

## INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: AN APPLICATION OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

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**Abstract.** *Attachment theory has gained increased prominence over the past several decades in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and social work. Early attachment theory and research focused primarily on infant-mother attachments, but latest attachment research is more concerned with adult love relationships. Different attachment pairings (of secure and insecure – avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles) in marital relationships were found to be closely associated with the relationship quality and emotional well-being. The literature review shows that attachment security enhances relationships, while attachment insecurity contributes to intimate partner violence. This report aims to review existing literature related to the application of attachment theory to intimate partner violence and to discuss the theory's strengths and limitations in understanding and resolving intimate partner violence.*

**Keywords:** attachment theory; domestic violence; intimate partner violence.

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Contribution:

**Maria Sokolova** – introduction, theoretical overview – attachment theory, attachment and intimate partner violence, weaknesses and implications for further development of Attachment theory

**Diana Bakalova** – abstract, theoretical overview – attachment style in adulthood, conclusion

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## INTRODUCTION

Growing evidence shows the COVID-19 pandemic has made intimate partner violence more common—and often more severe than earlier. The pandemic intensified many of the conditions that can fuel intimate partner violence, with many families facing economic tension along with the stress and uncertainty created by COVID-19. According to the National Representative Survey Research Report “Violence in Bulgaria” three quarters of all cases of violence in the 2019 are domestic violence (Policy Against Violence Association, 2019). In addition, for 56.6% of the citizens, the worst situation of violence they have ever experienced was at home. Unfortunately, cases of domestic violence in Bulgaria increased in 2020 compared to previous years. Hotlines for reporting violence and seeking assistance received a noticeably larger number of calls – 2403 in 2020 compared to 1513 in 2018 (Foundation Animus Annual Report, 2020, p. 71 & Foundation Animus Annual Report, 2018, p. 53). The relationship between aggression/violence and intimacy is often explained by the so-called attachment theory.

According to attachment theory, early experiences with their caregivers create the way in which children interpret and make sense of subsequent experiences (i.e., working models of attachment, or the internal representation of relationships). In this regard, the theory of attachment and the main views of John Bowlby are discussed in the next paragraph, as well as the contribution of Mary Ainsworth.

## ATTACHMENT THEORY

According to the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby, how early attachment relationships are formed and internalized affects a person’s development and relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 2019). Bowlby developed the construct of the *internal working model*, which refers to the mental representations of primary caregivers that a child has internalized from relational experiences; they encompass the degree to which a child expects sensitive, attuned responsiveness from caregivers. If the

attachment figure has acknowledged the infant’s needs for comfort and protection while simultaneously respecting the infant’s need for independent exploration of the environment, the child is likely to develop an internal working model of self as valued and reliable. Conversely, if the parent has frequently rejected the infant’s bids for comfort or exploration, the child is likely to construct an internal working model of self as unworthy or incompetent. With the aid of working models, children predict the attachment figure’s likely behavior and plan their own responses. These expectations are carried into future relationships and explain how early attachment relationships affect future relationship functioning (Mikulincer & Doron 2016).

Without Mary Ainsworth’s work on patterns of attachment and Mary Main’s Adult Attachment Interview that built on them, John Bowlby’s theoretical contributions to developmental, clinical and counseling psychology would not have had their current influence. Mary Ainsworth observed infant behavior in a laboratory procedure known as the Strange Situation and developed the classification of attachment styles into three categories: *secure*, *anxious-ambivalent*, and *anxious-avoidant* (also referred to as *secure*, *anxious*, and *avoidant*, respectively). Anxious and avoidant styles are both indicative of *insecure attachment* to the primary caregiver.

According to Mary Ainsworth, securely attached babies are confident that their primary caregivers will be responsive and available, and hence, they feel courageous in exploring the world. The primary caregiver (usually the mother but not always) is used as a “secure base,” where the baby is seeking proximity when alarmed, tired, or anxious. Secure attachment is supported by the mother’s sensitivity and availability to her child’s needs. As a result, secure children develop positive working models for themselves and responsibility to others (Bowlby, 2019). Anxiously attached toddlers are uncertain if their parents will be available or responsive when needed. Consequently, they are inclined to exhibit separation anxiety and clinging behavior, and are hesitant to explore the world. This style is typ-

