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AN ATTACHMENT THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON THE PERPETUATION OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Eli J. Finkel & Erica B. Slotter***

INTRODUCTION

Observers are frequently bewildered by the alarmingly high rates of violent behavior between romantic partners. How could individuals deliberately hurt those very people with whom they have chosen to merge their lives, even those whom they have promised “to love and to cherish from this day forward until death do them part”? Over the past several decades, social scientists have presented at least two separate, and largely incompatible, arguments to explain these high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV). The first argument is that standard socialization practices in most cultures teach men that they are entitled to exert power over women, and that violence is an acceptable means of doing so. The second argument is that the high levels of emotional and behavioral interdependence that characterize most intimate relationships invite unusually high levels of nonviolent conflict, which can on occasion serve as a precursor to violent behavior. In this Article, we review these two arguments and suggest that empirical evidence more strongly supports the latter. We then argue that the dynamics of emotional attachment in intimate relationships represent a powerful set of factors that influences the circumstances under which individuals are likely to become violent. We conclude by briefly discussing the implications of this review for clinical and legal interventions aimed at perpetrators of intimate partner violence.

IPV refers to any behavior carried out with the primary proximal intent to cause physical harm to a romantic partner who is motivated to avoid being harmed. Large-scale, representative surveys in the United States indicate that approximately one in six couples experiences at least one act of IPV every year;¹ these estimates are compa-

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1. John Schafer et al., *Rates of Intimate Partner Violence in the United States*, 88 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 1702, 1702 (1998); Murray A. Straus & Richard J. Gelles, *Societal Change and Change in Family Violence from 1975 to 1985 as Revealed by Two National Surveys*, 48 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 465, 466 (1986).

rable with, or even lower than, those from other surveys from the United States and from around the world.² Perhaps the most surprising conclusion from the large corpus of studies on IPV is that women tend to perpetrate IPV in heterosexual relationships at least as often as men do.³

II. TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE FREQUENCY OF IPV

As mentioned above, at least two lines of scholarly thought have emerged to explain the high rates of IPV.⁴ The first suggests that IPV is primarily a strategic behavior perpetrated almost exclusively by men and oriented toward the long-term goal of establishing and maintaining dominance and control. From this perspective, men internalize, via socialization processes, patriarchal norms that lead them to believe that dominating and controlling women with violence (and in other ways) is their right; female violence, in contrast, is virtually always used for self-protection.⁵ According to this approach, “[M]en who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions

2. See, e.g., Lynn Magdol et al., *Gender Differences in Partner Violence in a Birth Cohort of 21-Year-Olds: Bridging the Gap Between Clinical and Epidemiological Approaches*, 65 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 68 (1997); Murray A. Straus, *Cross-Cultural Reliability and Validity of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales: A Study of University Student Dating Couples in 17 Nations*, 38 CROSS-CULTURAL RES. 407 (2004).

3. John Archer, *Sex Differences in Aggression Between Heterosexual Partners: A Meta-analytic Review*, 126 PSYCHOL. BULL. 651 (2000); Miriam K. Ehrensaft et al., *Clinically Abusive Relationships in an Unselected Birth Cohort: Men's and Women's Participation and Developmental Antecedents*, 113 J. ABNORMAL PSYCHOL. 258 (2004). Some scholars have argued that there is a rare and particularly severe form of IPV that is perpetrated almost exclusively by men. See, e.g., Michael P. Johnson, *Patriarchal Terrorism and Common Couple Violence: Two Forms of Violence Against Women*, 57 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 283 (1995); Murray A. Straus, *The Controversy over Domestic Violence by Women: A Methodological, Theoretical, and Sociology of Science Analysis*, in *VIOLENCE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS* 17 (Ximena B. Arriaga & Stuart Oskamp eds., 1999). Although we are receptive to the notion that there are distinct forms of IPV, it seems plausible that the analysis of attachment dynamics presented in this report is applicable to almost all of them (perhaps with the exception of IPV perpetrated by psychopaths, who tend to lack empathy and a conscience). Future research could beneficially explore this issue empirically.

