

Romantic Attachment and Perception of Partner Support to Explain Psychological Aggression Perpetrated in Couples Seeking Couples Therapy

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This study examined associations among romantic attachment, perceived partner support, and the use of psychological aggression in 210 couples seeking couples therapy in a natural clinical setting. Following the first therapy session, partners completed the Conjugal Support Questionnaire, the Experiences in Close Relationships, and the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale individually. As expected, path analyses based on the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) revealed that, for both men and women, higher avoidance predicted their perception of lower partner support. Results also indicated that perception of lower partner support was related to both partners' more frequent use of psychological aggression. No significant association was found between attachment insecurities and the use of psychological aggression. Methodological and clinical considerations of these results are discussed.

Keywords: romantic attachment, perceived partner support, psychological partner aggression, couples, couples therapy

Psychological aggression is a form of intimate partner violence that is highly prevalent in North America, in both community-based and clinical populations (Jose & O'Leary, 2009). According to the 2009 General Social Survey on Victimization, 17% of Canadians reported that their partner was psychologically or financially abusive¹, mainly through name calling and put downs (Statistique Canada, 2011). Prevalence rates reported in empirical studies are even higher. For example, in a representative community-based sample of 6,002 American couples, Straus and Sweet (1992) found similar rates of psychological aggression used

by men (74%) and by women (75%) and a strong association between aggression used by men and women, suggesting that when one person is verbally abusive, their partner tends to reciprocate. A more recent study revealed that 84% of men and 90% of women from a Canadian community-based sample of 193 couples had used psychological aggression toward their partner at least once in the last year. This study also found a moderate association between men's and women's use of psychological aggression, suggesting the presence of bilateral aggression in these couples (Péloquin, Lafontaine, & Brassard, 2011). Studies that have examined psychological aggression in clinical samples of couples are scarce, but show equally high prevalence rates. For example, an investigation of 273 couples participating in a study on marital therapy revealed that the large majority of men and women (95%) reported having sustained psychological aggression from their

This article was published Online First October 20, 2016.

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We thank the therapists at the Clinique de Consultation Conjugale et Familiale Poitras-Wright, Côté for providing access to their data.

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¹ This study combined psychological aggression and financial abuse, although they are conceptualized as being two different types of partner aggression. Financial abuse is not a formal component of psychological aggression and is not typically included in its definition or measures.

spouse in the last 12 months (Simpson & Christensen, 2005).

Psychological aggression is defined as verbal and nonverbal behaviors intended to negatively affect the psychological well-being of a romantic partner (Straus & Sweet, 1992), to belittle, to isolate, to control, or to lower self-esteem by making the partner feel guilty or inadequate (Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009). These behaviors can include, but are not limited to, withholding affection (Péloquin et al., 2011), abusing, sulking, keeping a stony silence, smashing an object, slamming a door (Straus & Sweet, 1992), controlling the partner (e.g., demanding to know what the partner is doing and with whom every moment of the day and checking up on them), or falsely accusing a partner of having an affair (Doherty & Berglund, 2008). Despite its high prevalence in couples, this form of intimate partner violence has received much less empirical attention than physical violence (Jose & O'Leary, 2009). This may be due to the perception that whereas physical violence is considered unacceptable in North America, psychological aggression may be a more normative type of behavior in intimate relationships (Jose & O'Leary, 2009; O'Leary & Jouriles, 1994) and may be perceived as having less severe consequences than physical violence (Arias & Pape, 1999). Yet, studies have revealed psychological aggression to be linked to many psychological consequences, including depression (Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Simonelli & Ingram, 1998; Taft et al., 2006), low self-esteem (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek 1990; Sackett & Saunders, 1999), fear (in women; Henning & Klesges, 2003; Sackett & Saunders, 1999), posttraumatic stress disorder (Arias & Pape, 1999), and suicidal ideation (Marshall, 1999). Psychological aggression can also limit physical and cognitive functioning (Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003) and negatively impact the victim's ability to work (Coker et al., 2000).

In light of its high prevalence in couples and the substantial repercussions it can have on the lives of its victims, psychological aggression merits further study. The few studies that have primarily focused on psychological aggression mainly utilized samples of couples from the general population. Although psychological aggression in couples seeking therapy appears fre-

quent (Jose & O'Leary, 2009; Straus & Sweet, 1992), very few studies have been conducted on this population, limiting our knowledge of this problem in couples seeking therapy and therapists' ability to intervene with these couples.