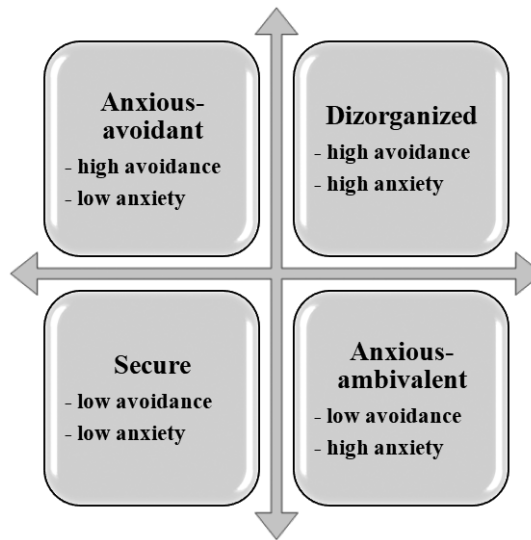


Figure 1. A four-category model of attachment in early childhood

ically developed in response to the mother's inconsistent availability and responsiveness. The behavior of mothers of anxious ambivalent babies is considered to be abusive, intrusive, or over-affective. Consequently, anxious children develop negative working models for themselves and negative self-image (Mikulincer & Doron, 2016). A baby with an avoidant attachment style does not expect that the parent will be responsive and available at all. This style is promoted by mothers, who reject or completely neglect their children's needs for comfort and protection. As a result, avoidant children develop a negative working model of others and attempt to live life without the emotional support of other people.

Nearly 20 years after Mary Ainsworth's original classification, Mary Main and her colleagues discovered a fourth type of attachment style referred to as the *disorganized style*. This style does not fit clearly into the anxious or avoidant categories and is marked by disorientation such as being dazed, immobile, or starting and stopping. These behaviors seem to be related to unpredictable behavior on the part of the caregiver who may have unresolved losses or unresolved attachment-related traumas (Mikulincer & Doron, 2016).

For instance, 80% of the abused children studied by Carlson *et al.* in 1989 had a disorganized attachment style, and their parents suffered severe childhood trauma, loss of a loved one, or some kind of mental illness.

To sum up, four styles of attachment in early childhood have been identified: *secure*, *anxious-ambivalent*, *anxious-avoidant*, and *disorganized* (see Figure 1).

#### ATTACHMENT STYLE IN ADULTHOOD

During the 1980s, Mary Main and her colleagues expanded the concept of attachment style into adulthood through the development of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). Based on answers to open-ended questions, respondents were classified into three categories that paralleled Mary Ainsworth's classification system for infants: *secure*, *dismissing*, and *preoccupied*. Mary Main's dismissing category corresponds to avoidant attachment, while the preoccupied category parallels anxious attachment. In subsequent studies, Kelly Brennan and colleagues proposed two fundamental dimensions in terms of attachment in adults: anxiety reflects the extent to which individuals worry about being underappreciated

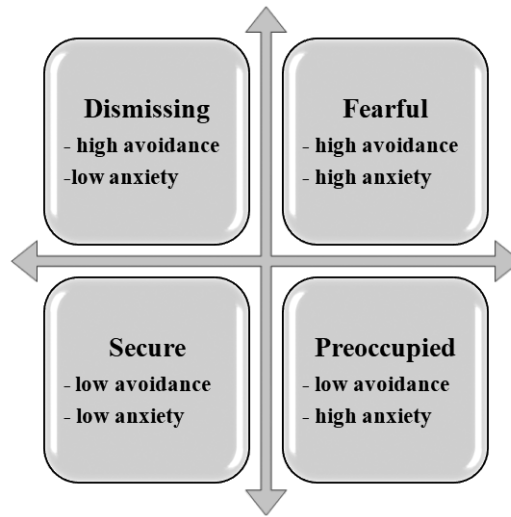


Figure 2. A four-category model of attachment in adulthood.

or abandoned in their relationships, whereas avoidance reflects the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy in their relationships (Brennan *et al.*, 1998). A four-category model of attachment style in adulthood is introduced (see Figure 2).

Dugal *et al.* (2019) believe that in romantic relationships, partners assume the status of their primary attachment figures. They note that both infant and adult attachment involve intimate physical contact and similar reactions of grief to separation and loss. In addition, they highlight studies showing that infant-caregiver and adult romantic attachments have a similar and unique power to affect physical and psychological health. Research indicates that attachment style is linked to relationship quality. Those who are securely attached and whose partners are securely attached report higher relationship functioning. Several studies show that secure couples are more likely to have better communication and conflict resolution skills in addition to higher satisfaction. Secure attachment also buffers against relationship deterioration during stressful times (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Feeney, 2016; Mikulincer & Doron, 2016). Aggressive responses have been linked to in-

tense attachment anxiety, in which partners attempt to regulate insecurity through control and abuse (Bowlby, 2019).

#### ATTACHMENT AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Research on adult attachment and intimate partner violence has shown that attachment anxiety is linked to intimate partner violence (Allison *et al.*, 2007; Henderson *et al.*, 2005; Spencer *et al.*, 2020; Velotti *et al.*, 2020). Researchers have interpreted violence by perpetrators as a dysfunctional means of maintaining proximity to an attachment figure when attachment needs have been frustrated. Research indicates that victims of domestic violence also exhibit high levels of attachment anxiety, which may make it more difficult to leave an abusive relationship (Allison *et al.*, 2007; Henderson *et al.*, 2005).

