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INSECURE ATTACHMENT BEHAVIOR AND PARTNER VIOLENCE: INCORPORATING COUPLE PERCEPTIONS OF INSECURE ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

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Intimate partner violence and insecure attachment are therapeutically relevant concepts when working with couples. The link between attachment and intimate partner violence has been examined in the literature, but an area of aggression that often goes unexamined is relational aggression, or using third parties as a means of being aggressive toward a partner. We asked how participants' attachment behaviors were related to their own and partners' relational and physical aggression. We used structural equation modeling to estimate actor–partner interdependence among these relationships in 644 heterosexual couples. Results indicated significant partner paths from attachment to relational aggression, as well as significant actor paths between relational aggression and physical aggression. Implications were discussed. Data for this study were collected from the RELATE assessment.

Building upon Bowlby's original work with parent–child attachment, numerous theorists and clinicians have shown that the presence of a secure attachment figure in adulthood, often a romantic partner, can produce feelings of security, relief, and additional positive affect, similar to a secure parent–child relationship (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Further, the presence of a secure attachment in adulthood contributes to relationship satisfaction and adds a buffering effect against the stress of everyday life (Feeney, 2008; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). The absence of secure attachment, in either a physical or emotional sense, can lead to distancing (avoidance) or hypervigilance (anxiety) behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In romantic relationships, these avoidant and anxious behaviors help a person to manage the experience of insecurity that accompanies the threat of isolation, loss, or abandonment, either with attempts to push the partner away or to draw the partner in closer (Johnson, 2004). These avoidant and anxious behaviors do not result in more secure attachment; rather, they have been linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes, such as chronic fatigue and depression (Feeney, 2008; Reis & Grenyer, 2004).

Relationship trauma, such as infidelity, addiction, intimate partner violence (IPV), and other moments of perceived abandonment or betrayal, can be damaging to adult attachment. These attachment injuries are perceived as threats to the relationship, and partners respond as if their safety and security are in jeopardy (Johnson, 2002). They may respond with avoidant or anxious behaviors in effort to regulate their relationships, such as leaving the relationship or responding in kind with a similar injury. For example, IPV represents a particularly salient kind of attachment injury, as researchers have suggested that insecurely attached partners are more likely to use violence as a set of behaviors that attempt to push partners away or engage them, which may result in partners responding in kind with more violence (Stith, McCollum, & Rosen, 2011). Further, these violent behaviors act as an attachment injury, creating the paradoxical effect of partners feeling less secure over time (Weston, 2008).

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Physical violence is not the only unhealthy way for couples to regulate distance in attachment. Couples may also use other nonphysical forms of aggression to seek closeness or maintain distance, including relational aggression. Relational aggression is distinguished by acts whose intents are to harm a relationship by involving third parties, but are not physically violent (Carroll et al., 2010). Despite the harm it does to relationships, relational aggression is a concept that has been underdeveloped in the research as an issue in couple therapy. Additionally, while several studies have examined relational aggression as a construct (Bagner, Storch, & Preston, 2007), few if any have examined it alongside both physical aggression and attachment. The purpose of this study is to further examine the relationships between attachment, relational aggression, and physical violence in committed partners. In this study, we will use dyadic data analysis to examine how partners' perceptions of attachment behavior influence one another's use of both physical and relational aggression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Explanations of Intimate Partner Violence

While the focus of this article will be the contributions of attachment on IPV, it is important to note, briefly, other factors or explanations for IPV. For example, cultural and societal factors take into account the social acceptability of IPV in certain cultures, as well as the dominance of patriarchy outlined by feminist scholars (Straus, 1976; Yllö, 2005). Further, variables, such as poverty or alcohol and drug use, may be linked to increased IPV (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & Melissa, 2000; Copenhaver, Lash, & Eisler, 2000). Finally, social learning theory posits that IPV is passed from generation to generation and that children of violent parents will be violent themselves because they have learned it, a theory for which there is limited support (Stith et al., 2000). Psychological traits, such as those associated with personality disorders or perpetrator typologies (i.e., dysphoric–borderline, antisocial), may put partners at risks for violence (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994).

Interactional factors also play a role in IPV. While it is important to recognize the role that gender and patriarchy have in violent relationships, this should not be done to the exclusion of interactional factors, such as those explained by systems or communication theories. Couples, like other systems, find themselves in reciprocal interaction patterns that slowly amplify over time (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). These patterns are often circular, meaning both people have a role in their creation and maintenance. For example, Johnson (2008) has suggested that typologies of violent couples exist, emphasizing the role of each partner in the violent relationship. In some typologies of violent couples (i.e., intimate terrorism), violence is fairly one-sided, while others, such as situational couple violence, suggest an escalation of mutual violence that results from couple interaction.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory can be seen as a systemic framework for explaining the patterns and processes families and couples bring to therapy (Byng-Hall, 2008; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). Attachment theory, initially proposed by the ground-breaking observational and theoretical work of John Bowlby (1973) and the research of Mary Salter Ainsworth, Blehai, Waters, and Wall (1978), describes an "inborn regulatory system" central to "social behavior" and the development of "emotional stability, mental health, and satisfying, close relationships" in all human beings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 28). When loved ones are consistently available and are "willing to respond" to calls for support, help, or protection, a strong relational bond can be formed. In addition to research linking secure attachment to a host of positive outcomes of particular interest to clinicians, there is growing research linking insecure attachment to IPV, which we will review in the next section.

Attachment and Violence

Intimate partner violence in the context of couple therapy is a subject that continues to be explored in MFT literature as researchers attempt to answer questions regarding whether or not to treat this population (Bograd & Mederos, 1999), as well as how it should be done (Oka & Whiting,

2011; Stith, McCollum, Amanor-Boadu, & Smith, 2012). Given the number of research questions regarding treating violent couples conjointly that still need to be answered, we feel this study makes an important contribution to the literature.

