Love as a Battlefield: Attachment and Relationship Dynamics in Couples Identified for Male Partner Violence
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The authors explored the attachment dynamics of heterosexual couples identified for male partner violence. Based on semistructured interviews, participants were assessed for attachment orientations. Based on a thematic analysis of the interviews, two strategies for regulating distance within these relationships were identified: pursuit and distancing. Partners’ abusive acts often appeared to serve one of these attachment strategies. As a pursuit strategy, violence forced one partner to focus on the other, and as a distancing strategy, violence served to push a partner back when the perpetrator had been approached too closely and perceived no other means of escape or self-protection. To understand the context in which individuals acted abusively, the authors considered the interaction between the attachment orientations of both partners as they sought to regulate their emotional and physical proximity. Findings highlight the relational basis of intimate violence.

Keywords: attachment behavior; couples; intimate partner violence; qualitative research

The goal of this study was to explore the interpersonal dynamics of heterosexual relationships characterized by male-to-female partner violence. We used attachment theory as a framework for understanding the interaction patterns that occur in these violent relationships. We took a dyadic approach, seeking to understand how both partners’ attachment
orientations may interact in setting the stage for partner violence. Finally, we employed a qualitative method to elaborate the relationship dynamics of a sample of couples identified for male partner violence.

**Attachment Theory**

Drawing on ethological theory, Bowlby (1969) proposed attachment theory to explain the human drive to form relationships with others and to maintain a desired level of accessibility to close others, referred to as attachment figures. He hypothesized that infant attachment behavior such as crying, clinging, or seeking contact is regulated by an innate motivational system called the attachment behavioral system. The evolutionary purpose of these behaviors is to promote infant and child survival by maintaining proximity between the infant or child and the attachment figure, particularly in threatening situations. If the caregiver is responsive to the child’s needs, giving contact and reassurance, attachment behavior ceases and the child learns that the attachment relationship provides a safe haven. Childhood expectations about the availability and helpfulness of primary attachment figures, usually the parents, are internalized as working models of attachment that guide subsequent interactions with others. In adulthood, primary attachment shifts from unidirectional child-to-caregiver relationships to reciprocal attachment relationships with peers, most notably adult romantic relationships (e.g., Hazan & Zeifman, 1999). Although attachment processes and relationships are universal, individuals display considerable variation in their preferred level of accessibility to attachment partners.

Bowlby (1969) further contended that threats to the accessibility or availability of an attachment figure lead to attachment anxiety and the activation of protest behaviors. Anger is a functional protest behavior when it serves to maintain contact with an attachment figure. For instance, when children are threatened with the loss of their attachment figures, they may respond with anger to encourage their attachment figures to increase proximity. Moreover, anger may discourage the attachment figure from straying too far from an acceptable level of proximity in the future. Anger may, however, become dysfunctional; this is particularly notable in violent relationships. According to Bowlby (1984), violence may be “the distorted and exaggerated version of a behavior that is potentially functional” (p. 12).

Bartholomew’s four-prototype model of attachment conceptualizes individual differences in attachment based on Bowlby’s (1969) proposal that two dimensions underlie internal working models: positivity of self-views and of views of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). More recently, these
dimensions have been reconceptualized as anxiety, the tendency to experience anxiety over separation and abandonment, and avoidance, the tendency to avoid closeness when experiencing attachment anxiety (e.g., Fraley & Waller, 1998). An individual’s attachment orientation may be defined in terms of the intersection of these two dimensions, yielding four attachment prototypes: secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing (see Figure 1).

Prototypically secure individuals are low in attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. They have high self-esteem and are able to form and maintain intimate bonds with others without losing a sense of self. In times of threat, they are flexible in their approach to problem solving; depending on the nature of the problem, they are comfortable relying either on themselves or on intimate others for support. Prototypically preoccupied individuals are high in attachment anxiety and low in attachment avoidance. They have low self-esteem, which manifests itself as an excessive need for

![Bartholomew's Two-Dimensional, Four-Prototype Model of Adult Attachment](image-url)
the approval of others. They respond to their anxiety by actively seeking or demanding contact with, and reassurance from, an attachment figure. Prototypically fearful individuals are high in attachment anxiety and high in attachment avoidance. They believe themselves to be unworthy of love, and they fear rejection by others, paradoxically both desiring and fearing intimacy. During times of distress, fearful individuals withdraw from their attachment figures in an attempt to maintain certain (even low) levels of accessibility without risking rejection. Prototypically dismissing individuals are low in attachment anxiety and high in attachment avoidance. Like the fearfully attached, dismissing individuals prefer to maintain distance from others, especially in times of stress. However, by downplaying the importance of close relationships and defensively deactivating the attachment system, they are able to maintain high self-esteem and reduce their tendency to experience attachment anxiety.

In summary, preoccupied and fearful individuals both experience high levels of attachment anxiety, but they differ in their response to their anxiety: The preoccupied approach others for support, whereas the fearful withdraw from others to avoid rejection. In contrast, the fearful and dismissing both experience high levels of avoidance but differ in their levels of attachment anxiety: The fearful are highly sensitive to rejection and interpersonal loss, whereas the dismissing defensively deny their need for others.

