Early Maladaptive Attachment Styles, and Psychological Aggression in Romantic Relationships

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May 2017
What you Need to Know:

- Psychological aggression often goes unseen and under-reported, yet is often the beginning of a severe cycle of abuse. The purpose of this research was to examine literature from 2006 to 2016 to understand how researchers and scholars have linked early maladaptive attachment styles to the experience of psychological aggression in adult romantic relationships.

- The research was evaluated based upon the following areas: early maladaptive attachment styles and psychological aggression in romantic relationships, static risk factors, malleable risk factors, protective factors, theory, prevention, and intervention.

- Exploring the linkage between insecure attachments and intimate partner violence (IPV) in regards to marginalized and at-risk populations may help to create dignity and social justice for individuals who are disproportionately affected by factors associated with psychological aggression and other forms of IPV.
Social Work Relevance:

• The literature and findings analyzed in this study aimed to assist social workers and other helping professionals to conceptualize the relationship between attachment styles and later romantic relationships. Moreover, this study aimed to assist in efforts to identify at-risk populations in order to effectively prevent and intervene. According to Social Work Speaks (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015), the field plans to approach this silent epidemic by way of “research and grants to improve assessment procedures, causality, and connectivity among causes, intervention, treatment, and prevention approaches, including publication of research findings” (p. 130). Furthermore, the policy statement suggests that,

• …standardized definitions of child abuse and neglect must include identification of emotional, medical, and psychological abuse and neglect, and risks and harm to children exposed to violence, as well as abuse that occurs through current and emerging technologies; they must state the responsibility to provide intervention for such conditions no matter the etiology. (p. 36)
Cross-cultural Relevance:

- This study identified at-risk populations to improve the social work scope of knowledge regarding assessment, prevention, and intervention strategies along with informing future research. Social workers who are aware of the risk factors associated with this population are apt to assess for psychological aggression in adult romantic relationships, particularly for those who disclose a history of adverse childhood events (ACEs).

- Furthermore, this study highlighted risk factors across different cultures and defined them specific to their culture. This study emphasized the fact that most marginalized groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and LGBTQ individuals are often statistically underrepresented regarding prevalence rates of IPV.

- The multicultural relevance of this study highlighted universal risk factors across different cultures, including those of the most marginalized groups, such as African American, Asian American, Latin American, and LGBTQ individuals. Unfortunately, the CDC has yet to collect data on individuals who identify as gender-fluid, and/or individuals of the trans experience in regards to IPV.
Methods:

A. Sample/ Sampling Method:

- The present study identified 23 articles for the purpose of performing a content analysis of previous research related to early maladaptive attachment styles and their associations with psychological aggression in romantic relationships.

B. Data Collection Procedures

- Several research databases were utilized to find peer-reviewed journal articles, which included Google scholar, EBSCO, and PsycInfo. The search terms relational aggression, psychological aggression, emotional abuse, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, insecure attachment, and codependency, were used during the literature search. A purposive sampling and non-probability method was used during the selection process to aid in finding peer-reviewed research relevant to the study.
Methods:

C. Data Analysis

• Previous research was systematically reviewed and utilized within this study. For the purposes of executing significant research, the author took the 23 most relevant studies from the search and organized into tables with seven substantial categories: Early Maladaptive Attachment Styles and Psychological Aggression in Romantic Relationships, Static Risk Factors, Malleable Risk Factors, Protective Factors, Theory, Prevention, and Intervention. All tables included the following information: name of author(s), year published, sample size, research design, purpose of the study, and research findings.

• Primary data were reviewed and analyzed for manifest and latent content (Berg, 2004). Of the primary data, 23 articles were then synthesized into an analysis of the linkage between early maladaptive attachment styles and psychological aggression.

D. Limitations

• This content analysis was steered by the concepts and inquiries that have directed prior studies of early maladaptive attachment styles and their associations with psychological aggression in romantic relationships. Only published research content, as well as information from the Center for Disease Control database was examined. No gray research was sought. Researcher bias was possible as only one researcher coded the content.
Results:

• From the 23 articles that were used for the content analysis, 11 articles utilized a quantitative research method. Sample sizes within quantitative studies varied from $n = 20$ to $n = 4,264$ participants and were recruited through schools, agencies that address IPV, hospitals, referrals made based on the use of screening and assessment tools, hotline callers, and public records. Eight studies from previous literature incorporated the use of qualitative methods; with samples varying between $N=17$ to $N=1,517$. Four studies explored theory.

• The category “Early Maladaptive Attachment Styles and Psychological Aggression in Romantic Relationships” had a total of 6 articles. Capaldi et al. (2012) and Costa et al. (2015) both systematic reviews, looked at the childhood and adolescent predictors of later IPV perpetration and victimization in intimate relationships. The outcomes of both systematic reviews pointed to adverse childhood experiences related to family and home life as being predictors of later IPV in romantic relationships. Studies conducted by Gratz et al. (2009), Gay et al. (2013), Rholes et al. (2016), and Kapeleris and Paivio (2011) measured the relationship between early maladaptive attachment styles in childhood and how it effects later intimate relationships. Outcomes of these studies were consistent with their hypothesis.