Previous theoretical writings have described the association between attachment and violence as being one in which, when attachment security is low, violence is high, and vice versa. In one review, Dutton (2011) suggested that disruptions of attachment in childhood or infancy activate an alarm reaction that can only be pacified with a response from an attachment figure. Without that response, children fail to reduce their attachment-related alarm, which can lower impulse control and increase the risk for violence as adults. Similarly, in adults, failure from a romantic partner to respond can also lower impulse control and increase risk of violence.

Empirical research has also extended the relationship between IPV and attachment theories. In particular, research on IPV perpetrators found that they were likely to be insecurely attached (Dutton & Kerry, 1999) and that perpetrators were more likely to be violent toward their partners when they feared abandonment (Holtzworth-Munroe & Anglin, 1991). Further, increases in male perpetrator perceptions of comfort and partner closeness were correlated with decreases in males' violence (Lawson, 2008). Likewise, research suggested that female survivors of violence were also likely to identify as insecurely attached (Alexander, 2009). Further, efforts to study violence at couple levels have echoed findings that insecure partners use violence as a technique to regulate attachment (Allison, Bartholomew, Mayseless, & Dutton, 2008). Other research at the couple level has suggested couples in which both partners are insecurely attached may be at increased risk for partner violence, as both partners are more likely to regulate attachment needs with violence (Bond & Bond, 2004). These findings lead researchers to question whether or not these patterns would hold true with other types of aggression.

Relational Aggression

Research has also shown that other types of nonphysical aggression, such as verbal or emotional aggression, are employed by couples as a means of regulating closeness in a relationship (Carroll et al., 2010; Goldstein, Chesir-Teran, & McFaul, 2008). At the outset, it is important to discuss what sets relational aggression apart from other types of nonphysical aggression. Relational aggression is characterized by "behaviors that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 77) similar to tactics that may be employed by children in peer groups. Such tactics may include love withdrawal—such as intentionally ignoring one's partner or withholding affection during a conflict—or social sabotage—including spreading rumors about a partner, embarrassing a partner in front of others, or triangling a third party into an argument with a partner (Carroll et al., 2010).

Relational aggression differs from traditional definitions of verbal or emotional abuse with its specific focus on inclusion, either in a couple or in another social group. In other words, relational aggression targets a partner by threatening his or her sense of belonging, either to the partnership or to another social group. Preliminary research findings by Carroll et al. (2010) suggest most couples report some level of relational aggression. While research suggests no gender differences in the experience of relational aggression in romantic relationships (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002), consequences related to perpetration of relational aggression, such as loneliness, depression, substance use, and social anxiety, appear to be more pronounced in female perpetrators (Bagner et al., 2007).

Relational Aggression and Attachment

Relational aggression, unlike other forms of aggression, involves behaviors that strike directly at core attachment needs: belonging, acceptance, and intimacy. For this reason, it is important to examine relational aggression alongside attachment. The scant research on attachment and relational aggression suggests a pattern similar to that of physical aggression and attachment, namely that couples with greater attachment insecurity also report increased levels of relational aggression (Wilson, 2011). Additional research has shown that couples with higher levels of relational aggression more frequently use insecure attachment language to describe their relationships (Goldstein et al., 2008).

Relational Aggression and Violence

The investigation of relational aggression as a phenomenon in couples is relatively recent, and its relationship to physical violence is largely unexplored. Relational aggression can be viewed as either a precursor to IPV or a component of IPV. Relational aggression does not carry the stigma of physical violence and may be seen as more socially acceptable. One of the main concepts that distinguishes relational aggression from other types of aggression is rejection, either rejection from the couple relationship or rejection from another group. Thomas (1995) hypothesized that physical violence can follow rejection, which suggests that physical aggression may follow relational aggression. Some have postulated that relational aggression can be used as a nonphysical way to regulate distance between partners (Bagner et al., 2007); however, if nonviolent tactics prove ineffective, a partner may escalate to violence to draw the other's attention (White, Smith, Koss, & Figueredo, 2000). Because this topic has only recently begun to be researched, it is important to note that these publications are largely theoretical.

In addition to the need for relational aggression in couples to continue to be explored, it is also a clinically relevant concept. The tendency for one or both partners to try to draw their therapist into a collusion against the other partner, by undercutting the partner or trying to make the partner look bad in front of the therapist, is one familiar to couple therapists (Roberto-Forman, 2002; Scharff & Scharff, 1991). Understanding this behavior in partners as an aggressive move motivated by insecure attachment can help couple therapists to address unmet attachment needs behind seemingly inappropriate behaviors in therapy.

Statement of Purpose

In this study, we will examine the relationships between partners' reports of perceptions of attachment insecurity, relational aggression, and physical aggression using an actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) to address the following research questions: Are insecure attachment behaviors related to couples' reports of their partners' physical violence and their own relational aggression? Further, is one's relational aggression related to partner's physical aggression? This study contributes to our understanding of how partner's insecure attachment behavior contributes to relational aggression, and how or whether relational aggression contributes to physical violence.

METHOD

Participants

There were a total of 644 heterosexual couples in this study. The mean age for females was 30.25 (*SD* = 9.79), and for males, the mean age was 32.44 (*SD* = 10.5). The majority of females reported their relationship status as married (40.5%), engaged (34.9%), or in "a serious or steady dating relationship" (24.5%). Males reported their relationship status as in married (40.8%), engaged (33.9%), or in "a serious or steady dating relationship" (25.3%). Nearly 24% of participants reported that they were cohabiting with their partners but not married. The length of marriages ranged from 0 months to 40 years, with the median length of marriage between 3 and 5 years, and the length for a dating relationship ranged from 3 months to 45 years, with a median length of 1–2 years. The majority of participants resided in the western United States.