Dutton and Painter (1993) found that the intermittency of good and bad treatment by an abuser increases the intensity of a woman's attachment in a phenomenon known as *traumatic bonding*. This is similar to an infant who becomes even clingier when faced with parental rejection to maintain proximity. Similarly, the violence of the abusive man is

viewed as paralleling the protest behaviour of an infant separated from his or her primary attachment figure in an attempt to bring the attachment figure back. Attachment anxiety therefore plays a role in both perpetration and receipt of partner violence (Spencer *et al.*, 2020).

Henderson *et al.* (2005) found that a preoccupied attachment style was predictive of perpetrating and being victimized by intimate partner violence. Allison *et al.* (2007) found, consistent with previous studies on couples, that violence was often an effort to maintain a desired level of proximity to a partner who was perceived as disengaging from the relationship. Conversely, they found that violence could be used to push away a partner as a means of escape when a perpetrator felt he was being approached too closely. Through in-depth qualitative research Godbout *et al.* (2017) showed that preoccupied individuals were more likely to use violence as a way to achieve proximity, while dismissing individuals were more likely to use violence as a way to create distance when attempts to distance themselves from conflict were resisted.

Other research is consistent with the findings of Allison *et al.* (2007), showing that the coupling of two preoccupied individuals or a preoccupied individual with a dismissing individual most likely results in violence. The coupling of two preoccupied individuals leads to destructive patterns such as “mutual attack and retreat” and “pursuing-pursuing”, in which both partners feel rejected and try to control the other. These patterns are linked to violence. The coupling of a preoccupied person with a dismissive person leads to destructive demand-withdraw patterns and is also linked to relational violence (Mikulincer & Doron, 2016; Velotti *et al.*, 2020).

To sum up, attachment security enhances relationships, while attachment insecurity contributes to intimate partner violence. If domestic violence stems from an attempt to meet thwarted attachment needs, establishing attachment security in the relational system ought to eliminate or reduce intimate partner violence. Couples experiencing violence,

however, are typically deeply entrenched in dysfunctional patterns of relating that are difficult to resolve without intervention (Park, 2015).

It is conceivable from an attachment theory lens that normative change could occur if individuals, particularly perpetrators, are able to naturally resolve their attachment insecurity through outside relationships. A secure, supportive relationship with a mentor figure, for example, could shift a perpetrator’s internal working models such that his attachment insecurity is no longer as easily triggered by his romantic partner. Likewise, a victim who is able to develop secure, supportive relationships with mentors or friends may be less likely to remain in an abusive relationship, because her attachment needs are being met in other ways. Conversely, researchers agree that couples therapy is ineffective and may even be harmful when there is a dominant partner exerting power and control. When violence occurs in an overall context of power and control, conjoint attachment-focused therapy can be viewed as providing excuses for the abuser and may even increase the risk of violence. In such cases, the perpetrator needs to receive individual treatment specifically targeting the abusive behavior before couples therapy can be considered (Schneider & Brimhall, 2013; Velotti *et al.*, 2020).

#### **WEAKNESSES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF ATTACHMENT THEORY**

According to Park (2015, p. 8) “a major weakness of attachment theory is that it focuses exclusively on factors internal to the individual and relational system of the couple, while ignoring external factors. Therefore, change is directed towards the individual person, while the larger social environment is neglected.” This is especially problematic given the social and economic factors influencing domestic violence.

It is important to keep in mind that attempting to escape a violent relationship can have major economic ramifications for the abused woman, including loss of employment, hous-

ing, health care, or financial support from her partner's income. Especially for poor women, staying in a violent relationship may realistically be the better option, given the possible threat of violence if they leave and the risks to their children, housing, and financial situation (O'Leary & Frew, 2016). Women in such circumstances must have options for employment, child-care, housing, and other needs in order to rebuild their lives. An attachment-theory perspective alone fails to address these basic needs of women affected by intimate partner violence, especially women in poverty, for whom economic and material supports are essential.

Finally, attachment theory alone does not provide guidance for the deeper characterological defects that are often at the root of intimate partner violence in which a clear perpetrator and victim can be identified. Abusive men typically have distorted thinking patterns and many of them are resistant to treatment in part because their methods of maintaining power and control have been effective.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, intimate partner violence is an important public health challenge. Due to its relational nature, attachment theory appears a useful framework to read the phenomenon and to better understand its components and its dynamics to provide more precise and tailored interventions in the future. We predict that, in the future, attachment theory may provide the underpinnings of a more general theory of personality organization and relationship development. Such a theory would build on, but also go beyond, John Bowlby's reworking of Freud's ideas on motivation, emotion, and development.

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