Several theoretical approaches have been used to study and understand intimate partner violence. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) has the advantage of taking into consideration the dyadic nature of the relationship and of aggressive behaviors between partners (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Recent studies have increasingly observed the presence of bilateral aggression in intimate relationships, with women being just as likely to be perpetrators as men² (Johnson, 1995; Jose & O'Leary, 2009; Straus & Sweet, 1992). The inclusion of both partners in studies on intimate partner violence thus accounts for this bilateral use of aggression and contributes to our understanding about the role of interpersonal factors in the use of aggression in couples, for which we still have limited knowledge (Lawrence, Orenge-Aguayo, Langer, & Brock, 2012). In the current study, we sought to examine the association among romantic attachment, perceived partner support, and psychological aggression, both at the individual and the dyadic levels, in couples seeking therapy.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) assumes that people have a set of innate behavioral systems that organize their behaviors to promote their survival (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Two of these behavioral systems are relevant in the study of intimate partner violence: attachment and caregiving.

Attachment System

Bowlby (1969) initially proposed that an attachment bond develops from the relationship between children and the individuals who pro-

² Aggression is perpetrated as often by men as by women for more "common" forms of couple violence, such as psychological aggression. However, "patriarchal terrorism," a more severe form of violence whereby men attempt to gain control over women, is almost exclusively perpetrated by men (Johnson, 1995).

vide the care needed for survival (i.e., attachment figures). When children feel threatened, whether the threat is real or perceived, they seek physical proximity to their attachment figure to obtain security and to be comforted. These repeated experiences with the attachment figure contribute to molding children's working internal models of self and others. When attachment figures are unavailable or their responses are inadequate, attachment insecurity may develop, leading to a negative image of the self, a sense of unworthiness, mistrust of others, and/or uncertainty as to the responsiveness of the attachment figure and of others in general.

Attachment dynamics are also present in adult romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment to the partner develops over time and is influenced by the history of interactions, the perception of the self as deserving of love (working model of self), and the perception of the partner as available and willing to provide support (working model of others). Using the concepts of working models of self and others, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a two-dimensional model of adult attachment. Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) later labeled these two dimensions anxiety over abandonment and avoidance of intimacy. Anxiety over abandonment is characterized by a negative working model of self, whereby individuals feel undeserving of love, fear rejection or abandonment and, consequently, constantly seek reassurance from their romantic partner (Collins & Read, 1990). Individuals with higher avoidance of intimacy have a negative model of others, perceiving them as unavailable and untrustworthy, and tend to avoid closeness or relying on their partner. Conversely, individuals who are securely attached present low anxiety and low avoidance and have a positive working model of self and of others.

From a theoretical standpoint, attachment insecurities can foster an environment that is favorable to intimate partner violence (Roberts & Noller, 1998). When individuals high in attachment anxiety perceive that their needs are not met or their attachment relationship is threatened (e.g., a conflict with the partner), these individuals can often express anger or perpetrate aggressive behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) to attract the desired support and attention, and to reestablish intimacy with their partner (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Pas-

sive-aggressive behaviors (Mayseless, 1991) or anger (Mikulincer, 1998) may also be used by individuals with high avoidance of intimacy to maintain emotional distance from the partner (Allison, Bartholomew, Mayseless, & Dutton, 2008; Roberts & Noller, 1998) when their usual proximity-regulating strategies (e.g., retreating) cease to be effective.

Recent literature reviews provide empirical support for the association between both types of attachment insecurities and psychological aggression used by men and women (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Gosselin, Lafontaine, & Bélanger, 2005). Studies using community-based samples of Canadian couples have found that attachment anxiety is associated with psychological aggression toward the partner (Lafontaine & Lussier, 2005; Péloquin et al., 2011). Avoidance of intimacy appears less consistently associated with the use of psychological aggression, as some authors reported an association in men only (Lafontaine & Lussier, 2005) and others in women only (Péloquin et al., 2011). No published study has investigated attachment insecurities and psychological aggression in a sample of couples undergoing therapy.

A limited number of studies to date have explored how attachment insecurity relates to psychological aggression in couples. Péloquin et al. (2011) observed that lower perspective taking (difficulty in considering the partner's point of view) mediated the association between insecure attachment (anxiety and avoidance) and psychological aggression use by women. Anger also mediated the association between attachment anxiety and psychological aggression in women, and between avoidance of intimacy and psychological aggression in men (Lafontaine & Lussier, 2005). No study examined similar processes in couples presenting high levels of relational distress and seeking therapy.