Most participants were Caucasian (female = 77.5%, male = 78.6%), African American (female = 5%, male = 6.2%), Asian (female = 6.8%, male 3.7%), or Latino (female = 4.8%, male = 4.3%). The majority of participants had completed a bachelor's degree or higher (female = 53.6%, male = 54.2%), some college (female = 35.9%, male = 27.3), or a high school degree (female = 10.7%, male = 18%). Among women, 46.9% reported earning <$20,000 annually; 18.9% earned between $20K and $39,999; 13.3% earned between $40K and $59,999; 8.8% earned between $60K and $79,999; 4.4% earned between $80K and $99,999; and 7.8% earned more than $100K. Among men, 26.8% reported earning <$20,000 annually; 18.2% earned between $20K and $39,999; 15.0% earned between $40K and $59,999; 11.1% earned between $60K and $79,999; 8.3% earned between $80K and $99,999; and 20.5% earned more than $100K. Regarding religious affiliation, 29.6% of men reported being Latter-Day Saint; 22.8% were Protestant, 20.2% were not religious; 14.3% were Catholic; and the remaining 13% were Jewish, Islamic,

Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, or reported "Other" as their religion. Among women, 29.9% were Latter-Day Saint; 21.7% were Protestant; 16.8% were note religious; 15% were Catholic; and the remaining 16.7% were Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, or reported "Other" as their religion. Dyadic data analysis requires that only couples where both partners completed measures could be included in this study. Participants were selected from the RELATE database for the study if one or both partners reported at least one incidence of physical assault (throwing things, pushing, hitting) over the past year, as measured by items from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale, and if both partners had also taken the Brief Accessibility Responsiveness and Engagement scale (BARE; Sandberg, Busby, Johnson, & Yoshida, 2012).

Procedure

Data were collected using the online RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE; Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997) from 2009 to 2011. The questionnaire consists of more than 300 items from various established measures, including those used for this analysis, that examine characteristics relevant to relationships. RELATE is offered to participants as an evaluation of individual and partner characteristics that are relevant in romantic relationships to be used for their betterment in current and future relationships. It can be taken by people in relationships as well as those who are not. As part of their use of the assessment for personal knowledge, participants consented to have their data used for research purposes. Participants were referred to the assessment by educators, therapists, clergy, or through family and friends. Participants were not compensated monetarily for their participation, but receive the benefit of learning more about themselves through an output following completion of the assessment. Participants were instructed to fill out the measure separately, but because they completed the measure at their own convenience, researchers could not control whether or not they filled the assessments out together. For this project, only those who took the assessment as a couple were included. Couples responded to items about themselves and their partner in four major contexts: (a) individual, (b) couple, (c) family, and (d) social. Therapeutic professionals, professors, researchers, and various forms of advertising referred participants to the questionnaire, and those included in the analysis consented to have their data used for future research projects.

Measures

Insecure attachment behaviors. Insecure attachment behaviors was a latent construct measured using the items from the BARE Scale (Sandberg et al., 2012). The BARE measures specific attachment behaviors to help researchers and clinicians better understand self-perceptions of behaviors that lead to secure attachment in couple relationships. Participants respond to six items assessing their own accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement (Table 2). Items are scored such that higher scores indicate more insecure attachment behaviors. The measure has displayed good reliability (classical testing–Cronbach's α was between .66 and .85 on six subscales; test–retest was .60 to .75; item response theory was appropriate) (Sandberg et al., 2012). Additionally, previous tests of construct validity have indicated excellent model fit (with CFI and TLI above .95 and RMSEA below .05; Sandberg et al.). Tests of concurrent validity indicated that the BARE subscales were significantly correlated with common relationship outcomes, such as relationship satisfaction, stability, and communication ($.21 < |r| > .73$), and that the scale is able to discriminate between high- and low-satisfaction groups (Wilk's $\Lambda = .37$, χ^2 (6, $N = 806$) = 802.23, $p < .001$) and high- and low-relationship stability groups (Wilk's $\Lambda = .53$, χ^2 (6, $N = 806$) = 401.59, $p < .001$) (Sandberg et al.). In this sample, reliability for men and women was alpha = .81. However, although participants respond on a Likert-type scale from 1 ("*Never true*") to 5 ("*Always true*"), possible responses are more categorical in nature ("Never true," "Rarely true," "Sometimes true," "Usually true," and "Always true"). Thus, item responses were treated as categorical indicators of the BARE latent construct for men and women, respectively. Men and women's latent constructs were allowed to covary. Confirmatory factor analysis for this sample revealed adequate model fit, χ^2 (53) = 336.07, $p < 001$; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .09, $p < .05$, 90% CI (.082, .101); factor loadings are found in Table 1.

Relational aggression. Relational aggression was a latent construct measured using the items from the Couples Relational Aggression and Victimization Scale (CRAVIS; Nelson & Carroll,

Table 1
Standardized Factor Loadings (and Standard Errors) for Measurement Models

	Female	Male
Insecure attachment behaviors[a]		
I am rarely available to my partner	.785 (.024)***	.752 (.023)***
It is hard for my partner to get my attention	.721 (.025)***	.677 (.026)***
It is hard for me to confide in my partner	.784 (.024)***	.758 (.023)***
I struggle to feel close and engaged in our relationship	.795 (.023)***	.799 (.023) ***
I listen when my partner shares her/his deepest feelings. (reverse coded)	.734 (.027)***	.637 (.03)***
I am confident I reach out to my partner. (reverse coded)	.678 (.048)***	.642 (.055)***
Relational aggression[b]		
I have threatened to end my relationship with my romantic partner in order to get him/her to do what I wanted	.596 (.037)***	.585 (.043)***
I have gone "behind my partner's back" and shared private information about him/her with other people	.556 (.039)***	.533 (.048)***
I have given my partner the silent treatment or "cold shoulder" when he/she has hurt my feelings or made me angry in some way	.730 (.03)***	.696 (.033)***
When I have been mad at my partner, I have recruited other people to "take sides" with me and get them upset with him/her too	.735 (.036)***	.709 (.04)***
I have intentionally ignored my partner until he/she gives in to my way about something	.798 (.029)***	.857 (.028)***
I have withheld physical affection from my partner when I was angry with him/her	.698 (.03)***	.538 (.043)***
I have spread rumors or negative information about my partner to be mean	.812 (.057)***	.645 (.055)***
Physical aggression[c]		
My partner threw something at me that could hurt	.466 (.041)***	.447 (.047)***
My partner pushed or shoved me	.623 (.044)***	.803 (.058)***
My partner punched or hit me with something that could hurt	.739 (.055)***	.792 (.072)***

