict resolution, responses to separation and distress, perceptions of social support, and perceptions of the self in relation to others. The HAI assesses both the content of individuals' experiences in close relationships and how they process information about these experiences (including coherence of their accounts, defensive style, and so on). The interviewer (also an expert coder) rated each participant's correspondence with each of the four attachment prototypes (secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing) outlined by Bartholomew (1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) on continuous 9-point scales. A second expert coder rated a sub-sample of 41 interviews, and inter-coder agreement was as follows: secure = .73, fearful = .84, preoccupied = .75, and dismissing = .78.

RESULTS

Analyses

In a series of hierarchical regression analyses, we predicted the various forms of relationship abuse from continuous ratings of the four attachment patterns. Because previous surveys have sometimes observed higher rates of female-to-male than male-to-female abuse (Archer, 2000), we controlled for the potential effects of gender. Main effects for gender are reported only if significant. In order to examine how attachment may differentially predict the receipt and perpetration of abuse for women and men, interaction terms for attachment ratings by gender were entered into the analyses after the block of main effects for attachment. Significant interactions would indicate that a particular attachment rating was differentially associated with abuse for men and women.

Consistent with other abuse surveys, there were strong correlations between receipt and perpetration of abuse (.60 for psychological abuse and .66 for physical abuse), suggesting that often the same individuals were both inflicting and sustaining relationship abuse (though not necessarily in the same abusive incidents). Therefore, we repeated all the regression analyses controlling for this interdependence. Specifically, regressions predicting receipt of abuse were repeated with the parallel perpetration variable controlled for on the first step of the regression. Similarly, regressions predicting perpetration of abuse were repeated with the parallel receipt variable controlled for on the first step of the regression.

Descriptive Analyses

The mean scores, standard deviations, and ranges of the attachment and abuse variables are presented in Table II. Attachment ratings were comparable between women and men, with the exception that women evidenced higher levels of preoccupation than men, $t(128) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. The levels of receipt of physical and psychological abuse were also comparable for men and women. However, women reported perpetrating significantly more acts of psychological abuse than men, $t(128) = 2.67$, $p < .01$.

Correlational Analyses

Zero-order correlations between the attachment and abuse variables are presented in Table III. There were positive associations between preoccupied attachment and

Table II. Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for Adult Attachment and Relationship Abuse

Variables	Women		Men	
	Mean (*SD*)	Range	Mean (*SD*)	Range
Attachment ratings				
Secure	4.13 (1.4)	2–8	3.68 (1.4)	1–7
Fearful	3.41 (1. 8)	1–8	3.83 (2.0)	1–8
Preoccupied	3.88 (1.7)	1–8	3.15 (1.8)	1–7
Dismissing	3.07 (1.5)	1–6	3.57 (1.7)	1–7
Relationship abuse				
Receipt				
Psychological	6.28 (3.5)	0–13	5.55 (3.2)	0–12
Physical	2.15 (2.8)	0–10	2.08 (2.7)	0–10
Perpetration				
Psychological	5.15 (2.2)	0–9	4.08 (2.3)	0–9
Physical	1.15 (1.9)	0–8	.85 (1.6)	0–8

all abuse variables. In contrast, there were no significant associations between either fearful or dismissing attachment and abuse, and just one significant negative association between security and abuse (with receipt of physical abuse).

Regression Analyses

Receipt of Abuse

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to predict receipt of psychological abuse and physical abuse from the four attachment variables (see Table IV). The attachment variables contributed significant variance to the prediction of both receipt variables ($R^2 = .15$ for psychological abuse and $R^2 = .09$ for physical abuse). In addition, preoccupied attachment independently predicted both psychological and physical abuse.

Interaction terms on the third step of the regression tested whether the associations between attachment and abuse receipt were moderated by gender. The block of interaction terms did not add to the regression equation, and none of the interactions independently predicted abuse receipt. Thus, there was no evidence that gender moderated the associations between attachment and receipt of abuse.

To control for bidirectionality of violence, the above regressions were repeated with perpetration of abuse entered on the first step of the equation. Thus, perpetration of psychological abuse was controlled for before assessing the association between attachment and receipt of psychological abuse, and perpetration of physical abuse was controlled for before assessing the association between attachment and receipt of physical abuse. In both cases, perpetration strongly predicted receipt ($R^2 = .35$ for psychological abuse and $R^2 = .44$ for physical abuse). However, after controlling for perpetration, attachment no longer significantly contributed to the prediction of abuse receipt (the change in R^2 was reduced to .04 for psychological abuse and .02 for physical abuse), and no individual attachment patterns independently predicted abuse. As before, there was no evidence that gender moderated these associations.