Attachment and Partner Violence

Most previous research examining partner violence from an attachment perspective has focused on only one partner: the perpetrator or the victim. In a sample of men referred to treatment for marital violence, Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, and Bartholomew (1994) found an association between self-reported fearful and preoccupied attachment and perpetration of partner violence. In two studies including both clinical and community participants, Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, and Hutchinson (1997) found that violent/distressed husbands showed elevated levels of anxious attachment on self-report measures of attachment (specifically preoccupied and fearful), as well as mixed insecure styles on the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984). Replicating and extending the Holtzworth-Munroe et al. study, Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, and Yerington (2000) found that violent/distressed husbands were more likely to be insecure than were nonviolent husbands, as assessed by the AAI. Generally, researchers have interpreted associations between attachment anxiety and partner abuse in terms of
Bowlby’s (1984) proposition that abuse is a dysfunctional form of protest behavior designed to maintain proximity with an attachment figure.

Less attention has been given to understanding the victims of partner violence from an attachment perspective. Strong attachment bonds are expected to be formed and maintained even when the attachment figure (in adulthood, most often the romantic partner) may be the source of threat (Dutton & Painter, 1993). In such cases, individuals manifesting the high separation anxiety and fear of loss associated with high attachment anxiety may have difficulty leaving an abusive relationship (Henderson, Bartholomew, & Dutton, 1997). Consistent with these speculations, Henderson and colleagues (1997) found that the majority of women identified as victims of violence were high in attachment anxiety (53% preoccupied, 35% fearful).

Associations between attachment orientations and partner violence in nonclinical samples, where relatively low levels of relationship violence are reported, parallel those observed in clinical samples. The pattern of associations also appears to hold across gender. For example, in a diverse community sample, Henderson, Bartholomew, Trinke, and Kwong (2005) found an association between preoccupied attachment and both the receipt and the perpetration of relationship aggression, for both men and women. In addition, in a sample of male and female undergraduates, Bookwala and Zdaniuk (1998) found that preoccupied attachment and fearful attachment were significantly associated with dating violence. In a similar sample, Bookwala (2002) found that perpetration of aggression and receipt of aggression were also linked to individuals’ perceptions of their partners’ insecure attachment, with the most consistent associations being with their partners’ perceived preoccupation.

In sum, studies examining the association between attachment and relationship violence have consistently identified an association between high attachment anxiety and partner violence, whether the emphasis of the study was on perpetration or receipt of violence. However, none of these studies used the couple as the unit of analysis. As argued by Feeney (2003) and Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, and Cowan (2002), to understand couple relationships it is essential to consider both partners’ attachment orientations and how they interact with one another. Similarly, as Gelles (1985) has pointed out, a systems approach to couple violence would focus on understanding violence as the product of a dysfunctional marital system, not just individual pathology.

Roberts and Noller (1998) examined the role of both partners’ attachment patterns in relationship violence. Using a large community sample, they found that attachment anxiety was associated with the perpetration of violence by each partner and that men’s attachment anxiety predicted victimization by their female partners. Roberts and Noller further identified an
interaction between anxiety and avoidance such that violence was elevated only when a partner high in attachment anxiety was coupled with a partner high in attachment avoidance. They speculated that violence may be used by one partner (who fears abandonment) to close the emotional gap to another partner (who tends to avoid intimacy). This study clearly demonstrated the importance of considering both partners’ characteristics when examining couple dynamics that may give rise to partner violence.

The Current Study

In this study, we examined the relational dynamics of heterosexual couples identified for male partner violence. Although previous research has suggested links between adult attachment orientation and partner violence, it has provided limited insight into the processes through which attachment may have an impact on abusive behavior. We explored the possibility raised by Bowlby (1984) that anger and violence are sometimes means by which individuals try to coerce a less available partner to stay close and accessible. We also tried to uncover other dynamics. For example, Mikulincer (1998) argues that avoidant individuals may have heightened needs for control in close relationships to protect their autonomy and avoid activation of their attachment systems. Thus, we explored the possibility that individuals use violent acts to distance themselves from partners and/or to more generally control their intimate partners (cf. Babcock et al., 2000).

In addition to exploring the potential role of attachment-related needs and strategies in understanding violence toward intimate partners, we explored how both partners’ attachment orientations may interact in the unfolding of relationship dynamics in violent couples. For example, perhaps partners are most likely to act abusively as a means of distance regulation when the two partners have incompatible needs for interpersonal closeness.

The data for this study consisted of in-depth interviews with both members of heterosexual couples identified for male partner violence. In the interviews, participants described their histories of close relationships and their experiences in the target relationship. These interviews served two purposes. First, a standardized and validated coding system was used to assess participants’ characteristic attachment orientations based on their interview responses (see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Henderson et al., 2005). Specifically, continuous ratings were given on each of four attachment prototypes (secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissive) to yield an attachment profile for each individual. Second, we employed thematic analysis, a qualitative approach...
to data analysis, to analyze the interviews of both partners in a couple to uncover meaningful relationship dynamics associated with partner violence (e.g., Aronson, 1994; Lacey & Luff, 2001). Because of the lack of previous research examining the relational context in which intimate partners become violent and because we wanted to be open to different constellations of dynamics that might be identified, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. This approach allowed us to take as our starting point the participants’ narratives about their relationships and provided a rich basis from which to explore the relational context of partner violence. The goal of this analysis was to identify any consistent patterns that would help explain the occurrence of violence, with a particular focus on the relational dynamics associated with partner violence. We looked for themes suggested by previous literature—in particular, violence as a means of regulating desired closeness and violence as a means of maintaining relational control—but also we were open to any new themes that might emerge.

**Method**

This study was part of a larger project examining therapeutic outcomes of men entering the Vancouver Assaultive Husbands Program and the Victoria Family Violence Project. The full sample consisted of 38 court- and 40 self-referred, relationally violent males (Dutton et al., 1994). The current study examined a subsample of 23 men and their female partners who completed the History of Attachments Interview (HAI; Henderson et al., 2005).