Note. [a]Model fit: $\chi 2$ (53) = 336.069***; RMSEA = .091; CFI = .948; TLI = .935; [b]model fit: χ^2 (76) = 295.556***; RMSEA = .067; CFI = .910; TLI = .893; [c]model fit: (Fully saturated model for men and women). ***$p < .001$.

2006). Participants responded to seven items (Table 2) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Very often"); however, possible responses are more categorical in nature ("Never," "Rarely," "Sometimes," "Often," and "Very Often"), and items were treated as categorical indicators of a relational aggression latent construct for men and women, respectively. Men and women's latent constructs were allowed to covary. Confirmatory factor analysis for this sample revealed adequate model fit, χ^2 (76) = 295.56, $p < .001$; CFI = .91; TLI = .89; RMSEA = .067, $p < .05$, 90% CI (.059, .075); factor loadings are found in Table 1. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha for men and women in this sample are .75 and .79, respectively.

Physical aggression. Physical aggression was a latent construct measured using three items from the physical assault scale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). These were the only items from the CTS-2 that were included in the larger RELATE measure. The literature on reporting topics such as IPV has shown partner

Table 2
Frequencies of Categorical Latent Variable Indicators, Means, and Standard Deviations

	n	1		2		3		4		5		*M*	*SD*
Insecure attachment behaviors[a]													
Male													
I am rarely available to my partner	642	233	36%	333[†]	52%	54	8%	18	3%	4	1%	1.8	.758
It is hard for my partner to get my attention	642	214	33%	328[†]	51%	77	12%	21	3%	2	0%	1.86	.771
It is hard for me to confide in my partner	642	223	35%	270[†]	42%	80	12%	59	9%	10	2%	2.01	.991
I struggle to feel close and engaged in our relationship	639	187	29%	271[†]	42%	96	15%	75	12%	10	2%	2.14	1.018
I listen when my partner shares her/his deepest feelings. (reverse coded)	642	300[†]	47%	297	46%	41	6%	4	1%	0	0%	1.609	.635
I am confident I reach out to my partner. (reverse coded)	142	31	22%	66[†]	46%	42	30%	3	2%	0	0%	2.119	.767
Female													
I am rarely available to my partner	644	328[†]	51%	264	41%	37	6%	11	2%	4	1%	1.6	.73
It is hard for my partner to get my attention	642	310[†]	48%	275	43%	41	6%	15	2%	1	0%	1.63	.721
It is hard for me to confide in my partner	643	271[†]	42%	241	37%	74	12%	41	6%	16	2%	1.9	1.003
I struggle to feel close and engaged in our relationship	643	237[†]	37%	210	33%	75	12%	93	14%	28	4%	2.17	1.196
	643	394[†]	61%	222	35%	23	4%	3	0%	1	0%	1.437	.604

Table 2
Continued

	n	1		2		3		4		5		*M*	*SD*
I listen when my partner shares her/his deepest feelings. (reverse coded)													
I am confident I reach out to my partner. (reverse coded)	143	52	36%	58[†]	41%	23	16%	9	6%	1	1%	1.94	.918
Relational aggression[b]													
Male—I have...													
threatened to end my relationship	641	493[†]	77%	100	16%	36	6%	8	1%	4	1%	1.33	.696
gone "behind my partner's back"	642	378[†]	59%	166	26%	75	12%	15	2%	8	1%	1.61	.873
given my partner the silent treatment	400	69	17%	125	31%	149[†]	37%	48	12%	9	2%	2.51	.986
recruited other people to "take sides" with me	400	306[†]	77%	75	19%	16	4%	2	1%	1	0%	1.29	.590
intentionally ignored my partner	399	189[†]	47%	133	33%	66	17%	10	3%	1	0%	1.75	.837
withheld physical affection from my partner	398	139[†]	35%	132	33%	100	25%	17	4%	10	3%	2.06	.998
spread rumors about my partner to be mean	400	373[†]	93%	25	6%	1	0%	1	0%	0	0%	1.08	.327
Female—I have...													
threatened to end my relationship	644	421[†]	65%	125	19%	71	11%	20	3%	7	1%	1.55	.886
gone "behind my partner's back"	643	293[†]	46%	185	29%	125	19%	30	5%	10	2%	1.88	.982

Table 2
Continued

	n	1		2		3		4		5		*M*	*SD*
given my partner the silent treatment	396	55	14%	113	29%	135†	34%	71	18%	22	6%	2.73	1.082
recruited other people to "take sides" with me	396	283†	71%	71	18%	37	9%	5	1%	0	0%	1.4	.710
intentionally ignored my partner	396	205†	52%	111	28%	59	15%	14	4%	7	2%	1.76	.954
withheld physical affection from my partner	395	101	26%	110	28%	116†	29%	51	13%	17	4%	2.43	1.129
spread rumors or about my partner to be mean	396	371†	94%	17	4%	6	2%	1	0%	1	0%	1.09	.399

	n	0		1		2		3		4		5		6		7		*M*	*SD*
Physical aggression[c]																			
Male—My partner...																			
threw something	643	251	39%	279†	43%	66	10%	25	4%	16	2%	3	0%	2	0%	1	0%	.91	1.036
pushed or shoved me	400	149†	37%	75	19%	82	21%	43	11%	33	8%	10	3%	5	1%	3	1%	1.5	1.577
punched or hit w/object	400	214†	54%	57	14%	60	15%	32	8%	18	5%	10	3%	3	1%	6	2%	1.14	1.589
Female—My partner...																			
threw something	644	329†	51%	234	36%	61	9%	15	2%	3	0%	2	0%	0	0%	0	0%	.66	.821
pushed or shoved me	396	234†	59%	53	13%	57	14%	24	6%	18	5%	9	2%	0	0%	1	0%	.92	1.356
punched or hit w/object	395	340†	86%	25	6%	16	4%	5	1%	6	2%	3	1%	0	0%	0	0%	.28	.834