4. A third argument, albeit a less mainstream one, suggests that evolutionary pressures have provided a survival advantage to men who were violent toward their mating partners because this violence helped to provide them with exclusive control over their partners' reproductive capacity. See MARTIN DALY & MARGO WILSON, *HOMICIDE* (1988). This sociobiological perspective suggests that the survival advantage has left present-day men with a genetic proclivity toward IPV.

5. R. EMERSON DOBASH & RUSSELL DOBASH, *VIOLENCE AGAINST WIVES: A CASE AGAINST THE PATRIARCHY* (1979); ELLEN PENCE & MICHAEL PAYMAR, *EDUCATION GROUPS FOR MEN WHO BATTER: THE DULUTH MODEL* (1993); Michele Bograd, *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse: An Introduction*, in *FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON WIFE ABUSE* 11 (Kersti Yllö & Michele Bograd eds., 1988); Russell P. Dobash et al., *The Myth of Sexual Symmetry in Marital Violence*, 39 SOC. PROBS. 71 (1992).

that are cherished in Western society—aggressiveness, male dominance, and female subordination—and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance.”⁶ Although patriarchal beliefs could well be a risk factor for male IPV, the perspective that patriarchal socialization is the primary cause of virtually all acts of IPV has begun to crumble under the weight of voluminous contradictory evidence. A review of the literature pertaining to this line of thought is beyond the scope of this Article, but the interested reader is encouraged to examine recent critiques by Professor Donald Dutton and others.⁷

The second line of scholarly thought suggests that violence is primarily an impulsive behavior that emerges when individuals (either men or women) feel angered or threatened in their relationship. From this perspective, some degree of nonviolent conflict (and the anger and insecurity that can arise from it) is virtually certain to emerge in close, interdependent relationships, and this nonviolent conflict can sometimes boil over into violent conflict:⁸ “Conflict is an inevitable—though often unanticipated—feature of close relationships. The strong, frequent, and diverse bonds between [intimate partners] set the stage for conflicting interests to surface.”⁹ Interdependence, which refers to having one’s life and well-being intertwined with that of another person, can lead to nonviolent (and, sometimes, violent) conflict in intimate relationships because it increases the likelihood that (1) the partner’s behavior will adversely affect the individual’s quality of life,¹⁰ (2) the individual will feel vulnerable to emotional pain at the hands of the partner,¹¹ and (3) the individual will be espe-

6. DOBASH & DOBASH, *supra* note 5, at 24.

7. See, e.g., Donald G. Dutton & Kenneth Corvo, *Transforming a Flawed Policy: A Call to Revive Psychology and Science in Domestic Violence Research and Practice*, 11 *AGGRESSION & VIOLENT BEHAV.* 457 (2006); Donald G. Dutton & Tonia L. Nicholls, *The Gender Paradigm in Domestic Violence Research and Theory: Part I—The Conflict of Theory and Data*, 10 *AGGRESSION & VIOLENT BEHAV.* 680 (2005); M.J. George, *Invisible Touch*, 8 *AGGRESSION & VIOLENT BEHAV.* 23 (2003).

8. See Richard B. Felson, *Patterns of Aggressive Social Interaction*, in *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF AGGRESSION: FROM INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR TO SOCIAL INTERACTION* 107 (Amélie Mummeny ed., 1984); Christopher M. Murphy & K. Daniel O’Leary, *Psychological Aggression Predicts Physical Aggression in Early Marriage*, 57 *J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL.* 579 (1989); Jan E. Stets, *Verbal and Physical Aggression in Marriage*, 52 *J. MARRIAGE & FAM.* 501 (1990); Murray A. Straus et al., *The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2)*, 17 *J. FAM. ISSUES* 283 (1996).

9. John G. Holmes & Sandra L. Murray, *Conflict in Close Relationships*, in *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: HANDBOOK OF BASIC PRINCIPLES* 622, 650 (E. Tory Higgins & Arie W. Kruglanski eds., 1996).