Table III. Correlations Between Attachment Ratings and Relationship Abuse

Relationship abuse	Attachment ratings			
	Secure	Fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissing
Receipt of abuse				
Psychological	−.15	.00	.38**	−.12
Physical	−.18*	.04	.23**	.06
Perpetration of abuse				
Psychological	−.06	−.07	.38**	−.12
Physical	−.08	−.05	.23*	.03

Note. $N = 128$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Perpetration of Abuse

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to predict perpetration of psychological and physical abuse from the four attachment variables (see Table V). Consistent with previously reported group differences, gender was predictive of perpetration of psychological abuse ($R^2 = .05$), indicating that women reported perpetrating more psychological abuse than men. The attachment variables contributed significant variance to the prediction of perpetration of psychological abuse ($R^2 = .12$), with preoccupied attachment again acting as an independent predictor. However, as a group, the attachment variables did not significantly predict perpetration of physical abuse ($R^2 = .06$, $p = .10$), although preoccupied attachment was an independent predictor. There was no evidence that gender moderated the associations between attachment and receipt of abuse.

To control for the bidirectionality of violence, the above regressions were repeated with corresponding receipt of abuse variables entered on the first step of the equation. In both cases, receipt strongly predicted perpetration of abuse ($R^2 = .35$ for psychological abuse and $R^2 = .44$ for physical abuse). However, after controlling for receipt, attachment no longer significantly contributed to the prediction of abuse perpetration (the change in R^2 was reduced to .02 for psychological abuse and .01 for physical abuse), and no individual attachment patterns independently predicted abuse. There was no evidence that gender moderated these associations.

Table IV. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Receipt of Abuse by Attachment Pattern with Sex as a Moderator

	Type of abuse											
	Receipt of psychological abuse						Receipt of physical abuse					
Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
Sex	.73	.60	.21	.59	2.88	7.14	.00	.49	−.12	.50	−3.69	6.70
Attachment												
Secure			.14	.38	.43	1.30			.18	.33	−.21	1.13
Fearful			.24	.25	−.41	.87			.29	.22	−.49	.75
Preoccupied			.84**	.26	1.82*	.85			.57*	.22	.57	.74
Dismissing			.00	.27	.61	.94			.36	.23	−.17	.82
Sex × Attachment												
Secure × Sex					−.17	.77					.23	.67
Fearful × Sex					−.45	.52					.49	.45
Preoccupied × Sex					−.66	.53					.00	.46
Dismissing × Sex					.41	.56					.29	.48
ΔR^2	.01		.15		.06		.00		.09		.02	
ΔF	1.50		5.29**		2.10		.02		2.88*		.66	

Note. The ΔR^2s and ΔFs are shown for each analysis. Unstandardized regression coefficients and their standard errors are also shown.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The most consistent finding in this study was a link between preoccupied attachment and intimate abuse. This link held for both psychological and physical abuse, and for both receipt and perpetration of abuse. Moreover, preoccupation was predictive of abuse independently of gender and other attachment orientations. In addition, this link was not moderated by gender. However, the associations between preoccupation and abuse were not maintained when the bidirectionality of abuse was controlled, indicating that preoccupation was associated with reciprocally abusive dynamics in relationships, rather than abuse receipt or perpetration per se.

Preoccupied individuals are torn between a need for love and support from others and the fear of not having that need gratified. Thus, they can become increasingly demanding and potentially aggressive when attachment

Table V. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Perpetration of Abuse by Attachment Pattern with Sex as a Moderator

	Type of abuse											
	Perpetration of psychological abuse						Perpetration of physical abuse					
Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
Sex	1.06**	.40	.67	.40	−7.07	5.30	.30	.31	.13	.33	−1.11	4.35
Attachment												
Secure			.23	.26	−.92	.89			.19	.21	.00	.73
Fearful			.14	.17	−.88	.59			.12	.14	−.19	.49
Preoccupied			.58**	.18	.00	.18			.34*	.14	.21	.48
Dismissing			.12	.18	−.72	.18			.22	.15	.26	.53
Sex × Attachment												
Secure × Sex					.70	.53					.00	.44
Fearful × Sex					.64	.36					.21	.40
Preoccupied × Sex					.30	.36					.00	.18
Dismissing × Sex					.49	.38					.00	.31
ΔR^2	.05		.12		.02		.01		.06		.01	
ΔF	7.18**		4.50**		.90		.91		2.01		.36	

Note. The ΔR^2s and ΔFs are shown for each analysis. Unstandardized regression coefficients and their standard errors are also shown.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

needs are not fulfilled. Moreover, preoccupied individuals may be more willing than others to tolerate sustained abuse from intimate partners. In a study of undergraduates, Pietromonaco and Feldman Barrett (1997) found that in high conflict situations preoccupied individuals tended to disclose more, to judge the interaction as more intimate, and to feel more satisfied after the interaction than did secure, fearful, or dismissing individuals. These authors suggest that preoccupied individuals appear to gain psychological benefit from interactions that most people would find unpleasant. Even when a partner's response is negative, preoccupied individuals may perceive this as evidence that their partner is engaged and, in a perverse sense, more intimately involved. Thus, preoccupied individuals could be at increased risk for tolerating, and (at an unconscious level) even soliciting, abuse from a partner.