Note. [a]1 = never true, 2 = rarely true, 3 = sometimes true, 4 = usually true, 5 = always true; [b]1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very often; [c]0 = never happened, 1 = happened but not in the past year, 2 = once in the past year, 3 = twice in the past year, 4 = 3–5 times in the past year, 5 = 6–10 times in the past year 6 = 11–20 times in the past year, and 7 = more than 20 times in the past year; †mode.

reports to be less biased (Cui, Lorenz, Conger, Melby, & Bryant, 2005; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1997), possibly because violent partners are more likely to distort violence (Whiting, Oka, & Fife, 2012). Thus, partner reports of physical aggression were used for our analyses.

Participants reported on the frequency of their partner's physically aggressive behaviors (Table 2). Possible responses were categorical and included "This has never happened to me," "Not in the past year but it did happen before," "Once in the past year," "Twice in the past year," "3–5 times in the past year," "6–10 times in the past year," and "11–20 times in the past year." Confirmatory factor analysis utilizing the three items as categorical indicators of a continuous latent construct was conducted for men and women separately, which resulted in fully saturated models for this sample. Factor loadings are found in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha for men and women in this sample is .68 and .64, respectively.

Analytic strategy

In recent years, family scholars have advocated using models that examine nonindependence among related people—specifically couples and family members (Friedlander, Kivilghan, & Shaffer, 2012; Oka & Whiting, 2013; Wittenborn, Dolbin-MacNabb, & Keiley, 2012). One such model is the APIM, which treats the couple as the unit of analysis and analyzes each partner's scores simultaneously, as if they are two scores from the same respondent (Kenny et al., 2006). In APIM, actor and partner effects are two of the main parameters estimated in a model. Actor effects estimate a relatedness of one person's predictor variable and his or her own outcome variable, while partner effects estimate the relatedness of one person's predictor variable to his or her partner's outcome variable.

All analyses were conducted using structural equation modeling in Mplus 7.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2009). We fit an APIM utilizing the latent constructs described above to test whether negative attachment behaviors were related to self- and partner's physical aggression. We also examined the effect of poor attachment behaviors on self- and other relational aggression and the relationship between relational aggression and self- and other physical aggression. Age, income, and educational level were included as covariates and controlled. Because latent construct indicators are categorical, analyses were conducted using weighted least squares with means and variances (WLSMV) estimation. Indicators of all latent constructs are positively skewed (see Table 2), and WLSMV estimation has been found superior to WLS and handles skewness among categorical variables well (Muthén, du Toit, & Spisic, 1997). The WLSMV estimator in Mplus handles missing data using present pairwise deletion (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2010). Regular chi-square difference tests cannot be conducted when using the WLSMV estimator because the difference between two chi-square values are not distributed as chi-square (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2009); however, equivalence of parameter estimates for men and women can be tested by constraining paths and using the DIFFTEST command in Mplus (which conceptually is equivalent to a chi-square difference test of nested models). If model fit worsened with the addition of a constraint, it was removed and equivalence of other paths was tested. If model fit did not worsen with each constraint, it was retained as other constraints were tested for the final model. After a final model was selected (using fit indices described in Hu & Bentler, 1999), mediation was tested using bootstrapping (Hayes, 2009) to examine the indirect effect of poor attachment behaviors on self- and partner's physical aggression through self- and partner's relational aggression (Figure 1).

RESULTS

Frequencies were obtained for categorical indicators for each latent construct for men and women separately prior fitting the full model (see Table 2 for frequencies and descriptive statistics). Overall, the data represent relatively low levels of insecure attachment behaviors, relational aggression, and physical aggression in the sample, with most participants giving responses in the categories indicative of low levels in items measured.

We fit the hypothesized model and obtained good model fit, χ^2 (1069) = 1646.29, $p < .001$; CFI = .91; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .029, 90% CI: (.026, .032), $p = 1.0$. A series of tests using the DIFFTEST option in Mplus were conducted, in which paths for men and women were constrained