10. JOHN W. THIBAUT & HAROLD H. KELLEY, *THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF GROUPS* (1959).

11. John G. Holmes, *Interpersonal Expectations as the Building Blocks of Social Cognition: An Interdependence Theory Perspective*, 9 *PERS. RELATIONSHIPS* 1 (2002).

cially motivated to influence the partner's behavior.¹² An enormous amount of empirical evidence suggests that this conflict-based perspective on IPV accurately describes a large proportion of the violent acts that both men and women perpetrate in their intimate relationships.¹³ One flourishing area of research adopting this conflict-based approach has extended attachment theory principles¹⁴ to the domain of IPV. This research has been spearheaded by scholars such as Kim Bartholomew, Antonia Henderson, Donald Dutton, and Ofra Mayseless.¹⁵

III. THE FOUNDATIONS OF ATTACHMENT THEORY: ATTACHMENT IN INFANCY

Attachment theory was originally developed as an evolutionary analysis of the emotional bonds that connect infants and their caregivers (typically parents) and the adverse consequences for the infant when these bonds are frayed or broken.¹⁶ For complex biological reasons (including the size of the infant's skull required to house the large human brain and the narrowness of the birth canal required for the mother's bipedal skeletal structure), human babies are born extremely immature relative to other animals and cannot survive without receiving long-term care to keep them safe and healthy.¹⁷ According to attachment theory, human infants and caregivers possess,

12. RICHARD B. FELSON, *VIOLENCE AND GENDER REEXAMINED* (2002).

13. *See, e.g., id.*

14. *See generally* MARY D. SALTER AINSWORTH ET AL., *PATTERNS OF ATTACHMENT: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE STRANGE SITUATION* (1978); 1 JOHN BOWLBY, *ATTACHMENT AND LOSS: ATTACHMENT* (2d ed. 1982) [hereinafter BOWLBY, *ATTACHMENT*]; 2 JOHN BOWLBY, *ATTACHMENT AND LOSS: SEPARATION: ANXIETY AND ANGER* (1973) [hereinafter BOWLBY, *SEPARATION*]; 3 JOHN BOWLBY, *ATTACHMENT AND LOSS: LOSS: SADNESS AND DEPRESSION* (1980) [hereinafter BOWLBY, *LOSS*]; JOHN BOWLBY, *A SECURE BASE: PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT AND HEALTHY HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* (1988) [hereinafter BOWLBY, *A SECURE BASE*]; Cindy Hazan & Phillip Shaver, *Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process*, 52 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 511 (1987) [hereinafter Hazan & Shaver, *Romantic Love*].

15. *See, e.g.,* DONALD G. DUTTON, *THE ABUSIVE PERSONALITY: VIOLENCE AND CONTROL IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS* (1998); Kim Bartholomew & Colleen J. Allison, *An Attachment Perspective on Abusive Dynamics in Intimate Relationships*, in *DYNAMICS OF ROMANTIC LOVE: ATTACHMENT, CAREGIVING, AND SEX* 102 (Mario Mikulincer & Gail S. Goodman eds., 2006); Kim Bartholomew et al., *Insecure Attachment and Abusive Intimate Relationships*, in *ADULT ATTACHMENT AND COUPLE PSYCHOTHERAPY: THE "SECURE BASE" IN PRACTICE AND RESEARCH* 43 (Christopher Clulow ed., 2001); Ofra Mayseless, *Adult Attachment Patterns and Courtship Violence*, 40 *FAM. REL.* 21 (1991).

16. *See* BOWLBY, *ATTACHMENT*, *supra* note 14; BOWLBY, *SEPARATION*, *supra* note 14; BOWLBY, *LOSS*, *supra* note 14.

17. *See* M. Maurice Abitbol, *Growth of the Fetus in the Abdominal Cavity*, 91 *AM. J. PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 367 (1993); Helen E. Fisher, *The Four-Year Itch*, *NAT. HIST.*, Oct. 1987, at 22, *reprinted in* *APPLYING ANTHROPOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTORY READER* 203 (Aaron Podolefsky & Peter J. Brown eds., 2d ed. 1992).