Caregiving System

Whereas the attachment system serves to restore an individual's sense of felt security, the caregiving system serves to provide protection, security (Collins, Ford, & Feeney, 2011), reassurance, and comfort in a distressed significant other (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2006; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Mikulincer, 2006). These two systems are complementary (Collins

et al., 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Stressful events activate the attachment system and motivate individuals to seek closeness and support from their partner (Feeney & Collins, 2001). The partner's caregiving system is then activated to respond to the individual's attachment needs. To appease attachment insecurity, the support given must be sensitive and make the partner feel loved and understood (Collins et al., 2006, 2011).

The perception of partner support is influenced by the recipient's working models of self and others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Individuals with high attachment anxiety tend to be dissatisfied with the support they receive, as it does not entirely meet their often insatiable needs to be comforted (Bachman & Bippus, 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). This can lead to using anger, jealousy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), or psychological aggression to communicate their needs to their partner (Bowlby, 1988). Simpson et al. (1996) found that attachment anxiety was indeed associated with more negative perception of partner support, anger, and hostility in dating couples. Individuals higher on avoidance of intimacy also tend to be dissatisfied with the support they receive from their partner who is perceived as untrustworthy and unavailable to respond to their needs (Collins et al., 2011; Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Studies have shown that both types of attachment insecurities are associated with perceiving low support from the partner (Coddington, 2006; Kane et al., 2007).

Caregiving is also influenced by the attachment system. Momentary or chronic activation of the attachment system may interfere with one's ability to respond adequately to a partner's support needs. In such situations, one's own attachment needs are prioritized, leaving fewer resources available to attend to the partner's needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As such, support offered by individuals higher on attachment anxiety may be perceived as intrusive or inappropriate by the partner, as this support may be offered partly for egoistic motives (e.g., to feel loved or to increase intimacy with the other; Collins et al., 2006). Individuals who score high on attachment avoidance tend to minimize their partner's preoccupations, may not notice their distress, or choose not to respond to their partner's needs so as to avoid

activating their own attachment system and maintain emotional distance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). For these reasons, the support they offer may often fail to adequately meet their partner's needs. Empirical support shows that individuals high on attachment anxiety or avoidance are perceived as less supportive by their partner (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Davila & Kashy, 2009; Kane et al., 2007; Simpson et al., 1992).

Proposed Model and Hypotheses

In sum, few studies have explored the association between romantic attachment and psychological aggression in couples seeking therapy, the association between perception of support and intimate partner violence, or the role of dyadic dynamics to explain the occurrence of psychological aggression. Furthermore, although existing evidence suggests a theoretical link between attachment insecurity, perceived partner support, and psychological aggression, no study had as yet verified this association. The current study used a dyadic perspective to examine the association between both partners' attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance), perception of partner support, and perpetration of psychological aggression in couples seeking therapy. We hypothesized that individuals' attachment insecurities would be related to their own and their partner's lower perception of support received, as well as to their own higher use of psychological partner aggression. We also expected to find a significant indirect association between individuals' attachment anxiety and perpetration of psychological aggression, through their perception of receiving less support from their partner. The same association was examined for individuals higher on attachment avoidance. To test the proposed hypotheses, the current study used cross-sectional data from a large sample of couples seeking couples therapy in a natural clinical setting. Because couples completed the measures at a single point in time, this study cannot inform on the causal relationships between attachment insecurities, perceived partner support, and psychological aggression. Nonetheless, it offers the first opportunity to test a strong theoretically based model linking these variables in couples who experience significant relationship distress, hence allowing researchers

and clinicians to gain insight into the manner in which the attachment and caregiving systems relate to the use of psychological aggression in relationally distressed couples.

Method

Participants

This investigation was part of a larger longitudinal research program on the effectiveness of couples therapy in a natural setting. The current study, however, focused on cross-sectional pretreatment data only. The sample included 210 heterosexual Canadian couples beginning couples therapy at a private clinic. The mean age was 41 (ranging from 22 to 71, $SD = 9$) for women and 43 (ranging from 24 to 76, $SD = 10$) for men. On average, couples had been together for 14 years (ranging from 1 to 49 years, $SD = 10$), and 45% of couples were married, whereas 55% were cohabiting. Most couples (83%) had at least one child. The mean income was CAN \$85,000 for men and CAN \$55,000 for women. Most participants were francophone (93% of men and 91% of women) and Caucasian (92% of men and 94% of women). The majority of participants had some college education (58% of men and 64% of women).

Procedures

This study was approved by the institutional ethics committee in June 2013. Couples were recruited during their first assessment session. Psychologists explained the goals of the research program and the advantages associated with their participation (results were used to supplement therapists' evaluation and guide treatment). Participation was voluntary, however, and couples could withdraw from the study at any time. The participation rate was 95%. Interested couples signed a consent form and partners received a series of questionnaires to complete individually at home and return to their therapist by mail before their next session.