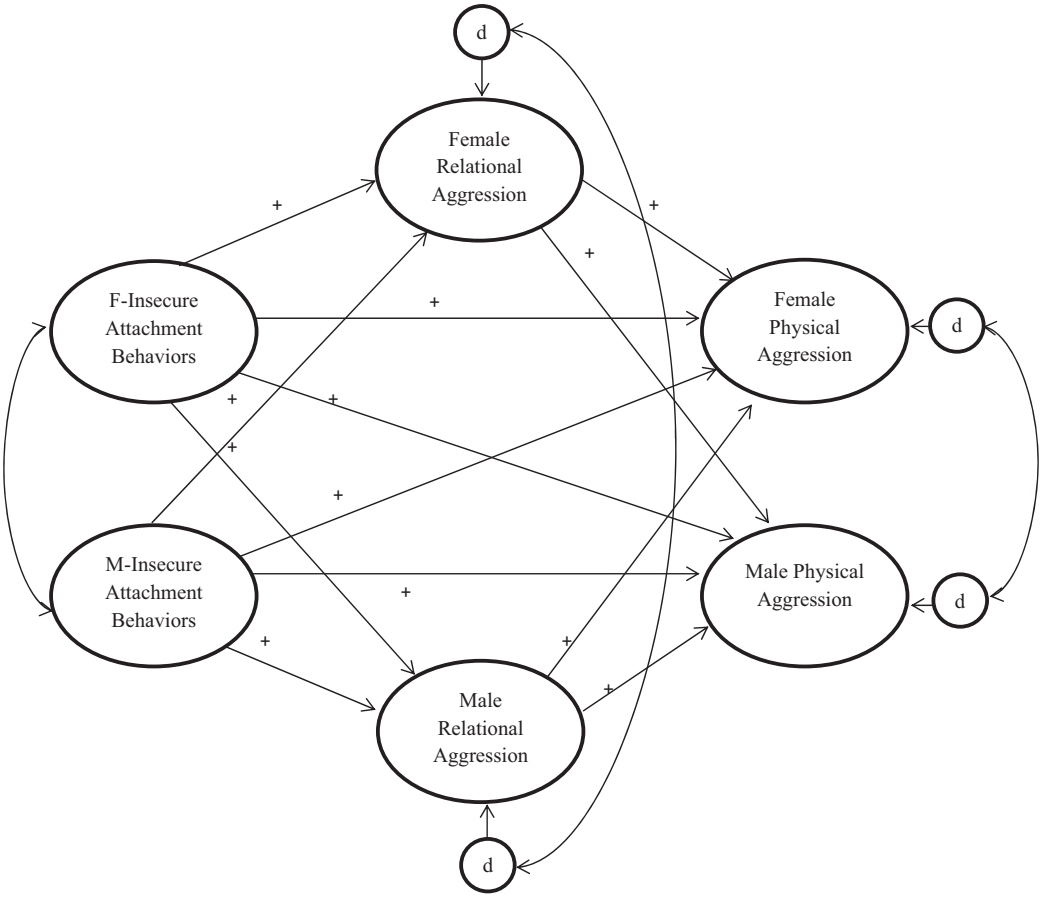

Figure 1. Hypothesized SEM model.

to be equal. Equivalence constraints for the following paths resulted in worsened model fit and were thus left to be freely estimated: insecure attachment behaviors → physical aggression, $\chi^2(1) = 4.50$, $p = .03$; relational aggression → physical aggression, $\chi^2(1) = 7.74$, $p = .01$; and insecure attachment behaviors → relational aggression, $\chi^2(1) = 4.42$, $p = .04$. Equivalence constraints for the following paths did not worsen model fit and were therefore retained for the final model: insecure attachment behaviors → partner relational aggression, $\chi^2(1) = 1.69$, $p = .19$; insecure attachment behaviors → partner's physical aggression, $\chi^2(1) = 2.24$, $p = .13$; and relational aggression → partner physical aggression, $\chi^2(1) = .28$, $p = .60$. The final model fit was good, $\chi^2(1072) = 1646.40$, $p < .001$; CFI = .91; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .03, 90% CI: (.026, .032), $p = 1.0$, and indicated that all actor path estimates were statistically significantly different for men and women, whereas all partner path estimates were statistically the same for men and women. Bivariate correlations among the latent constructs can be found in Table 3.

Direct effects

Figure 2 contains standardized and unstandardized parameter estimates associated with statistically significant paths in the structural model. For women, there was one significant actor effect where insecure attachment behaviors were positively associated with relational aggression ($B = .52$, $p < .001$). Neither insecure attachment behaviors nor relational aggression predicted their physical aggression. For men, all three actor effects were significant. Insecure attachment behaviors were positively associated with their own relational aggression ($B = .43$, $p < .001$), but negatively associated with physical aggression ($B = -.36$, $p < .001$). Additionally, relational aggression was positively associated with physical aggression ($B = .39$, $p < .001$).

Table 3
Bivariate Correlations of Latent Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Female Physical Aggression	1.000					
2. Male Physical Aggression	0.206	1.000				
3. Female Relational Aggression	0.101	0.362	1.000			
4. Male Relational Aggression	0.269	0.337	0.242	1.000		
5. Female Insecure Attachment behaviors	0.117	0.267	0.512	0.170	1.000	
6. Male Insecure Attachment Behaviors	0.277	−0.047	0.204	0.430	0.411	1.000

Note. The latent variable correlations were not explicitly tested in the model; these results are derived from the covariance matrix used by Mplus to estimate the model; hence, no *p*-values are available.