as a result of evolutionary pressures, complementary affective and behavioral systems that increase the likelihood that the infant will receive sufficient care to survive. For example, infants cry when they feel anxious, causing their caregivers to experience distress and a desire to soothe them; those ancestral parents who lacked this desire, the theory suggests, tended to have children who did not survive long enough to reproduce, and consequently their genes were weeded out of the evolutionary pool over time. At its most basic level, then, attachment is a deep-rooted emotional bond that keeps the infant and the caregiver in close proximity, a process that decreases the likelihood that harm will befall the infant. The attachment-based motivation to seek proximity is especially strong under stressful or threatening circumstances, which can include not only safety concerns but also threats to the attachment bond itself, such as caregiver unavailability.¹⁸

According to attachment theory, the emotional attachment linking infants to their primary caregiver rises to the level of a basic need—comparable in many ways to hunger or thirst.¹⁹ When the caregiver is responsive to their needs, infants feel calm and safe, concluding that they are lovable and that their caregiver is dependable. In contrast, when the caregiver is unresponsive (or when circumstances, such as prolonged separation, threaten the attachment bond), infants feel anxious and insecure. This anxiety and insecurity can quickly turn to anger and protest behaviors if the caregiver remains unresponsive or unavailable. Even when they are reunited with their primary caregiver, infants who have experienced prolonged attachment disruptions (separations or periods of unresponsive caregiving) frequently remain angry for a while. They express both a desire for intimacy and a tendency to communicate their anger, “arching away angrily while simultaneously seeking contact.”²⁰

As a result of their early attachment experiences,²¹ infants draw idiosyncratic conclusions about the degree to which (1) they are worthy

18. See BOWLBY, ATTACHMENT, *supra* note 14; Mario Mikulincer & Phillip R. Shaver, *The Attachment Behavioral System in Adulthood: Activation, Psychodynamics, and Interpersonal Processes*, in 35 ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 53 (Mark P. Zanna ed., 2003).

19. See BOWLBY, ATTACHMENT, *supra* note 14; BOWLBY, SEPARATION, *supra* note 14; BOWLBY, LOSS, *supra* note 14; see also Roy F. Baumeister & Mark R. Leary, *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation*, 117 PSYCHOL. BULL. 497 (1995).

20. DUTTON, *supra* note 15, at 119 (citing BOWLBY, SEPARATION, *supra* note 14, at 285).

21. Genetic and temperamental factors also play a role, but a discussion of such issues is beyond the scope of this Article.

of affection and (2) others are reliably responsive.²² According to early empirical research, infants develop one of three unique “attachment styles,” which refer to the ways in which they relate emotionally and behaviorally to their primary caregiver.²³ Infants categorized as “secure” feel confident to explore new surroundings when their primary caregiver is present, become distressed or even angry when she (or he²⁴) leaves them alone, and are quickly comforted by an affectionate reunion when she returns. Infants categorized as “avoidant” tend not to pursue physical contact with their primary caregiver, do not exhibit overt signs of distress when she leaves them alone, and do not approach her when she returns. Finally, infants categorized as “anxious-ambivalent” tend to cling anxiously to their primary caregiver, become almost inconsolably distressed or angry when she leaves them alone, and both solicit and reject care (e.g., by wanting to be picked up but then immediately pushing away) when she returns. Although attachment theorists recognize that these attachment styles are not entirely stable over time,²⁵ they argue that the styles exhibit reasonably high stability because the lessons infants learn about how lovable they are and how responsive caregivers are become internalized and entrenched beliefs that influence how they interact with the social world in the future.²⁶

Although the secure pattern is the healthiest of the three attachment styles, Professor Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues²⁷ argued that all three styles are adaptive responses to a specific type of parenting. Secure infants tended to have a primary caregiver who was reliably responsive to their needs, which caused them to learn that their distressed pleas for comfort would be met. Avoidant infants tended to have a primary caregiver who was reliably unresponsive, which caused them to learn that their pleas would be neglected and that making such pleas was fruitless. Anxious-ambivalent infants tended to have a primary caregiver who was unreliably responsive, which caused them to learn that their pleas would sometimes be met and sometimes be

22. See BOWLBY, SEPARATION, *supra* note 14.

23. See AINSWORTH ET AL., *supra* note 14.

24. Infants can readily form an attachment bond to caregivers of either gender, although attachment to a mother figure tends to be most common.