Measures

Demographic information. As part of the larger research program, participants were asked to provide personal sociodemographic (e.g., age, income, education, ethnic back-

ground) and relationship information (e.g., marital status, number of children, duration of relationship).

Romantic attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships (Brennan et al., 1998) is a measure of romantic attachment that comprises two 18-item subscales: anxiety over abandonment and avoidance of intimacy. Participants respond according to how they feel in general in their romantic relationships on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores on each dimension range from 1 to 7, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance. The internal consistency was reported to be excellent on both subscales. The French version of the scale has shown excellent bifactorial validity and internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$ and $.88$ for men and women; Lafontaine & Lussier, 2003). The current study yielded alpha coefficients for both men and women of $.89$ for attachment anxiety and $.87$ for avoidance.

Caregiving. The Conjugal Support Questionnaire (Brassard, Houde, & Lussier, 2011) includes two four-item subscales assessing perception of received partner support and support given to the partner. Only the perception of received support subscale was used in the current study. Participants were asked to rate the frequency with which their partner provides support on items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*). The mean score of items was compiled to form a global score, with higher scores reflecting a more favorable perception of partner support received. This questionnaire has shown good predictive validity with relationship satisfaction evaluated 12 months later (Brassard et al., 2011). Reliability estimates are good, with alpha coefficients for the received support subscale of $.84$ for men and $.86$ for women in a French-speaking sample (Brassard et al., 2011). In the current sample, alpha coefficients were $.75$ for men and $.72$ for women.

Psychological aggression. The French version of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Lussier, 1997; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) measures the frequency of violent acts received from a romantic partner in the past year. An abbreviated version was used for the study, comprising a list of 25 partner

violence behaviors divided into four subscales: physical violence (12 items), psychological aggression (8 items), sexual coercion (3 items), and physical injury (2 items). The current study used the psychological aggression subscale only. Participants indicated the annual frequency at which the various behaviors were used by their partner on an eight-point Likert scale (0 = *this has never happened*, 1 = *once in the past year*, 2 = *twice in the past year*, 3 = *3 to 5 times in the past year*, 4 = *6 to 10 times in the past year*, 5 = *11 to 20 times in the past year*, 6 = *more than 20 times in the past year*, 7 = *not in the past year, but it happened before*). Responses were then recoded to the midpoint of the category (0, 1, 2, 4, 8, 15, 25, and 0, respectively). The total score ranges from 0 to 200, with higher scores indicating a higher frequency of psychological aggression used by the partner against the participant. The psychological aggression scale previously demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .79$; Straus et al., 1996). In the current study, alpha coefficients were .63 for men and .71 for women.

Participants were asked to provide information on aggression they received from their partner, whereas this study is concerned with perpetrated aggression. Therefore, the individual's score served as the index of the partner's aggressive behaviors. We believe that using scores of perceived aggression as indicators of aggression perpetrated by the partner may partially counter possible social desirability biases and reduce possible underreporting of aggression, as individuals tend to report committing fewer acts of aggression than their partner indicates receiving (Simpson & Christensen, 2005).

Results

The aim of the study was to examine the association between attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance), perceived partner support, and the use of psychological aggression in couples seeking relationship therapy. It was hypothesized that higher attachment insecurity would be linked to one's own and partner's lower perceived support and to one's increased use of psychological aggression, and that one's attachment insecurities would be indirectly related to one's psychological aggression through low perceived support.

Preliminary Analyses

The data were first screened for missing data, multivariate outliers, and normality. With less than 1% of the dataset missing, single imputation using expectation-maximization in SPSS 21.0 was used to replace the missing data. Nine cases of multivariate outliers were found using Cook's distance. Because these cases were mainly extreme due to high levels of psychological aggression, our main variable of interest, and that removing these would also require removing their partner, we decided to keep these cases in the main analyses. All variables were found to be normally distributed, except for psychological aggression, which was positively skewed. A square root transformation corrected the nonnormal distribution.