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 23 couples identified for male-to-female violence in their intimate relationships. Fifteen men were self-referred, and 8 were court referred. The men’s mean age was 34.13 years ($SD = 8.18$, range 25-61 years); the women’s mean age was 33.70 years ($SD = 9.39$, range 23-59 years). The mean length of relationships was 6.10 years ($SD = 8.28$, range 1-40 years). Ten couples had been together less than 3 years, 10 had been together between 3 and 10 years, and 3 had been together over 10 years. The sample included 2 single (not cohabiting), 9 common-law, and 12 married couples. At the time of the interviews, 14 couples were separated, including 5 married, 8 common-law, and 1 single couple. In most cases, these separations were intended as temporary.
Men’s violence toward their partners in the past year was assessed by the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979), a standard measure of violent acts. The mean weighted violence score was 5.53 (SD = 5.70, median = 5.00), and the total frequency of violent acts in the past year was 5.70 (SD = 3.89, median = 5.00). Three quarters of the men reported having perpetrated severe acts of violence (kicked, beat up, etc.). On average, this sample scored above the 85th percentile of men who report any level of violence against their wives (Straus, 1990).\(^1\) As well, this level of violence was comparable to the level reported by the full sample of men in treatment for spousal violence (Dutton et al., 1994). Although this sample was chosen for male violence and we did not begin this project expecting that women in this sample were also violent, participants in 20 of 23 couples indicated that the female partner also engaged in non-self-defensive partner violence.

**Procedure**

Men entering the Vancouver Assaultive Husbands Program and the Victoria Family Violence Project were administered the HAI. Men completed the interviews, which took 1 to 3 hours, early in the treatment process to minimize the effects of treatment on interview responses. Their partners were given the same interview a week to several months later. All participants were interviewed individually by a member of their own gender. Informed consent was given, and confidentiality was assured. The men and women were asked not to discuss their respective responses with each other.

**Measures**

*HAI.* The HAI is a semistructured interview combining key components of the Family Attachment Interview (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which focuses on adult interpretations of childhood attachment experiences with parents and caregivers, and the Peer Attachment Interview (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which focuses on friendships and past and present romantic relationships. Respondents are asked about their relationships with significant others; how they respond when upset; how they resolve conflict with parents, partners, and peers; and how they see themselves and perceive that others see them. Relationships are examined chronologically beginning with the family of origin and moving on to friendships and romantic partnerships. Although the interview is semistructured, the interviewer has considerable latitude to probe participant experiences in the course of the narrative.
For this study, particular emphasis was placed on current relationships with partners, including the nature of interactions, feelings toward one another, and conflict within the relationship. Discussions of conflict in these couples, all of whom had experienced violence in their intimate relationships, naturally led to a discussion of violence. For the purposes of this study, the interviews served a twofold purpose: (a) to code attachment and (b) to qualitatively assess the relationship dynamics of each couple.

**Coding attachment.** Attachment coding was completed prior to the qualitative analyses, and each interview was assed by two coders, with women and men rated by different sets of coders (to maintain independence of ratings across partners). All coders (one of them the first author) had undergone extensive training to code the HAI and had reached reliability on a different set of interviews. Based on interview tapes, coders rated the degree to which interviewees’ relational experiences corresponded to each of four attachment prototypes—secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing—defined by Bartholomew’s (1990) attachment framework (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; see prototype descriptions above). Attachment prototypes were rated on 9-point continuous scales, ranging from $1 = \text{no correspondence with prototype}$ to $9 = \text{perfect fit with prototype}$. The two sets of ratings were averaged across each of the attachment prototypes to arrive at mean ratings for each individual. Alpha coefficients were used to assess interrater agreement (cf. Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Alphas for women’s ratings were .60 for secure, .88 for fearful, .83 for preoccupied, and .62 for dismissing. Alphas for men’s ratings were .71 for secure, .83 for fearful, .87 for preoccupied, and .81 for dismissing.2 (For more information on the procedure for coding attachment from the HAI, please see Mayseless, Bartholomew, Henderson, and Trinke, 2004; Henderson et al., 2005.)

The women’s means on each of the four prototypes were as follows: secure, 2.93 ($SD = 0.95$, range = 1.50-5.00); fearful, 3.65 ($SD = 1.70$, range = 1.50-7.00); preoccupied, 4.78 ($SD = 1.56$, range = 1.50-7.00); and dismissing, 1.96 ($SD = 0.89$, range = 1.00-4.00). The men’s means on each of the four prototypes were as follows: secure, 2.30 ($SD = 0.79$, range = 1.00-3.50); fearful, 3.52 ($SD = 1.55$, range = 1.50-6.50); preoccupied, 4.70 ($SD = 1.62$, range = 2.00-7.00); and dismissing, 3.59 ($SD = 1.60$, range = 1.00-6.50).

**Qualitative Analysis of Relationship Dynamics**

Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data (e.g., Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Lacey & Luff, 2001; Silverman, 2001). The goal of
thematic analysis is to identify patterns in the data through an inductive process. It is a complex, iterative process that leads to an understanding of the participants’ experiences. In this study, our goal was to understand the role of both partners’ attachment patterns in their approaches to conflict, particularly violent conflict.