25. See Joanne Davila et al., *Attachment Change Processes in the Early Years of Marriage*, 76 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 783 (1999); Joanne Davila & Erica Sargent, *The Meaning of Life (Events) Predicts Changes in Attachment Security*, 29 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1383 (2003); Eli J. Finkel et al., *Vengefully Ever After: Destiny Beliefs, State Attachment Anxiety, and Forgiveness*, 92 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 871 (2007).

26. See AINSWORTH ET AL., *supra* note 14; BOWLBY, SEPARATION, *supra* note 14; Hazan & Shaver, *Romantic Love*, *supra* note 14.

27. See AINSWORTH ET AL., *supra* note 14.

neglected. Given this parental behavior, it is adaptive for avoidant infants not to depend too much on their caregiver and for anxious-ambivalent infants to express as much distress as possible to make the caregiver realize that the current need for comfort is especially acute, thereby maximizing the likelihood that the caregiver will respond sensitively.

IV. ATTACHMENT IN ADULTHOOD

In the mid-1980s, psychologists began to examine Professor John Bowlby's assertion that "attachment behavior is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave,"²⁸ which led these scholars to investigate the attachment bonds formed between adults.²⁹ Attachment theorists have argued that such adult attachment bonds are important in part because the neural substrates underlying such emotional connections parallel those underlying infant-caregiver connections:³⁰ "The evolution of the brain would have to be considered unparsimonious if it were not able to draw upon the same basic capacities of emotion and action in the various settings where strong attachment is called for."³¹

Although attachment bonds in adult relationships certainly differ in important ways from infant-caregiver bonds (e.g., adults care mutually for one another's needs rather than having one person in the needy role and the other in the caregiving role), they also exhibit substantial and essential similarities (e.g., adults seek support and reassurance from their adult attachment figure when experiencing distress). One of the key conceptual contributions of this application of attachment dynamics to adult relationships is the observation that, as with infants, adults frequently experience anxiety when their attachment bond is threatened—an emotional response that can quickly give way to anger and protest behaviors.³² Attachment bonds in intimate relationships can be threatened by diverse circumstances, including the perception that one's partner is becoming detached or is attracted to somebody

28. John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, 130 *BRIT. J. PSYCHIATRY* 201, 203 (1977) (quoted in Donald G. Dutton et al., *Intimacy-Anger and Insecure Attachment as Precursors of Abuse in Intimate Relationships*, 24 *J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL.* 1367 (1994)).

29. Hazan & Shaver, *Romantic Love*, *supra* note 14.

30. Cindy Hazan & Phillip R. Shaver, *Attachment as an Organizational Framework for Research on Close Relationships*, 5 *PSYCHOL. INQUIRY* 1 (1994).

31. MELVIN KONNER, *THE TANGLED WING: BIOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE HUMAN SPIRIT* 298 (1982).

32. BOWLBY, *A SECURE BASE*, *supra* note 14; John Bowlby, *Violence in the Family as a Disorder of the Attachment and Caregiving Systems*, 44 *AM. J. PSYCHOANALYSIS* 9 (1984).

else. Bowlby argued that anger is frequently a healthy and adaptive response to threats to the attachment bond:

Thus in the right place, at the right time, and in right degree, anger is not only appropriate but may be indispensable. It serves to deter from dangerous behavior, to drive off a rival, or to coerce a partner. In each case the aim of the angry behavior is the same—to protect a relationship which is of very special value to the angry person.³³

Although he argued that anger is a sensible response to attachment threats, Bowlby believed that the violent behavior that can result is “maladaptive,” and that it “can be understood as the *distorted and exaggerated* versions of behavior that is potentially functional.”³⁴ In short, the anger and protest behaviors frequently exhibited by infants dealing with an attachment disruption are also seen in adults who are experiencing attachment disruption in their romantic relationships. These angry and protesting responses, when managed poorly, can lead to IPV.