Preoccupied individuals also may be vulnerable to staying in abusive relationships because of their tendency to excuse their partner's abuse. The following 32-year-old man from our study received extreme and ongoing psychological and physical abuse from his partner. Although he recognized that the relationship was abusive, he was able to reinterpret his partner's mistreatment as reflective of her deeper love. When asked about the positive aspects of his relationship, he admitted that there had been barely 2 h in the 5 years that were good:

> About an hour and a half to two hours when she was giving birth to our daughter—it was the only time that I felt she was honest and intimate with me. And she told me how she loved me and how she cared about me. And there was just a feeling of closeness. And I told her this at one point and she sort of mocked me and said "Well I was stoned at the time. Don't you know I was on drugs?" And I thought about that. And I'm not sure yet . . . but I think what they give them is sodium pentithol, which, as it turns out, is truth serum. So I know she had revealed her true intimacy to me then.

This tendency to idealize partners may lead preoccupied individuals to create unrealistic expectations of their partner's ability to change. Consider the following excerpt from a 29-year-old woman who, in spite of years of rejection and increasing withdrawal by her partner, believed that she could make him love her more:

> I kept on thinking if I believed in him, his life would be OK, he would be OK. He'd have, you know, lots of self-esteem and everything else . . . I always thought I could fix things and I could help him, in like the white knight kind of thing. I kept on saying, "Even if you don't want to marry me, at least let me help you do this."

Downey and Feldman's (1996) description of the rejection-sensitive individual fits well with the preoccupied prototype. The rejection-sensitive are hypervigilant to rejection, exaggerate their partners' dissatisfaction and lack of commitment, and behave in ways that are counterproductive to healthy relationship functioning. In a study of undergraduates, these researchers found that rejection sensitive women reacted to perceived partner rejection with hostility and withdrawal of emotional support, whereas rejection sensitive men reacted with jealousy and controlling behaviors. Such social construals and reactions may facilitate and maintain mutually destructive interpersonal dynamics. Consistent with this hypothesis, rejection sensitive men who were highly invested in intimate relationships showed an increased risk of partner violence (Downey *et al*., 2000).

Cappell and Heiner (1990) suggest that a *vulnerability* to abuse may be intergenerationally transmitted and may involve such strategies as learning to tolerate and/or provoke violence, gravitating toward aggressive partners, or not learning productive strategies for avoiding conflict. These strategies are evidenced in the following excerpt from a preoccupied woman in our study. Although her partner ended their relationship, left the country, and moved in with another woman, she seemed to seek out confrontation in order to be closer:

> He never called me for three months, and so I just bought a ticket down to California and basically bought a one way ticket and figured, if he's gonna get rid of me he's gonna have to send me home. He's gonna have to go out and buy the ticket. . .I'm not gonna make it that easy for him.

In contrast to the findings for preoccupied attachment, we found little evidence of an association between attachment security and relationship abuse, though theory and previous research suggests that security is related to constructive conflict strategies and higher functioning relationships (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Security also has been shown to be negatively related to relationship abuse (e.g., Dutton *et al*., 1994; Henderson *et al*., 1997), although this association is not consistent across studies (e.g., Morgan & Pietromonaco, 1994). Abuse may not be associated with security in this sample because of the relatively low levels of abuse. Often physical abuse consisted of once having slapped or pushed a partner in the heat of an argument. We would not necessarily expect these isolated acts to bear on participants' overall attachment security. Alternatively, lack of defensiveness typical of secure individuals may have made them more frank in their responses, and more likely to endorse acts of less severe abuse than a more defensive person might.

In addition, we found no associations between dismissing attachment and abuse receipt or perpetration.

The characteristic self-reliance, lack of emotional investment, and avoidance of intimacy of dismissing individuals would make them unlikely to maintain commitment in problematic relationships. Conversely, they might be more tolerant of moderate levels of relationship dysfunction as they would tend to have minimal expectations of partners being supportive. Previous research has found few associations between dismissingness and abuse receipt or perpetration (e.g., Dutton *et al*., 1994; Henderson *et al*., 1997; Landolt & Dutton, 1997).