After listening to audiotapes of the interviews, the first author made extensive notes on each of the men’s and women’s interviews. Using index cards, she organized the preliminary data, including both partners’ attachment profiles, levels, natures, and directionality of violence; the context of violent incidents; and relational dynamics leading up to and playing out in violent incidents. She used these cards to organize her extensive interview notes. She then wrote brief descriptions of the conflict dynamics of each couple, and the first, second, and third authors met to review and discuss the initial findings. Through this discussion, the researchers sought to identify relational dynamics that made sense of individuals’ striking out abusively toward their partners. As a specific theme of relationship dynamics emerged, the group critically assessed its validity vis-à-vis descriptions of other abusive incidents described by the participants. When the researchers’ interpretations did not converge or when one of the researchers questioned an interpretation, the first author revisited her notes and, if necessary, the audiotapes, and further discussion took place. This process was repeated until consensus was reached. When agreement was reached, the first author returned to the participant data to search for specific examples of the identified theme. Finally, we reviewed and critically assessed the themes of relational dynamics, concluding that we had identified two overarching relational dynamics associated with incidences of partner violence.

As expected with thematic analysis, not all themes initially identified were maintained. A few themes did not hold up under further scrutiny. For example, in a few couples we initially identified a theme in which a man’s violence appeared to be motivated by a desire to control his partner, even in the absence of perceived threats or emotional demands by the partner. However, when we examined this potential theme more thoroughly and studied the interviews of both partners in these relationships, we found that the men’s violence could also be interpreted in terms of other identified themes (all of which included elements of control) and that this theme was not evident in most abusive incidents. Moreover, there was no consistent pattern in the couples in which this theme occurred. For example, it was not the case that this theme only emerged with dismissing men or in couples with male-only violence. Therefore, we did not feel comfortable in concluding that we had identified a consistent relational pattern associated with partner violence.
The two partners in a given couple often had somewhat different views on their relational dynamics. As well, they did not necessarily describe the same violent episodes. However, we found their stories to be remarkably consistent, in spite of the different points of view. For example, one member of the couple might see a partner’s distancing behavior as indicating a lack of involvement in the relationship, whereas the distancing partner described the same behavior as stemming from being overwhelmed by a partner’s demands. Thus, although their interpretations might differ, partners generally described similar relationship dynamics.

Findings

Variability in Attachment Ratings

As attachment ratings of the individuals in this sample were examined, it became apparent that a large number of the participants manifested complex profiles of attachment orientations rather than having one clearly dominant orientation. Many participants had moderate to high scores on more than one attachment orientation. Thus, instead of forcing the participants into one specific category (e.g., fearful), we decided to describe them by using profiles. These attachment profiles gave us insight into the complexity of individual attachment as well as the combinations of attachment orientations within each couple. Predominant attachment profiles were derived by including those patterns rated 4 and above, indicating at least a moderate correspondence with the particular attachment prototype. A combination profile was assigned when attachment prototypes with a rating of greater than 4 were within 1 point of each other. For example, an individual whose averaged ratings yielded a profile of 2 on security, 5 on fearfulness, 6 on preoccupation, and 3 on dismissing was considered to have a combination preoccupied/fearful profile. When attachment prototypes with a rating of greater than 4 varied by 1.5 points or more, they were said to consist of primary (the highest rating over 4) and secondary (the second highest rating over 4) attachment profiles. For example, an individual who was rated 6 on fearful and 4 on preoccupied was considered to have a primary fearful and secondary preoccupied attachment. We use the following notation for such a pattern: fearful (preoccupied).

Of the women in this sample, 12 had predominantly preoccupied profiles (1 with secondary dismissing tendencies and another with secondary secure tendencies), and 6 had predominantly fearful profiles (2 with secondary preoccupied tendencies). Combination profiles, in which two prototypes were
primary (falling within 1 rating of each other), were also evident: 3 women had fearful/preoccupied profiles, 1 had a secure/preoccupied profile, and 1 had a preoccupied/dismissing profile. The male profiles showed somewhat greater variation: 9 men had predominantly preoccupied profiles (1 with secondary dismissing tendencies), 2 men had predominantly fearful profiles (1 with secondary preoccupation), and 4 men had predominantly dismissing profiles (3 with secondary preoccupation). Combination profiles accounted for an additional 8 men: fearful/dismissing (2 men), preoccupied/dismissing (1 man), fearful/preoccupied (4 men), and fearful/preoccupied/dismissing (1 man).

Given the homogeneity of this sample (chosen for male partner violence), the variability of attachment profiles within couples was striking. (For a summary of attachment profiles across couples, see Table 1.) Notably, there were no couples in which both partners had solely avoidant profiles. Rather, all participants who were primarily avoidant had partners who had either primary or secondary preoccupation in their attachment profile.

Themes of Relationship Dynamics: Pursuit and Distancing

On the basis of the qualitative analysis, we identified two consistent themes associated with partner violence. Although these themes did not encompass all incidents of violence described by participants, they were evident in all couples’ descriptions of their conflicts and in the large majority of violent encounters. Both themes that emerged were strategies for regulating the desired level of closeness in these relationships and the corresponding accessibility of the partner. We have labeled these themes as the strategy of pursuit and the strategy of distancing. Each of these strategies could take many forms, including, at times, acts of violence.