Preliminary correlations for both men and women were computed to identify potential control variables among sociodemographic data. Because studies have found associations between psychological aggression perpetration and alcohol use (Straus & Sweet, 1992; Testa & Derrick, 2014) and depression (Kim & Capaldi, 2004), they were also inspected as potential control variables.³ Analyses yielded weak associations between perception of partner support and age for both men ($r = .09$) and women ($r = -.13$), as well as between the use of psychological aggression and age ($r = -.11$) and duration of the relationship ($r = .10$) for women. Partner support was also found to be negligibly associated to alcohol use for men ($r = -.08$) and women ($r = -.08$) and to depression in both men ($r = -.03$) and women ($r = .02$). Associations were negligible between the use of psychological aggression and alcohol for men ($r = .02$) and women ($r = -.08$) and the presence of depression in men ($r = -.01$) and in women ($r = .02$). The small effect size of these correlations (Cohen, 1988) did not justify controlling for these variables.

³ Among other measures, questionnaires to collect data on depression (Psychiatric Symptom Index; Ilfeld, 1976) and alcohol consumption (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test; Saunders, Aasland, Babor, De la Fuente, & Grant, 1993) were also included in the battery of questionnaires given to each participant at the end of the first assessment session. Both of these measures were previously reported to have excellent psychometric properties.

Preliminary analyses showed that most men (74.8%) and women (80.5%) used psychological aggression toward their partner at least once in the past year. On average, men perpetrated 20 acts of psychological aggression against their partner, whereas women perpetrated 14 acts. This difference was statistically significant, $t(209) = 3.733, p < .001, d = .26$.

Preliminary correlations between study variables are presented in Table 1. Men's and women's use of psychological aggression were positively and moderately correlated, which may reflect the bidirectionality of psychological aggression in couples. Partners' perceptions of support received were also positively, but weakly correlated. Men's attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) and women's attachment avoidance were weakly and negatively correlated with their own perception of partner support. However, no significant association was found between attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) and the use of psychological aggression for both men and women.

Path Analyses

To test the proposed model accounting for the couple as the unit of analysis, path analyses based on the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) were used. This approach accounts for interdependence of observations found in dyadic data and provides statistical information for actor effects (i.e., how one person's outcome variable is pre-

dicted by their own independent variable) and partner effects (i.e., how one person's outcome variable is predicted by their partner's independent variable; Kenny et al., 2006). The model was tested using AMOS 19.0 with a maximum likelihood estimation and nonparametric bootstrapping method, specifying 1,000 randomly selected samples derived from our data. Correlations were specified between both partners' attachment variables as well as between partners' perceived support and psychological aggression variables. Direct paths were specified from individuals' attachment insecurities to their perceived partner support and use of psychological aggression (actor effects), as well as between their attachment insecurities and their partners' perception of partner support (partner effects). Indirect effects were not tested due to the lack of a direct association between attachment insecurities and psychological aggression (i.e., nonsignificant bivariate correlations). Several indices were used to assess the model's goodness of fit: the goodness-of-fit index (GFI; values greater than .90 indicate good fit), the comparative fit index (CFI; values greater than .90 indicate a reasonable fit, whereas values equal to or greater than .95 indicate a good fit), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; values of .06 or less indicate a good fit; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The initially proposed model did not fit the data well, as reflected by poor fit indexes ($\chi^2(6, N = 210) = 25.826, p = .000$; GFI = .971;

Table 1
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Attachment, Perceived Partner Support, and Psychological Aggression Among Men and Women ($N = 210$ Couples)

Variables	1	2	3	4 ^a	5	6	7	8 ^a
1. Anxiety M		.22**	-.19**	.05	-.09	.16*	-.04	.09
2. Avoidance M			-.35**	.06	.20**	-.17*	.03	.09
3. Perceived partner support M				-.18**	-.03	-.01	.16*	-.29**
4. Psychological aggression M					-.01	.11	-.22**	.46**
5. Anxiety W						.10	.09	.08
6. Avoidance W							-.22**	.01
7. Perceived partner support W								-.20**
8. Psychological aggression W								
<i>M</i>	3.48	2.92	3.79	19.98	3.70	2.68	3.71	14.10
<i>SD</i>	.98	.84	.57	24.15	1.04	.89	.52	18.02

Note. M = Men; W = Women.

^a A square root transformation was performed for psychological aggression due to significant positive skew; untransformed means and standard deviations are presented here.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

CFI = .861; RMSEA = .126, 90% CI [.078–.177]). Examination of modification indices led us to specify two additional partner effects between perception of support and the partner’s use of psychological aggression, for both men and women. Although not initially hypothesized, these additional associations appeared theoretically meaningful (as will be presented in the discussion), hence our decision to test these two additional direct paths.

The final model is presented in Figure 1. Goodness-of-fit statistics were found to be much improved ($\chi^2(4, N = 210) = 1.839, p = .765$; GFI = .998; CFI = 1.000; RMSEA = .000, 90% CI [.000–.071]). This model explained 6.9% of the variance in women’s use of psychological aggression and 11.9% of the variance in men’s use of psychological aggression.