Attachment theorists argue that, as with infants, adults differ in their attachment styles. The first empirical study³⁵ to apply attachment theory to adult romantic relationships built on the research of Ainsworth and her colleagues³⁶ by allowing research participants to self-classify as secure (e.g., “I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me”; 56% of respondents in this sample), avoidant (e.g., “I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them”; 25%), or anxious-ambivalent (e.g., “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me”; 19%).³⁷ These three groups differed in ways that were consistent with predictions derived from attachment theory. For example, secure individuals were the most likely to trust their partner, avoidant individuals were the least accepting of their partner’s limitations, and anxious-ambivalent individuals were the most likely to exhibit obsessive preoccupation with their partner.

A torrent of research has followed the publication of Professors Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver’s³⁸ seminal article on adult attachment dynamics. One of the major advances is a refined structure for conceptualizing individual differences in attachment tendencies.

33. Bowlby, *supra* note 32, at 11.

34. *Id.* at 12 (emphasis added).

35. See Hazan & Shaver, *Romantic Love*, *supra* note 14.

36. See AINSWORTH ET AL., *supra* note 14.

37. Hazan & Shaver, *Romantic Love*, *supra* note 14, at 515 tbl.2.

38. See generally *id.*

Rather than thinking in terms of discrete types or styles, adult attachment researchers are converging on the consensus that individuals differ in terms of where they fit on an attachment anxiety dimension and on an attachment avoidance dimension, with low scores on both dimensions indicating attachment security.³⁹ The anxiety dimension measures the affective and attributional processes involved in monitoring and appraising events for signs of threat, whereas the avoidance dimension measures the strategies individuals use to regulate their attachment needs.⁴⁰ Individuals who are high on the anxiety dimension tend to feel preoccupying uncertainty about whether their partner will accept or reject them, so they vigilantly monitor their partner's behavior for signs of rejection or acceptance. They tend to be buffeted around emotionally by relationship events, and to catastrophize the anticipated future consequences of relationship difficulties.⁴¹ Individuals who are high on the avoidance dimension tend to deal with insecurity by orienting away from their partner; varying along this dimension is not associated with preoccupying uncertainty, vigilant monitoring, being buffeted around by relationship events, or engaging in catastrophizing appraisals.⁴²

V. PREDICTING IPV FROM INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTACHMENT

A large and growing corpus of research suggests that individuals characterized by high levels of attachment anxiety are especially prone toward perpetrating IPV; as discussed below, the association of attachment avoidance with IPV perpetration is much less reliable.⁴³

39. See Kelly A. Brennan et al., *Self-Report Measurement of Adult Attachment: An Integrative Overview*, in ATTACHMENT THEORY AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS 46 (Jeffrey A. Simpson & W. Steven Rholes eds., 1998); Dale Griffin & Kim Bartholomew, *Models of the Self and Other: Fundamental Dimensions Underlying Measures of Adult Attachment*, 67 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 430 (1994); Jeffrey A. Simpson et al., *Conflict in Close Relationships: An Attachment Perspective*, 71 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 899 (1996).

40. R. Chris Fraley & Phillip R. Shaver, *Airport Separations: A Naturalistic Study of Adult Attachment Dynamics in Separating Couples*, 75 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1198 (1998); see also R. Chris Fraley & Phillip R. Shaver, *Adult Romantic Attachment: Theoretical Developments, Emerging Controversies, and Unanswered Questions*, 4 REV. GEN. PSYCHOL. 132 (2000).

41. See Lorne Campbell et al., *Perceptions of Conflict and Support in Romantic Relationships: The Role of Attachment Anxiety*, 88 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 510 (2005); Mikulincer & Shaver, *supra* note 18.

42. See Campbell et al., *supra* note 41.

43. Bartholomew & Allison, *supra* note 15. Given that scholars have measured individual differences in attachment tendencies in diverse ways, placing participants from any given study at specific locations on the anxiety and avoidance dimensions is not always straightforward. In the interest of avoiding substantial complexity, we gloss over some of this measurement-based nuance in favor of providing a brief but accurate overview of the big picture.