The strategy of pursuit included behaviors designed to increase emotional and/or physical closeness to a partner. This strategy is consistent with previous conceptualizations of partner abuse as being a form of protest behavior designed to increase proximity to an attachment figure. These behaviors took many forms, including a push for communication, verbal or physical abuse, clinging, demanding or needy behavior, and displays of jealousy. Each of these relational dynamics was first identified separately and only then in further reading combined into the general category of pursuit. The apparent goal of pursuit behaviors was to engage the partner, thus increasing a partner’s proximity and availability. For example, in a couple that
Table 1
Couple Profiles and Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Male Profile</th>
<th>Male Strategy</th>
<th>Female Profile</th>
<th>Female Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
<td>Secure/preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Fearful/dispersing</td>
<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Fearful/preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Dismissing (preoccupied)</td>
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<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>56</td>
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<td>Preoccupied</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Fearful/preoccupied</td>
<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
<td>Fearful/preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Fearful (preoccupied)</td>
<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
<td>Fearful/preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121</td>
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<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
<td>Preoccupied/dispersing</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>Fearful/preoccupied/dispersing</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
<td>Preoccupied (dismissing)</td>
<td>Pursuit/distancing</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Pursuit</td>
<td>Preoccupied (secure)</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
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<td>125</td>
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<tr>
<td>126</td>
<td>Dismissing (preoccupied)</td>
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<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Distancing</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>144</td>
<td>Dismissing</td>
<td>Distancing/pursuit</td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>Pursuit</td>
</tr>
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(continued)
combined a preoccupied woman and a fearful/dismissing man, she pursued him physically as well as verbally during arguments, trying to prevent him from leaving their home. In another couple that combined two preoccupied partners, when an argument escalated the male partner left their home and then repeatedly turned up at the same friend’s home. Being an expected pattern, his partner pursued him with multiple abusive phone calls. In both of these cases, the preoccupied partners attempted to decrease physical and emotional distance from their more distant partners.

The strategy of distancing included behaviors designed to decrease emotional and/or physical closeness to a partner. As far as we are aware, this strategy has not been identified previously in the abuse literature. Although we initially distinguished between a passive, retreating form of distancing (such as becoming quiet) and an active, turning away sort of distancing (such as physically removing oneself from a situation or avoiding a partner by remaining away from the home), further scrutiny and discussion led us to question this distinction. We could not categorize some distancing behaviors as either passive or active, and there did not appear to be any explanatory benefit to making this distinction. Therefore, we combined these different behaviors under a general strategy of distancing. For example, in one couple consisting of a preoccupied man and a fearful woman, his constant and intrusive demands to be involved in every aspect of her life were generally met with passive resistance. When he demanded to be involved in her decision making around her children (by a previous partner), she would “clam up,” effectively rebutting his perceived interference. In another couple that combined a fearful (preoccupied) man who worked out of town with a primarily preoccupied women, she pushed for more time together when he was home. She repeatedly tried to approach him to initiate dialogue about their relationship until he fled to his work once again. In both of these cases, fearful partners attempted to increase physical and emotional distance from their more intrusive partners.
We discovered that the same overt behavior could reflect different strategies, depending on the motivation behind the behavior and the form the behavior took. For example, extrarelationship affairs were often a pursuit strategy, a means to gain attention and acceptance, either from new partners or from the existing partner (through eliciting jealousy). One man described his partner “phoning me and telling me she’s fucking somebody and there’s nothing I can do about it,” presumably as a way of gaining his attention and fostering his jealousy. However, in other cases, individuals pursued affairs to create emotional and physical distance from a partner. Finally, although individuals had tendencies toward specific strategies to regulate closeness, no individual used one strategy exclusively: Most individuals in this sample used a combination of pursuit and distancing strategies (see the discussion in the next sections).

**Violence Can Serve Either of the Attachment Strategies**

We observed that violence could serve either of the strategies for regulating closeness. Applying an attachment perspective, we observed that partners were frequently violent in an effort to maintain a desired level of proximity to a partner. In this sample, partners were typically violent only when other behaviors failed to achieve a desired level of closeness. As a pursuit strategy, violence forced one partner to focus on the other. For example, a preoccupied man choked his fearful partner when she attempted to withdraw from escalating conflict. In another couple, during an argument a preoccupied female partner pulled her preoccupied/dismissing partner’s hair, slapped him, and threw his things out of the house when he refused to respond to her verbal attack. The man in this same couple described another violent incident: After an evening of drinking together, his partner decided to visit a male friend to do some cocaine; in a jealous rage, “I followed her outside and grabbed her by the hair and said you’re coming home.” The apparent goal of the violence in these cases was to force engagement of a partner who was perceived to be disengaging from the relationship.

As a distancing strategy, violence served to push a partner back when the perpetrator had been approached too closely and perceived no other means of escape or self-protection. The fearful female partner of a preoccupied man tried to leave the room when he began to harangue her. When he attempted to prevent her from leaving, she physically attacked him. The preoccupied female partner of a fearful/dismissing man constantly nagged him to open up:
“I can’t handle him not talking with me. . . . I just won’t shut up. I just won’t stop the argument. I won’t just leave it . . . because I don’t believe he’ll come back to me an hour later and go ‘Okay, what were we discussing?’” When his attempts to withdraw (perceived by her as rejection) failed to de-escalate her pursuit, he sometimes responded with violence. In one instance, “I had to physically move her out of the way to get her out the house because I couldn’t deal with the stress.” She described a more serious incident, where he choked her severely because “I refused to back down.” Another man described becoming violent when he couldn’t stop his partner from arguing: “I felt trapped and she doesn’t understand. She doesn’t understand the need for sleep.” In these cases, the use of violence appeared to arise out of individuals’ needs to create physical and emotional distance from what they saw as the excessive and intrusive demands of their partners.