Results indicated that both men’s and women’s higher attachment avoidance predicted their own perception of receiving less support from their partner, but not their use of psychological aggression. Men’s and women’s attachment anxiety did not predict their perception of partner support or use of psychological aggression. Significant actor and partner effects were found, with men’s and women’s low perception of support being directly linked to both their own (actor effect) and their partner’s (partner effect) higher use of psychological aggression.

Discussion

Using a dyadic approach, this study examined the association between attachment insecurity, perceived partner support, and the use of psychological aggression in a large sample of couples seeking couples therapy. We aimed to extend knowledge of the processes underlying the association between attachment and psychological aggression by examining the possible role of perception of support received from the romantic partner.

Attachment Insecurity and Use of Psychological Aggression

Contrary to expectation, we did not find an association between men’s and women’s attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) and their use of psychological aggression toward their romantic partner. For individuals higher on attachment anxiety, this absence of association is difficult to comprehend and goes counter to previous findings conducted in community-based samples of couples (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Lafontaine & Lussier, 2005; Péloquin et al., 2011). Methodological considerations may have contributed to these findings. In particular, a concern for social desirability may have been heightened in our participants because individuals’ responses to questionnaires were not provided entirely anonymously—they were used by their psychologist in

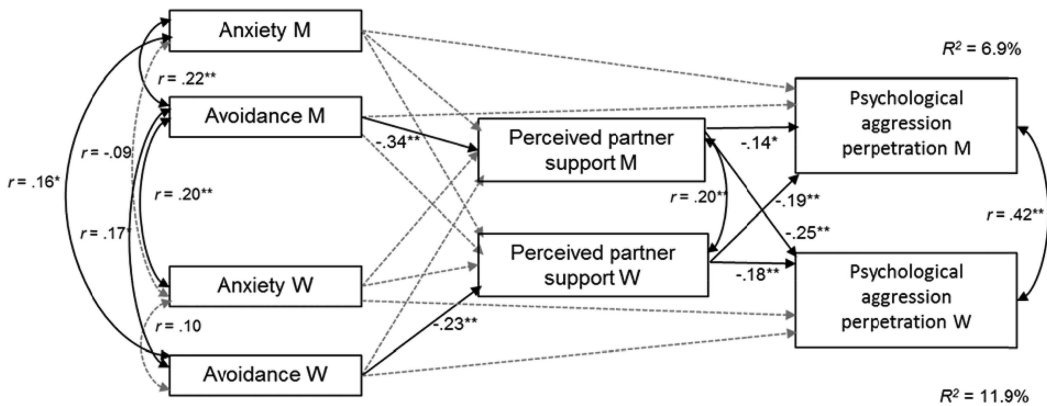


Figure 1. Path analyses showing romantic attachment predicting perceived partner support and use of psychological aggression ($N = 210$ couples). Only significant standardized path coefficients are shown. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. M = Men; W = Women. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

the course of therapy. Participants may have been hesitant to reveal psychological partner aggression in their relationships to their therapist before a solid working alliance was established, resulting in underreporting of aggression by participants. Yet, it is also possible that our results reflect a true difference between community and clinical samples, whereby attachment anxiety would not be a good predictor of psychological aggression in highly distressed couples. That is, more secure individuals (i.e., low attachment anxiety) may become more aggressive toward their partner as conflict frequency and intensity increase over time, and when they perceive that their usual, more adaptive conflict management skills do not result in conflict resolution or expected changes in their partner. Additional studies using samples of distressed couples seeking therapy and where responses remain confidential would be necessary to corroborate our findings in clinical samples. Comparing couples whose questionnaire results are shared with the therapist with couples whose answers remain confidential would also help determine the direct impact of our research design on individuals' willingness to divulge aggressive behaviors.

The lack of association between attachment avoidance and psychological aggression perpetration appears more in line with previous research showing that these two variables are less consistently associated (Lafontaine & Lussier, 2005; Péloquin et al., 2011). Theoretically, our findings are also coherent with the view that individuals higher on attachment avoidance tend to use aggressive behaviors only as a last resort to regulate closeness to their romantic partner (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These individuals are more likely to withdraw from interpersonal conflicts and suppress overt expressions of anger and hostility, and are thus less likely to use outright aggression toward their romantic partner (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Because the use of psychological aggression can provoke conflict or encourage retaliation from the partner, it would follow that individuals with high avoidance would be less likely to use psychological partner aggression on a consistent basis, although they may become aggressive at times.