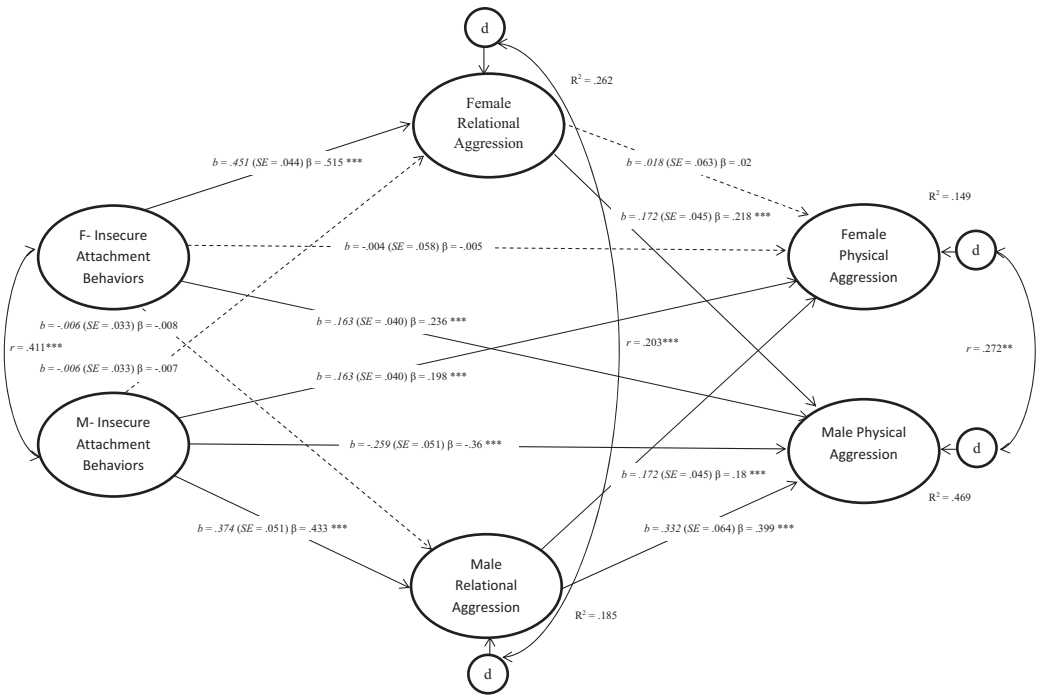

Figure 2. Final SEM Model. Model fit: χ^2=1646.4*** *df* = 1072, RMSEA = .029, CFI = .906, TLI = .901.
Note: Solid lines denote statistically significant effects; broken lines denote tested, but nonsignificant effects. *b*-Unstandardized (Standard Errors). β-Standardized coefficients. *r*-Pearson correlations. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Partner effects were also detected for men and women. Insecure attachment behaviors (B = .24 and .19, $p < .001$, for men and women, respectively) and relational aggression (B = .22 and .18, $p < .001$, for men and women, respectively) were positively associated with their partner's physical aggression. Note that even though standardized coefficients appear different, they are statistically equivalent. There were no significant partner effects of attachment behaviors on relational aggression. Results also indicate that 26.2% of the variance in women's relational aggression, 18.5% of men's relational aggression, 14.9% of women's physical aggression, and 46.9% of men's

physical aggression are explained by the model. Because we obtained unexpected results for the direct effect of men's insecure attachment behaviors on their physical aggression, we were interested to know how much of the variance in physical aggression that was explained by the model was uniquely attributable to this direct effect. To do so, we constrained the path to be zero (thereby removing the direct effect) and examined the difference in the proportion of variance in men's physical aggression explained by the model. Results indicated that 12.3% of the variance accounted for men's physical aggression is uniquely attributable to the direct effect of their insecure attachment behaviors.

Indirect effects

Although model results suggest that relational aggression does not fully mediate the relationship between one's insecure attachment behaviors and their own physical aggression, we tested these indirect effects using bootstrapping to examine findings for men. Because we unexpectedly found that insecure attachment was actually negatively related to physical aggression, a test of indirect effects would reveal whether the magnitude of the indirect effect through relational aggression was comparable to the unexpected direct effect. For men, the indirect actor effect of insecure attachment behaviors on their physical aggression (through their relational aggression) was statistically significant, $B = .17(.04)$, $p < .001$, (and smaller than the previously identified direct effect). The total effect of men's insecure attachment behaviors on their physical violence ($B = -.19$ (.04), $p < .001$) indicates that for every standard deviation increase in insecure attachment, physical aggression actually decreases .19.

Additionally, it appears that one's relational aggression partially mediates the relationship between their insecure attachment behaviors and their partner's physical aggression. Thus, we also tested that indirect effect for men and women (e.g., women's attachment → women's relational aggression → men's physical aggression). The indirect partner effect of women's insecure attachment behaviors on men's physical aggression (through women's relational aggression) was statistically significant, $B = .11$ (.05), $p = .01$, as was the total effect of women's insecure attachment on men's physical aggression, $B = .35$ (.05), $p < .001$. The indirect partner effect of men's insecure attachment behaviors on women's physical aggression (through men's relational aggression) was statistically significant ($B = .08$, $p = .01$), as was the total effect of men's insecure attachment on women's physical aggression, $B = .28$ (.04), $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Actor effects

The results that link female insecure attachment to relational aggression extend the literature on relational aggression and attachment, as well as the literature tying insecure attachment to increased physical aggression (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000). On the other hand, the significant relationship between secure male attachment and male physical aggression was not in the direction expected based on previous literature regarding relational and physical aggression and insecure attachment, which suggests that those who are more insecurely attached are more likely to be violent. We hypothesize that this path may be mediated by total disengagement. In other words, a subset of insecurely attached men (avoidant) become more disengaged as they become more insecure and are less likely to be violent (Doumas, Pearson, Elgin, & McKinley, 2008) and our results may reflect this type of insecure attachment behaviors. Implications for a follow-up study will be discussed in the next section. Finally, there was a positive relationship between male relational aggression and male physical aggression. This suggests that, for men, relational aggression occurs in addition to physical aggression, not as an alternative (Bagner et al., 2007). Therefore, we cannot assume that if a couple reports they are engaging in relational aggression that physical violence is not also present.

Partner effects

The partner effects of attachment to aggression also occur in the expected directions—that is, participants' insecure attachment is related to their partners' use of aggression for both males and females. Of note was the finding that the total effect of women's negative attachment behaviors on

men's physical aggression was stronger than the total effect of men's attachment behaviors on their own physical aggression (direct and indirect). In this model, insecure attachment precedes use of aggression, rather than the other way around. While the data are not longitudinal, there is some evidence for insecure attachment preceding violence. For example, Kesner and McKenry (1997) found that female partners of male offenders were more likely to have insecure attachment from childhood.