Based on some prior work in clinical samples (e.g., Dutton *et al*., 1994), we might have expected to see associations between fearfulness and received and/or perpetrated abuse. However, nonclinical samples have not shown consistent associations in this regard (e.g., Henderson *et al*., 1997; O'Hearn & Davis, 1997). Perhaps fearfulness is not linked with abuse in our community sample because the levels of fearfulness may be less extreme. Unlike the angry protest behavior seen in clinical samples (e.g., Dutton *et al*., 1994), our fearful individuals were more typically shy and compliant, which may serve to dissipate rather than inflame the rage of an aggressive partner.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Implications

One of our primary goals was to extend the generalizability of previous research by sampling from the community. Although our sample covered the full demographic spectrum, there were some demographic differences between the survey and the follow-up samples. However, it is unclear how these potential selection biases may relate to attachment and abuse. Further, our interviews suggested that there may have been some selection pressures which would not have been captured by demographic comparisons with census data. For men in particular, a 3-h evening session discussing personal relationships with a female interviewer may have been appealing to men who were lonely and possibly hoping to participate in something more than pure research. The following excerpt from a 32-year-old man captures the climate that the researchers were often feeling when conducting the interviews. Asked what encouraged him to come in for the follow-up, he replied:

> Well I guess it was Shanna [Shanna Trinke, a co-author] when she called. I was kind of bored, kind of lonely . . . Nothing better to do. And it was very interesting . . . Um, um, um, and, and some of the questions that I responded to . . . There's nothing specific, like specific words . . . Maybe it was the tone that she took. That she seemed to be um, um, intrigued, if that's the word, or curious, or maybe just clinically curious . . . which I found . . . don't get me wrong . . . not from a biologic [sic] point, but from an intellectual viewpoint. I was . . . aroused. I thought it was interesting. I'd always kind of thought if I'd gone to school, to university, I'd have met nice girls, like Shanna . . . I just wanted to know what she was like.

A limitation of this study was its focus on the individual rather than the couple as the unit of analysis. The high level of reported bidirectionality of abuse and the fact that attachment predicted abusive dynamics, not receipt or perpetration independently, highlight the dyadic nature of relationship abuse. Roberts and Noller's (1998) findings suggest that anxious individuals are more likely to be violent when their partners are uncomfortable with closeness. An individual's anxiety about being deserted can be exacerbated by a partner who is uncomfortable with emotional intimacy. This can potentially set the stage for a self-feeding cycle of abuse from the anxious partner who resorts to increasingly aggressive strategies in order to hold on to a distant partner. In addition to clarifying the dynamics of abusive relationships, the study of couples rather than individuals would permit the inclusion of partner reports of abuse to supplement self-reports, thereby increasing the reliability of the abuse ratings.

This research cannot address the direction of causality between attachment and abuse. But we expect that attachment representations are formulated, at least in part, from earlier relationship experiences and, therefore, that attachment orientations may be predictive of relationship abuse. We also expect abuse to predict attachment preoccupation, as both positive and negative relationship experiences continue to modify attachment representations throughout the life span. Being the recipient of abuse will have a negative impact on even the most positive self-models. Thus, in all likelihood, both past and current relationship experiences serve to maintain, shape, and change attachment orientations. To address this question, an ideal research design would follow individuals from before the first abusive relationship throughout subsequent relationships.

Some researchers have argued that studying the individual psychology of victims is dangerous because associations between maladaptive personality variables and abuse receipt could shift the onus of responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim (e.g., Browne, 1993; Dobash *et al*., 1992). However, the association between preoccupation and abuse receipt does not mean that preoccupied individuals *intentionally* choose to create conflictual relationships because of their poorly integrated sense of self-worth. Moreover, the observed association between preoccupation and abuse perpetration in no way takes responsibility away from the perpetrator of abuse.

Our findings highlight the importance of understanding relationship abuse as developing within the context of ongoing relationships. We agree with O'Leary *et al.*'s (1994) position that marital therapists should focus on changing negative interaction patterns between spouses *before* the onset of physical violence. In particular, preoccupied individuals appear to be vulnerable to relationship abuse because of their simultaneous longing for closeness and struggle with never feeling satiated. Intervention efforts may help preoccupied individuals to communicate their attachment needs for closeness and support in more appropriate ways that are more likely to lead to mutually rewarding relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is based on Antonia Henderson's doctoral dissertation at Simon Fraser University. The project was supported by SSHRC Major Grant to Kim Bartholomew and SSHRC Doctoral Fellowships to Antonia Henderson and Shanna Trinke.

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