It is worthwhile to note that in this study, participants actually provided information on the frequency of psychological aggression *per-*

ceived from their partner, and not on their own use of aggression. This information served to infer psychological aggression perpetration by the partner. Therefore, when interpreting results from this study, what appears as an "actor" effect (an association between an individual's perception of partner support and use of psychological aggression) is in fact a "partner" effect (one person's psychological aggression use is predicted by their partner's perception of support received). This could also partially explain the lack of observed associations between attachment insecurities and psychological aggression. We postulated that individuals with attachment insecurities would use more psychological aggression toward their partner, but whether the partner actually perceives these aggressive behaviors may be a different story, especially in conflictual couples where both partners may resort to screaming, blaming, and criticizing to express discontentment and relationship dissatisfaction on a continual basis.

Attachment Insecurity and Perception of Partner Support

Although attachment insecurities and use of psychological aggression were not found to be indirectly associated through the perception of partner support, several interesting direct links between attachment insecurities and perception of partner support were observed and are worthy of mention. With respect to the association between higher attachment insecurity and perception of lower partner support, our hypotheses were partially supported. Men and women high on attachment avoidance perceived lower support from their romantic partner. One possible explanation resides in the interdependence of support seeking (attachment) and support giving (caregiving) behaviors (Collins et al., 2011). When individuals are faced with a stressful situation, they may seek support and reassurance from their partner, who may then provide sensitive and appropriate care (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Feeney & Collins, 2001). However, willingness and ability to reach out to the partner may differ based on a person's attachment profile and needs. Individuals high on avoidance tend to use less effective and more indirect strategies to request support (e.g., hinting, sulking; Collins & Feeney, 2000), are less likely to turn to their partner when they are

upset (Rholes, Simpson, & Stevens, 1998), minimize their distress, and limit expression of their emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These behaviors provide ambiguous information about their needs and make it more difficult for their partner to provide them with the appropriate level of sensitive support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Collins et al., 2011). This may explain why individuals high on avoidance report receiving less partner support (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Alternatively, individuals high on avoidance view others as unavailable (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). When their attachment system is activated, they tend to deny or suppress their distress to avoid intimacy and dependency on their partner, as well as possible frustration caused by the perceived lack of partner support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, these strategies concomitantly taint their perception of others as unsupportive (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and may contribute to their underestimation of the support offered by their partner.

Unexpectedly, no association was found between attachment anxiety and perception of partner support. This finding is surprising, as previous studies using general population samples have found a negative association between attachment anxiety and perception of partner support (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2004). It is possible that the lack of anonymity of participants' responses may provide some explanation for these results. Because individuals higher on attachment anxiety fear being rejected and abandoned (Collins & Read, 1990), some may prefer to conceal their perception of receiving low partner support if they believe that disclosing the extent of their needs could lead to rejection (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006) knowing that their responses may be shared with their therapist and their partner. This may have contributed to obscuring the potential and expected link between attachment anxiety and perception of partner support in our sample. Again, this hypothesis would need to be validated in future studies of distressed couples whose answers remain confidential.

Perception of Partner Support and Use of Psychological Aggression

As predicted, our findings revealed that men's and women's low perception of partner

support was linked to their greater use of psychological aggression. People who perceive low partner support may tend to insult or denigrate their partner more as a way of making their unmet needs heard and express their dissatisfaction with the support received in their romantic relationship (Bowlby, 1988).

Interestingly, our analyses also led us to consider initially unanticipated partner effects between perceived support and use of psychological aggression for both men and women. This addition appeared logical when considering the source of the data. The reader may recall that each individual provided information on their own perception of partner support as well as on their partner's (not their own) use of psychological aggression. Hence, individuals who perceived receiving low support from their partner also reported that their partner used more aggression. It is possible that the use of psychological aggression reflects an individual's lower sensitivity toward the partner's needs and point of view. This could provide an explanation for why individuals with aggressive partners perceive receiving less support in their romantic relationship, and highlight a possible bidirectional association between support dynamics and aggressive behaviors in couples.

Limitations

Several limitations to this study should be mentioned. First, although we proposed a theoretical model suggesting directionality between variables, our data are correlational and cross-sectional, and cannot be used to infer causality. A longitudinal design would be necessary to investigate the temporal associations among romantic attachment, perceived partner support, and psychological aggression perpetration.