These findings point to a pattern of female relational aggression and male physical aggression, but no evidence of a pattern in the other direction (male relational aggression to female physical aggression). Most discussions of the interactions of partner violence remind us that, while partner violence may be two-sided, men and women may have different contributions to the pattern. Both partners must take responsibility for their contributions to that pattern. For example, men are typically more physically powerful than women. Accordingly, men have a responsibility to recognize their greater capacity for injury in a physical altercation. Similarly, research suggests that women have a greater capacity for verbal communication (Johnson, 2008). Relational aggression may be an extension of that capacity with women spreading rumors about their partners or recruiting others in relationships against their partners that is less likely in men. Findings also suggest that women need to take responsibility for the nonviolent aggressive things that they do, as well, which will be discussed in the next section.

Implications for clinicians

It is crucial to state, at the outset of this section, that there is a difference between how a clinician may wish to conceptualize or understand relational violence and the proven methods for treating this issue (Stith et al., 2012). Therefore, when examining violence in the couple context, it is important to address ethical implications. Some scholars suggest conjoint therapy can pressure women to stay in violent relationships, or even lead to blaming of the victim (Loseke & Kurz, 2005). By advocating for violence and aggression to be examined from a couple interaction perspective, we acknowledge that these are legitimate concerns and should be considered when making decisions about therapy with couples where violence is an issue. We acknowledge several recent articles that have provided some guidelines and that therapists should be familiar with state laws regarding treatment of IPV (Todahl & Walters, 2011).

The findings for this study are largely conceptual in nature, namely the results suggest that attachment theory may provide a useful framework for how to understand the escalation of relational aggression and physical assault in intimate relationships. Ethics and clinical experience teach it is not appropriate to ask for openness and connection where such "expressions of vulnerability are likely to be dysfunctional and place the abused partner more at risk" (Johnson, 2004, p. 206). Though, couples therapists may find this attachment framework extremely helpful in working with individuals with anger and control issues, when working with those who do not yet possess the ability to ask in nonviolent ways for needs to be met.

Once conditions of safety have been met, other considerations may be addressed. For example, relational aggression between partners may be more likely to manifest in therapy than in physical aggression and may be more likely to be ignored or missed by the therapist. As previously stated, relational aggression may take the form of colluding with the therapist to exclude a partner. Therapists may wish to identify this collusion as an *en vivo* example of relational aggression and help couples describe it in attachment terms, focusing on the hoped-for outcome of such behavior. A number of illustrative questions may highlight the attachment needs that can drive aggressive behavior, such as "in the moment right before you said (or did) the aggressive thing, what were you longing for from your partner?" Such a question might help the listening partner to consider something that has been unrecognized previously, namely that a partner's aggression may actually be an attempt to seek connection or closeness (Tilley & Palmer, 2012). This pursue—distance cycle —has elsewhere been connected to attachment (Johnson, 2004).

Further, examining the impact of relational aggression on a couple's pattern of violence lends some weight to the concept. Confronting partners' aggressive behavior head-on may draw some defensiveness. Additionally, relational aggression, by its nature, is an elusive concept. However, focusing on the contribution the aggressive behavior makes to violence, and, further, its link to insecure attachment may help partners be more aware of their behaviors and amenable to change.

Implications for future research

To establish and generalize these findings, longitudinal research is needed to establish direction and causality among attachment, relational aggression, and IPV variables. Also, in-depth, qualitative interviews are needed to truly understand any attachment meaning and intention that may underlay aggressive behavior. Longitudinal clinical outcome studies, where attachment-based therapy models are appropriately and ethically matched to specific types of violent couples, are needed to determine whether attachment-based treatment is as effective as the theoretical conceptualizations suggest it may be.

Further, our findings suggested that, for males, insecure attachment may actually be related to less physical violence, echoing findings that certain insecure attachment styles are less likely to be prone to violence (Bond & Bond, 2004). As this study did not test for attachment styles, a follow-up study might include couple profiles of attachment using the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Additionally, this study makes a case for further examination of partner attachment on aggression. The findings that the total effect for female attachment on male violence was greater than those of male attachment on male violence suggest that there are cross-partner interactions occurring in violence and attachment that merit further studies. Given that this study used partner reports, a future study could examine in more depth how a male's perception that his partner is insecure in her attachment impacts his behavior.

Limitations

Despite the fact that, for most of the indicators of physical assault, the presence of violence in the sample matched that of national violence surveys (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the small subsample of couples in the RELATE dataset who were violent and had also reported on both relational aggression and the BARE was a limitation methodologically. Further, we acknowledge that the broad nature of RELATE did not allow us to a comprehensive measure of violence by including the entire CTS-2. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data did not allow us to make inferences regarding causality. In other words, it is difficult to determine whether people are aggressive as a result of attachment insecurity, or whether people are insecurely attached as a result of violence and aggression in their relationships. Further, while this study has clinical implications, the study's sample is a community sample, rather than a clinical one. It can be assumed that, if we were to focus this study on a clinical sample, the rates of violence would be more pronounced and less skewed (Stith et al., 2011), as well as, presumably, the lack of attachment security (Pielage, Luteijn, & Arrindell, 2005). Further, while we were able to control for some of the correlates of physical aggression in this study, we were unable to control for all of them (i.e., alcohol and drug use).

Finally, the majority of our sample was Caucasian and college educated. The largely homogeneous sample makes it difficult to generalize the findings to minority populations. While studies have conflicted as to how and whether ethnicity and violence are related, several studies have shown that there is a relationship between violence and educational level, such that those with less education tend to be more violent. Of note are Johnson's (2008) findings that there is a negative relationship between intimate terrorism and educational level, as well as situational couple violence and educational level. This suggests that a more educationally diverse sample might yield a larger portion of violent couples.

CONCLUSION

Attachment, IPV, and relational aggression are interrelated in important ways. Most importantly, self-perceptions of attachment have a bigger impact on one's propensity for violence than partner perceptions of the self's attachment. Additionally, the relationship between attachment and partners' physical aggression is mediated by the presence of relational aggression. While this model does not fully account for couple violence, it does make a strong case for examining IPV at a couple level and for the inclusion of attachment interventions in working with violent and relationally aggressive partners.

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