Correspondence Between Attachment Profiles and Strategies for Regulating Proximity

Table 1 lists participants’ attachment profiles and their primary strategies for regulating proximity within the relationship. Consistent with the definition of attachment preoccupation, individuals whose attachment was primarily preoccupied tended to desire high levels of relational closeness and to use pursuit strategies when they experienced less than their desired level of proximity. Conversely, individuals with avoidant attachment tendencies (fearful and dismissing) were inclined to use distancing strategies to gain and maintain a comfortable level of relational distance. Moreover, individuals’ characteristic strategies for regulating closeness appeared to extend to their use of partner violence. For example, preoccupied partners tended to become violent when their attempts to approach and gain support from their partners verbally were unsuccessful. While engaged in the process of decision making, the preoccupied male partner in one couple became extremely violent when his fearful (preoccupied) partner attempted to voice her desires. He interpreted her attempts to be assertive as a turning away from his needs. As a response to his perception that his needs were being denied, he shook her and threw her against the wall. On the other hand, fearful and dismissing partners tended to become violent when their attempts to distance themselves from conflict were met with resistance. In a couple consisting of a primarily preoccupied man and a primarily fearful woman, violence proceeded from disagreements. She would attempt to passively wait out his anger. But her lack of response would enrage him so that he
was likely to hit her as well as hit himself. She, in turn, would hit him when he invaded her privacy, attempting to reestablish some boundaries with him.

In many cases, individuals appeared to use the two strategies for regulating proximity in accordance with their primary and secondary attachment tendencies. This was apparent when the attachment profiles of the couple were complex. One such case included a man with a combination fearful/preoccupied/dismissing orientation and his primarily preoccupied, secondarily dismissing partner. They were initially roommates but subsequently became romantically involved. Due to their complex profile of attachment orientations, they had conflicting needs; they both appeared uncertain about what they and the partner wanted out of the relationship. Sometimes she woke him in the middle of the night to ask if he loved her (pursuit); other times she distanced herself by keeping a schedule the reverse of his (e.g., staying out all night in bars and then rising late the next morning). They slept in separate beds with a divider down the middle of the room, simultaneously giving them physical proximity and distance. He attempted to engage her in his interests (pursuit). In contrast, he became violent on several occasions when her insistence on talking when she was intoxicated about their relationship and his feelings prevented him from sleeping at night (distancing). She also attempted to distance him with violence when he made too many demands of her or became verbally abusive. We hypothesize that couples with complex profiles of attachment may not know what to expect from each other, with each partner shifting between pursuing and distancing. In this particular case, both partners regularly shifted between pursuit and distancing; unfortunately, their strategies and needs were seldom in synchrony.

**Dyadic Combination of Attachment Profiles**

To illustrate the importance of both partners’ attachment in relationship dynamics, we examined some of the relationships of preoccupied women: We compared the relationships in which both partners were predominantly preoccupied with those in which the woman was predominantly preoccupied and the man was predominantly avoidant.

When both partners were predominantly preoccupied, they were in mutual pursuit. In all three of these couples, high idealization early in the relationships faded quickly when both individuals were unable to meet their partner’s unreasonable expectations for support and attention. The result was mutual anger and frustration; if one partner tried to express her feelings, the
other partner insisted on talking about his feelings. Disagreements typically proceeded from raised voices to name-calling, sometimes ending in mutual pushing and shoving, which might escalate into more serious violence. The primarily preoccupied female partner in one couple described her relationship with her partner (also primarily preoccupied) as “The War of the Roses.” This relationship became serious very quickly. In the beginning, he considered her his ideal mate and appreciated her giving nature. However, over time these partners found it difficult to listen to and communicate with each other. Attempts to express themselves led to frustration, then to angry and blaming silences. Finally, violence erupted when both partners felt completely frustrated in their needs. Each was likely to use violence in an attempt to engage the other. If the female partner responded to conflict with angry silence, her partner responded with violence to gain her complete attention (he hit, strangled, and spat upon her). Over time, she felt her needs for support and attention were being ignored and became abusive herself, frequently smashing things and egging him on with name-calling as a way to make him pay attention to her needs. Both of these partners were completely enmeshed and engaged in their relationship.

When preoccupied women were partnered with avoidant men (fearful and/or dismissing) the dynamics of the relationships and the occurrence of violence were different. Initially these preoccupied women had great appeal for their avoidant partners because of their warmth and their devotion to the relationship. But these women desired emotional and physical closeness at a level their partners could not tolerate. When these female partners got too close, their partners reacted with nonviolent distancing behaviors. And when these male partners’ nonviolent efforts to distance their partners failed, they were likely to become violent toward their partners. One of these couples consisted of a preoccupied woman partnered with a primarily fearful and secondarily preoccupied man. They met for the first time when a mutual friend arranged for him to recover from an injury at her home (at the time she was involved with another man). She nursed him back to health until he was well enough to return to his home some distance from where she lived. Finding herself at loose ends when her relationship ended, she pursued her former patient. At first her attention was welcome; her warmth and desire to teach him how to communicate and love made him feel cared for. However, as time went on he put up walls because he could not tolerate such a high level of emotional and physical proximity. He distanced himself by traveling out of town for his work; when he returned, she pursued him with renewed vigor. If she failed to accept his efforts to distance her, he was likely to become violent. “P. would want to resolve, talk about a situation, and I wouldn’t want to at the time so she’d sort of push it. . . . And
I’d start boiling and it was just like a switch. Flip a switch—then verbal abuse, and physical.” Even after a violent incident she wanted to talk to him; but he was spent and mute, his withdrawal complete. At times, she also became violent when he failed to respond to her demands for increased closeness, slapping him or throwing things at him. In these cases, the varying combinations of partners’ attachment profiles contributed to different relationship dynamics. We could not have arrived at an understanding of these dynamics without taking both partners’ attachment profiles into account.