• The category “Static Risk Factors” had 2 articles. Capaldi et al. (2012) with a focus on race and ethnicity, and Costa et al. (2015) noting ACEs as a focal static risk factor. The two studies were used again to highlight a pattern emerging between the central theme of this content analysis and static risk factors.
Results:

- “Malleable Risk” Factors had 3 articles. Studies by Trevillion et al. (2012), Cunradi et al. (2002), and Sullivan et al. (2012) focused on the following; mental illness, socioeconomic status, education, and substance-using women experiencing IPV. Each study outcome was consistent with the authors’ hypothesis, and imply higher prevalence rates and increased chances of experiencing IPV with these risk factors in place.

- “Protective Factors” had 1 article. The focus of this article by Sullivan (2013), was to draw attention to the importance of IPV research specifically related to women’s IPV victimization. The article suggests a comprehensive approach to research that includes examination of both risk and protective factors that are modifiable with intervention i.e; such as the malleable factors.

- “Theory” had 6 articles. Authors of these studies include; Ainsworth et al. (1978), Bowlby (1973), Ali and Naylor (2013), Hazan and Shaver (1987), Booth and Dabbs (1993), Walker (2006), Gondolf and Fisher (1988). Theories listed are attachment in early development, attachment in adults, biological, psychological, and the feminist perspective. Essentially, there is no one theory that can explain nor fully inform research of the linkage between early maladaptive attachment styles to psychological aggression and IPV.

- “Prevention” had 4 articles that looked at programs that promote secure attachment bonding with mothers and their infants, aim to reduce teen dating violence, and educate parents on the value of communication with their adolescents regarding healthy versus non-healthy relationships. Authors are; Bernard’s et al. (2015), Dozier and The Infant Caregiver Project (2006), Caron et al. (2015), Miller et al. (2015), and Foshee et al. (2012). Outcomes were consistent with authors’ hypothesis, and each study implies that these approaches can be used across many populations.

- “Intervention” had 3 articles that looked at the effectiveness of programs that provide services to women who had experienced IPV. The authors are Miller et al. (2014), Reed and Enright (2006), and Bair-Merritt et al. (2014). Outcomes were consistent with authors’ hypothesis that IPV would be reduced, and each suggests generalizability across populations.
Discussion/Implications for Social Work:

**Discussion:** Providing psychoeducation to at-risk expecting parents and caregivers on the value and importance of fostering a secure attachment with their infant, along with providing information and tools to adolescents and teenagers to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy relationships, is imperative. There is a lot of studies in this content analysis that examines prevalence and incidence of IPV, but roughly 15% in this study are both prevention and intervention strategies, more specifically for victims and perpetrators of psychological aggression. Connections made by previous studies linking maladaptive attachment styles and psychological aggression in adult romantic relationships give strong clues for which direction helping professionals can go in terms of addressing this issue (Capaldi et al., 2012; Costa et al., 2015; Gratz et al., 2009; Gay, Harding, Jackson, Burns, & Baker 2013; Rholes, Paetzold, & Kohn 2016; Kapeleris & Paivio 2011). Fortunately, there is a common theme of self-empowerment that is threaded amongst the most effective interventions that address general IPV.

**Implications for Social Work Research and Practice:** Overlooking the silent wounds of psychological aggression is akin to denying or overlooking PTSD in a soldier back from combat, and can arguably fall out of line with nearly all the NASW’s core values. With such in mind, social workers must be able to identify signs of IPV, including occurrences of psychological aggression, and consider the link between early maladaptive attachment styles and any kind of abuse in adult romantic relationships. In terms of practice, helping professionals can continue advocating for services to assist at-risk parents in forming secure bonds with their infants which can be maintained throughout the child’s life, along with actively communicating with them about healthy versus non-healthy relationships as they grow up. The pioneers of attachment styles, Bowlby and Ainsworth, would be thrilled in knowing that clinicians were to further research focused on the linkage between insecure attachments and IPV. More specifically, in regards to marginalized and at-risk populations, such research may help to create dignity and social justice for individuals who may disproportionally be affected by factors associated with psychological aggression and other forms of IPV. Additionally, viewing this topic through the lens of the NASW core values keeps the conversation about dating violence transparent and universal. Abuse in all forms can be transgenerational; breaking up this pattern is not only vital for the individuals involved, but it is also beneficial to society. Promoting the message that IPV is not, under any circumstance okay or acceptable, in any form, culture, or community is critical. Psychological aggression is often at the core of the abuse cycle, and intervening at the core is highly recommended.