Before reviewing this evidence in detail, we first discuss the characteristics of attachment anxiety that might make individuals scoring toward the high end of this dimension especially susceptible to the type of anxiety, anger, and protest behaviors that can increase the likelihood of IPV perpetration. Individuals characterized by strong attachment anxiety deal with attachment threats by employing “hyperactivating strategies”:

[These strategies] intensify the vigilant monitoring of attachment-figure behaviors and slant perceptions in the direction of noticing or imagining insufficient interest, availability, and responsiveness. As a result, the likelihood of detecting signs of distance, rejection, and unavailability is increased, because the attachment figure cannot always be available and totally at the disposition of the attached person’s needs.⁴⁴

These interpersonal strategies cause anxiously attached individuals “to feel chronically frustrated due to the unfulfilled need for demonstrations of love and commitment” and to engage in “catastrophic appraisal of interpersonal conflicts, the perpetuation of the resulting negative affect, and conflict escalation.”⁴⁵

Experiencing goal frustration⁴⁶ and negative affect⁴⁷ have long been acknowledged as central predictors of violent behavior. As such, the frequent frustration of attachment needs and negative affect (not to mention the catastrophic appraisals and severe conflict) characteristic of strongly anxiously attached individuals increases the likelihood that they will experience impulses toward IPV when facing threats to their attachment bonds. Recent years have witnessed a sharp surge in theoretical and empirical research exploring this issue.⁴⁸ Most of the early empirical work focused exclusively on male perpetrators, ignoring the association between attachment representations and IPV among female perpetrators.

Following closely on an early, gender-neutral theoretical analysis of the role of individual differences in attachment representations in predicting IPV perpetration,⁴⁹ a first empirical investigation by Dutton demonstrated that court-mandated, male IPV perpetrators scored higher on the attachment anxiety dimension than did demographically matched controls.⁵⁰ A subsequent study replicated this finding among

44. Mikulincer & Shaver, *supra* note 18, at 77.

45. *Id.* at 83.

46. See JOHN DOLLARD ET AL., *FRUSTRATION AND AGGRESSION* (1939).

47. See LEONARD BERKOWITZ, *AGGRESSION: ITS CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND CONTROL* (1993).

48. See Bartholomew & Allison, *supra* note 15.

49. See Mayseless, *supra* note 15.

50. Dutton et al., *supra* note 28.

a sample of male IPV perpetrators recruited from the community rather than from the court system, and demonstrated that individuals who were both violent and maritally distressed were characterized by greater attachment anxiety than were those who were either maritally distressed but nonviolent or maritally nondistressed and nonviolent.⁵¹ A third study, which also employed a community sample, not only replicated the finding that male IPV perpetrators tended to experience greater attachment anxiety than did maritally distressed but nonviolent men, but also demonstrated that those men characterized by high levels of attachment anxiety were likely to perpetrate IPV in response to instances when their spouse withdrew from them and to exhibit elevated belligerent tendencies during a laboratory-based conflict discussion with their spouse.⁵² In short, strong and consistent evidence supports the hypothesis that men characterized by elevated attachment anxiety are prone toward IPV perpetration.

A question that was not addressed by these influential studies is whether the association between attachment anxiety and IPV perpetration is limited to male violence against their female partners or whether it applies to a broader range of IPV perpetration. Empirical evidence now demonstrates that attachment anxiety predicts IPV perpetration not only in gay male relationships,⁵³ but also among female IPV perpetrators. An impressive recent study, for example, demonstrated that the robust association of elevated attachment anxiety with IPV perpetration was not moderated by gender.⁵⁴ A second study replicated the association between elevated attachment anxiety and IPV perpetration in a sample of female college students,⁵⁵ and a third study replicated it, albeit with a measure of “interpersonal dependence” as a proxy for attachment anxiety, in a sample of women who were mandated by the court system to complete a batterer intervention program.⁵⁶ Taken together, these findings suggest, as hypothe-

51. Amy Holtzworth-Munroe et al., *Violent Versus Nonviolent Husbands: Differences in Attachment Patterns, Dependency, and Jealousy*, 11 J. FAM. PSYCHOL. 314 (1997).

52. Julia C. Babcock et al., *Attachment, Emotional Regulation, and the Function of Marital Violence: Differences Between Secure, Preoccupied, and Dismissing Violent and Nonviolent Husbands*, 15 J. FAM. VIOLENCE 391 (2000).