Discussion

Generally, the attachment profiles of the women in our sample corresponded to previous findings that women in violent relationships tend to show moderate to high levels of preoccupation (e.g., Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998; Henderson et al., 2005). Twelve of the 23 women had primary preoccupied profiles, and all but 4 of the women (who were fearfully attached) had some level of preoccupation in their profiles. Thus, all of these women rated high on attachment anxiety (cf. Henderson et al., 1997). Consistent with prior research, preoccupation was also a common tendency in the men, with 19 of 23 men presenting with primary or secondary preoccupation (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; Henderson et al., 2005; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997). Previous findings suggest that fearfulness may have been underrepresented in our sample (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994): Only 9 men displayed primary or secondary fearfulness. However, both preoccupation and fearfulness share high anxiety over abandonment, a dimension previously linked to marital violence (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; Roberts & Noller, 1998). Primary or secondary dismissing tendencies were present in 9 men in this sample, paralleling findings by Babcock et al. (2000).

A major finding of this study was the linking of strategies for regulating proximity to attachment profiles. We identified two such overarching strategies, pursuit and distancing, that individuals used to gain and/or maintain their optimal level of accessibility to their attachment partners. We observed that violence could serve to increase or decrease proximity to the partner. As pursuit, violence represented an attempt to increase physical and emotional proximity; as distancing, violence represented an attempt to decrease physical and/or emotional proximity.

Preoccupied individuals tended to pursue their partners in an attempt to gain greater physical and emotional proximity. This pursuit took the form of nagging, clingy or needy behavior, and verbal or physical abuse. Fearful
and dismissing individuals tended to use distancing as their major strategy to maintain greater distance. Distancing included both passive and active behaviors. Passive forms of distancing included compliance and quietness in the face of partner demands. More active forms of distancing included physical removal of oneself from the situation and, at times, physical abuse. Although pursuing behaviors were most clearly linked with preoccupied attachment and distancing behaviors with fearful and dismissing attachment, many individuals used both strategies. The predominant strategy appeared to shift depending on situational factors such as the behavior of the other individual involved in the interaction.

Complex attachment profiles, notably fearful/preoccupied and dismissing/preoccupied, typified a sizable number of individuals in this sample (12 of 46). Bartholomew, Kwong, and Hart (2001) have suggested that the combination of approach and avoidance strategies in an individual may be associated with the most pathological outcomes. Because of their conflicting attachment needs and corresponding strategies, individuals who fluctuate unpredictably between approach and avoidance are likely to be chronically frustrated in their attachment relationships. In turn, romantic partners are likely to find it difficult to understand, predict, and effectively respond to fluctuations in attachment strategies. This mutual frustration may place the intimate relationships of individuals with conflicting attachment goals at risk for violence.

The variation in individual attachment profiles gave rise to even greater variation in couples’ profiles. We made no attempt at categorization at the couple level because considerable variation in attachment profiles resulted in 18 different couple profiles (out of a sample of 23 couples). This variability suggests that multiple attachment tendencies and their associated strategies may result in partner violence. However, in line with some previous findings (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), no couples in our sample consisted of two predominantly avoidant individuals. As expected, securely attached individuals were also underrepresented. We would expect securely attached individuals to have a flexible and constructive repertoire of strategies to fulfill their attachment needs without resorting to violence.

Combinations of individual attachment profiles in couples may lead to incompatibilities that play a role in the etiology of domestic violence. Particularly problematic may be combinations of avoidant and preoccupied attachment within a dyad (cf. Roberts & Noller, 1998). When stressful situations arise, preoccupied individuals attempt to engage others, whereas avoidant individuals attempt to disengage from others. Thus, conflicting attachment strategies of partners with preoccupied and avoidant orienta-
tions may prevent both partners from meeting their needs. In addition, individuals perceive their partners’ behavior in light of their own attachment tendencies. Thus, preoccupied individuals may perceive the distancing of the avoidant partner as rejection, and avoidant individuals may perceive the pursuit of the preoccupied partner as engulfment. Partners may become violent when more functional attachment behaviors fail to achieve individuals’ desired levels of proximity. These findings highlight the importance of considering the dyad as a unit in addition to examining individual contributions to an interaction (cf. Feeney, 2003).

The pattern of pursuit and distancing maps onto demand–withdrawal interactions as described in the marital literature (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990). But whereas research into demand–withdrawal interactions has tended to focus on gender differences, we interpreted pursuit and distancing (demand and withdrawal) in the context of individuals’ attachment needs. Our work illustrates both men’s and women’s pursuing and distancing. Moreover, previous research has linked both husband demand/wife withdrawal and wife demand/husband withdrawal to the occurrence of partner abuse (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993). In addition, based on wives’ descriptions of violent incidents, Babcock and colleagues (2000) found that only preoccupied men responded with violence to their wives’ withdrawal, whereas dismissing and secure men responded with violence to their wives’ defensiveness (e.g., disagreeing or disputing, likely pursuit behaviors). Our findings further suggest that both partners’ attachment orientations contribute to their relationship dynamics (cf. Roberts & Noller, 1998).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although we identified just two consistent themes associated with partner violence—pursuit and distancing—there were instances of violence that did not fit these themes and that were not related systematically to the couples’ relational dynamics. In particular, there were instances of retaliatory violence where the perpetrator’s goal seemed to be simply to get back at an offending partner. Moreover, our sample consisted of couples identified on the basis of male violence, specifically couples in which the men were in treatment for violence toward their partners. Had the sample included couples identified for female violence or for mutual violence or had the men not been in treatment, other themes and dynamics might be evident. It is notable, however, that although our sample was selected for high levels of male violence, most of the female partners had also acted violently within these relationships. These findings suggest that it is important
to consider both partners’ abusive behaviors, even in samples identified for one partner’s violence.