Second, only self-report questionnaires were used to assess each of the three constructs. It is possible that shared method variance induced response biases, although this could not account for the partner effects. Recall errors should also be considered, in particular with the measure of psychological aggression that requires participants to report on the occurrences of aggression over the past year. Moreover, a concern for social desirability may have been heightened, because participants were informed that their responses would be shared with their therapists and potentially discussed in therapy with their

partner. Future research may benefit from maintaining complete confidentiality of the answers provided to limit potential biases.

Third, the Revised Conflicts Tactics Scale (CTS2) is the most widely used measure for assessing various forms of intimate partner violence. The scope of behaviors assessed is limited, however, and items do not reflect all aspects of psychological aggression. For instance, there is no item pertaining to isolating or controlling the partner, and no distinction is made between passive and hostile withdrawal. Consequently, some forms of psychological aggression may have been experienced but not reported by participants, and thus not taken into account in this study. Additionally, some items (“my partner stomped out of the room or house or yard during a disagreement”) may be assessing poor communication skills rather than actual psychological aggression (Lawrence et al., 2012). Furthermore, the CTS2 does not provide information on the context in which acts of psychological aggression were committed, on what may have motivated such behaviors, or on its consequences on the romantic relationship (Murphy & O’Leary, 1989). Hence, it is not possible to determine if psychological aggression was used to fulfil an unmet need (as we hypothesized) or if it served some other purpose (e.g., self-defense, leaving the room to control one’s anger and prevent resorting to more severe aggression). Lastly, individuals’ use of psychological aggression was inferred through their partner’s report of such behaviors. On the one hand, inferring from partner data may reduce individuals’ tendency to underreport their own use of aggression (Simpson & Christensen, 2005). On the other hand, the use of an indirect measure may result in finding fewer significant associations between attachment insecurities, perception of partner support, and the use of psychological aggression. Future studies should consider using more comprehensive measures of psychological aggression, and do so by gathering both direct (self-reported) and indirect (via the partner) data about participants’ use of psychological aggression. This would include gathering information about both its occurrence and its context (e.g., motives, situational events) to better understand the processes underlying psychological aggression in distressed couples.

Finally, participants were dyads beginning couples therapy at a specific private clinic,

which limits variability within the sample (primarily Caucasian, well educated, and employed). Future studies should include couples from various settings to increase sociodemographic diversity and improve generalizability of findings.

Clinical Implications

The high rates of psychological aggression used by both partners in our sample are worth highlighting. Studies examining intimate partner violence in couples who seek therapy for marital issues other than violence, and who are not involved in a specific treatment for anger control or violence are scarce. Our findings underline the importance of conducting a thorough assessment of aggressive behaviors in all couples entering relationship therapy in order to tailor interventions to the particularities of these couples, and ensure that the therapist is properly trained to intervene with these couples. A number of empirically validated approaches are available to treat couples with severe violence (e.g., Physical Aggression Couples Treatment, Heyman & Neidig, 1997; The Couples Abuse Prevention Program, LaTaillade, Epstein, & Werlinich, 2006). Unless the therapist has sufficient training in couples therapy in the context of intimate partner violence, however, partners reporting severe aggression should be referred to individual therapy before they may safely engage in couples therapy. Alternatively, if couples therapy is deemed appropriate (i.e., low level aggression), aggressive behaviors need to be addressed directly. To avoid placing partners at increased risk of further emotional abuse, concrete measures to reduce these behaviors need to be put in place early on before partners engage in therapeutic work requiring them to discuss each other’s vulnerabilities.

Results of this study also underline two key intervention targets: (a) the association between attachment avoidance and the perception of low partner support, and (b) the role of low partner support for both partners’ use of psychological aggression. Interventions aimed at improving supportive behaviors between partners could thus be very useful to reduce attachment avoidance and both partners’ use of psychological aggression in couples seeking therapy. In this respect, Emotionally-Focused Couple Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004) appears especially indi-

cated. This approach fosters the development of more secure attachment bonds in couples through the improvement of partners' mutual empathic understanding of attachment needs and responsive behaviors. A recent study assessing observed attachment behaviors and changes in self-reported attachment across therapy sessions successfully showed that secure base use (i.e., ability to clearly identify one's attachment needs and express them to one's partner) and supportive behaviors were significantly improved, and attachment avoidance significantly reduced over the course of EFT (Burgess Moser et al., 2016). As partners learn to clearly identify and communicate their needs in a constructive and open manner, and to sensitively respond to each other's needs, discomfort with intimacy may be reduced, as is the likelihood of using psychological aggression to express dissatisfaction with unmet emotional needs.

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Received April 4, 2016

Revision received August 22, 2016

Accepted September 26, 2016 ■

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