53. See Monica A. Landolt & Donald G. Dutton, *Power and Personality: An Analysis of Gay Male Intimate Abuse*, 37 SEX ROLES 335 (1997).

54. Antonia J.Z. Henderson et al., *When Loving Means Hurting: An Exploration of Attachment and Intimate Abuse in a Community Sample*, 20 J. FAM. VIOLENCE 219 (2005).

55. See Holly K. Orcutt et al., *Female-Perpetrated Intimate Partner Violence and Romantic Attachment Style in a College Student Sample*, 20 VIOLENCE & VICTIMS 287 (2005).

56. See Michelle Mohr Carney & Frederick P. Buttell, *Exploring the Relevance of Attachment Theory as a Dependent Variable in the Treatment of Women Mandated into Treatment for Domestic Violence Offenses*, 41 J. OFFENDER REHABILITATION 33 (2005).

sized, that the attachment theory analysis of IPV presented in this Article is gender-neutral.⁵⁷

We have examined the association of attachment anxiety with IPV perpetration, largely ignoring the association of attachment avoidance with IPV. We have neglected attachment avoidance thus far because there is little consistent evidence that it exerts a simple association with IPV perpetration. Some theoretical work and empirical evidence suggests that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance interact to predict IPV. All of these studies show that high attachment anxiety predicts IPV perpetration, but they are inconsistent in suggesting whether high attachment anxiety predicts perpetration most strongly for individuals who are high⁵⁸ versus low⁵⁹ in attachment avoidance. Clarifying whether and how attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance combine to predict IPV perpetration remains an important topic for future research.

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, both a meta-analytic review⁶⁰ and a blistering critique⁶¹ have provided evidence that extant treatment interventions, be they self-referred or court-mandated, for IPV perpetration are generally ineffective. These interventions, however, tend to pay little attention to the attachment dynamics discussed in this Article. Although IPV perpetration is a complex and multiply determined phenomenon, sufficient evidence now suggests that attachment dynamics—especially elevated attachment anxiety—play an important role in predicting both male and female IPV perpetration. In addition, ample evidence suggests that although attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are relatively stable personality characteristics, they are amenable to change over time.⁶² Taken together, the current state of the scientific literature indicates that treating IPV perpetrators with clinical interventions (individual therapy, couple therapy, or both) oriented toward making them less anxiously attached could prove fruitful in reducing violent behavior among those perpetrators whose violence is precipitated in large part by perceived threats to the attachment

57. See Bartholomew & Allison, *supra* note 15; Bowlby, *supra* note 32; Barbara Gormley, *An Adult Attachment Theoretical Perspective of Gender Symmetry in Intimate Partner Violence*, 52 *SEX ROLES* 785 (2005); Mayseless, *supra* note 15.

58. See DUTTON, *supra* note 15; Landolt & Dutton, *supra* note 53.

59. See, e.g., Bartholomew & Allison, *supra* note 15.

60. See Julia C. Babcock et al., *Does Batterers' Treatment Work? A Meta-analytic Review of Domestic Violence Treatment*, 23 *CLINICAL PSYCHOL. REV.* 1023 (2004).

61. See Dutton & Corvo, *supra* note 7.

62. Davila et al., *supra* note 25.

bond. A number of promising interventions for addressing attachment-related distress in conflictual relationships have been developed in recent years;⁶³ such interventions could be readily adapted for couples who experience attachment-related IPV.

In conclusion, attachment theory provides a psychologically rich and empirically supported perspective on IPV perpetration. Individuals, especially those who are anxiously attached by disposition, are likely to experience anxiety and anger when their attachment bond is threatened, and these responses can boil over into violent behavior. Transforming IPV-relevant social policies, clinical interventions, and legal practices to accommodate this attachment perspective holds promise for helping to alleviate the severity and frequency of the violent behavior individuals perpetrate against their intimate partners.

63. See *ATTACHMENT PROCESSES IN COUPLE AND FAMILY THERAPY* (Susan M. Johnson & Valerie E. Whiffen eds., 2003).