Our sample included single (noncohabiting) couples, common-law couples, and couples who had been married for various lengths of time. Moreover, at the time of the interviews, over half of the couples were temporarily separated. We did not observe any systematic associations between relational dynamics and either relationship status or length. However, any potential differences in dynamics that may exist across relationship groups in the broader population may have been obscured by the selection of a sample characterized by severe levels of partner abuse.

The identified strategies of pursuit and distancing were instrumental; that is, individuals were attempting to influence their partners’ behaviors to meet their own needs (e.g., to gain attention from the partner or to stop the partner from making emotional demands). And certainly, when individuals acted violently to regulate closeness, these strategies constituted coercive control of the partner. Thus, this analysis is not contrary to previous conceptualizations of partner violence as a means to control the partner (for a review, see Graham-Kevan, 2007). Rather, this analysis seeks to understand what might motivate such controlling behavior. Moreover, by seeking to understand the relational dynamics associated with partner violence, we are not suggesting that individuals are not responsible for their abusive behavior or that victims of abuse share some responsibility. To the contrary, we believe that all individuals should be held fully responsible for their abusive behavior toward intimate partners, regardless of the motivation underlying the abuse or the relational context in which the abuse take place.

This research was not designed to develop or test a typology of violent relationships; however, our findings may have implications for previously identified typologies. Applying Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart’s (1994) typology of male batterers, the men in our sample appeared to consist primarily of the dysphoric/borderline subtype. Thus, our findings are consistent with the proposition that attachment issues are salient for this group, with violence sometimes being used in a desperate attempt to avoid abandonment by partners. These findings also suggest an extension of Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart’s conceptualization of dysphoric/borderline batterers: Such men may also resort to violence as a means of distancing from partners when they perceive their partners as demanding an intolerable level of closeness. As well, our findings suggest that we may further our understanding of partner violence by looking beyond the characteristics of individual perpetrators to consider the dyadic context in which they become violent.

Johnson has proposed that the violent relationships of those identified
through clinical samples are likely to be characterized by intimate terrorism, a distinct pattern in which one partner (almost always the man) uses aggression to maintain control over the partner (e.g., Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Given the escalating, severe, and controlling nature of much of the violence described by our participants, almost all of these couples would likely qualify for either intimate terrorism or mutual intimate terrorism (where both partners act in a violent and controlling manner). However, we did not find that our participants’ acts of control were motivated by male (or female) entitlement or by a generalized desire to maintain dominance over a partner, as emphasized in Johnson’s typology (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Rather, our findings suggest that attachment-based needs to regulate distance can motivate individuals to strike out violently against their intimate partners, but these seem to take place within particular dyadic contexts and after less coercive strategies have failed. As argued by Graham-Kevan (2007), it is therefore important for future work to examine the reasons that some individuals seek to control their partners through coercive means and the relational context in which such behavior is likely to arise.

Many factors other than attachment-related dynamics doubtless play a role in the development of partner violence. For example, alcohol was frequently mentioned as a factor in violent episodes, and conflicts over one partner’s excessive drinking were common. Similarly, although we did not specifically examine the childhood backgrounds of participants, we observed that participants’ childhoods were marked by neglect, rejection, and various forms of loss. Nor did we investigate previous involvement in abusive relationships, but we noted that a number of women (9 of 23, in contrast to 2 of 23 men) had a history of involvement in abusive romantic relationships. Thus, we anticipate that individuals’ preexisting attachment insecurity and relationship expectations had an impact on the development of abusive relational dynamics (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). It was also our impression from the interviews that involvement in a long-term abusive relationship undermined the security of both partners in these relationships. However, longitudinal data are necessary to disentangle the direction of these effects.

Our findings suggest that a dyadic approach to treating partner abuse may be desirable as long as neither partner is at risk for serious injury (for an overview of safety considerations, see Hamel, 2005). Until recently, men have been the focus of treatment because they have been identified as the perpetrators of partner abuse. Moreover, standards for batterer treatment have generally mandated feminist and psychoeducational approaches, of which neither considers the dyadic context of violence nor the possibility of women’s violence. Not surprisingly, a recent meta-analysis of batterer
treatment programs found little evidence of effectiveness (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). We expect that couples therapies, such as integrative behavioral couple therapy (Christensen, Jacobson, & Babcock, 1995), could be adapted for treatment of couples who have experienced partner abuse. Moreover, recent work suggests that multicouple group therapy may be effective for violent couples (Stith, Rosen, McCollum, & Thomsen, 2004). Even if a dyadic approach is not suitable for a particular couple, we would advocate that both partners in a relationship with violence be treated. We would refer readers to Hamel (2005) for a nongendered and intimacy-based approach to the treatment of partner abuse.

An attachment perspective may help guide treatment for violent couples. If couples are treated as a unit, a therapist can highlight the attachment needs and strategies of both partners to shed light on their relationship dynamics. For instance, behaviors viewed as clingy by one partner are likely to be viewed as an attempt to overcome distance in the relationship by another. When partners are able to understand the attachment needs that drive their own and their partners’ behaviors, they may be able to find non-violent strategies for attaining a comfortable level of relational closeness. As a result, conflicting needs for closeness and distance may be less likely to escalate to violence.

Notes

1. These norms are based on self-reports of men, age 25 and older, in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey, a survey of a large and representative sample of American families. We are not aware of any Canadian norms for the Conflict Tactics Scales. However, literature suggests that levels of partner violence are generally comparable in Canada and the United States.

2. The alphas for security ratings and women’s dismissing ratings were lower due to the low means and limited variability on these scales.

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