Abuse and violence in intimate adult relationships: New perspectives from attachment theory

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ABSTRACT Previous attachment writing about violence between intimate adult partners has implicated the role of insecure attachment. This paper proposes that insecure attachment is not sufficient to explain intimate partner violence. Instead, it is suggested that recent evidence leads to the conclusion that such violent behavior is best explained in terms of attachment disorganization, a more profound form of relational insecurity. We discuss the contributions of this perspective to intervention.

KEYWORDS: violence - attachment - intimate adult partners - attachment disorganization - intervention

The focus of this paper is relational violence between intimate adult partners. Several attachment views of intimate partner violence appear in the literature. Developmental views are based on extrapolations from Ainsworth’s tripartite system of infant classification (Mayseless, 1991; Young, George, & Tori, 1994). Although these models have contributed to our understanding of relationship violence, we suggest here that they are somewhat outdated in that they fail to integrate recent thinking about attachment insecurity. Other views are derived from social personality models of adult attachment (Bartholomew, 1990; Dutton, 1998), an approach, we have argued elsewhere, that conflates attachment with broader aspects of personality functioning (George & West, in press).

Unique to the perspective we present here is the link between violence and Bowlby’s (1963, 1980) concept of pathological mourning. We begin with a brief review of attachment theory, in particular, the role of anger in intimate relationships, anxious and disorganized attachment, and pathological mourning. We next propose an attachment model of intimate partner violence and discuss the contributions of this perspective to intervention.
ATTACHMENT AS A BEHAVIORAL SYSTEM: FUNCTION AND GOAL

Ainsworth defined attachment as a tie or bond that endures over time and space (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Attachment theorists emphasize that what is important to development is the quality of this bond. Quality refers to how behaviors are organized and to the interplay and meaning of expressed behavior in relation to the goals of the relationship (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Quality of relationships, not their strength, has been shown to have tremendous explanatory and predictive power.

According to Bowlby (1969/1982), one of the primary developmental tasks for the child is to establish a relationship with an attachment figure who will provide proximity, contact and, ultimately, protection. Complementary to the attachment system of the child is the attachment figure’s caregiving system. The goal of the caregiving system is to maintain the relationship with the child, again in order to provide proximity, physical contact and protection (Bowlby, 1969/1982; George & Solomon, in press; Solomon & George, 1996). The long-term benefit to the parent of providing protection is parental fitness, that is, the survival of the parent’s genes as they are passed onto the next generation (Belsky, 1999; Solomon & George, 1996). Importantly, attachment continues to be a component of relationships across the life-span. Establishing an attachment-caregiving bond in the context of an intimate adult relationship is thought to be an integral aspect of adult development (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1973; Shaver & Clark, 1996).

Since protection is fundamental to survival and fitness, attachment theory proposes that the individual continually monitors the environment scanning for real or perceived signs of threat or danger. Bowlby emphasized that strong activation of the attachment system is expected under stressful or threatening circumstances. Further, when experiences in relationships are threatening (physical or psychological abuse, real or threatened abandonment), it follows that the attachment system is in a relatively constant state of activation (Solomon & George, in press). Our view of adult relationship violence rests on the premise that the abuser’s assault against his or her partner is an exaggerated form of behavior that occurs naturally when the attachment system is activated. We propose that these assaultive acts can best be understood in the context of heightened attachment insecurity, in particular, dysfunctional anger and behavioral patterns that attachment researchers have recently described as associated with attachment disorganization.

Anger and the conceptualization of anxious attachment

Bowlby (1973) emphasized that anger is a natural response to threats to attachment. It follows, then, that the child may become justifiably angry in circumstances in which he or she feels that proximity and contact with the attachment figure are jeopardized. Accordingly, the child reproaches the attachment figure in order to communicate directly his or her evaluation of the severity of the threat. Thus, Bowlby stressed that anger can work to promote the attachment bond; it is functional and essential to keeping the relationship intact and healthy.

Anger which becomes so intense or persistent that it threatens to weaken or disrupt the attachment bond no longer serves its biological function and was viewed by Bowlby as dysfunctional. Dysfunctional anger develops under conditions of actual or threatened experiences of severe separation or psychological/physical abandonment and loss. Rather than strengthening the relationship, dysfunctional expressions of anger are rooted in deep-seated resentment of the attachment figure and pose a threat to the relationship.

Bowlby (1973, 1988) viewed dysfunctional anger as the foundation of anxious attachment. Chronic frustration of the attachment system in childhood was thought to lead to anxious attachments, which might result in aggressive and even violent behavior if attachment needs continued to be frustrated, or if the relationship itself was endangered by threats or actual attempts by the attachment figure to leave the relationship. Bowlby’s view is supported in the spousal violence literature by attachment research that has found abusive men more likely to be judged insecure in adulthood than non-abusive men (Dutton, 1998; Young et al., 1994).

Although these findings are certainly an important step toward understanding the fundamental role that attachment plays in intimate partner violence, it is unlikely that the majority of insecurely attached adults assault or abuse their partners. Thus, one of the major theoretical tasks before us is to expand our understanding of the concept of anxious attachment in order to understand more clearly who is and is not at risk of relationship violence. To this end, we examine the nature of organized and disorganized attachment.

Organized attachment

The organization of the attachment system allows the individual to maintain ongoing relationships and supports adaptation and development (Bowlby, 1969/1982). By the pre-school years, the mechanisms that organize the attachment system and that prompt attachment behavior come to include language and related representational processes (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Therefore, throughout most of the life-span, attachment experience and behavior are guided and maintained by an organized representational system. Broadly defined, mental representation refers to the internal organization of memory, knowledge, experiences and affect that direct and influence evaluations of self, others and behavior. Representational models of attachment include the following features: (1) they are reality-based and derived from childhood experiences with the attachment figure; (2) they consist of an abstraction of collective interactive and emotional experience; (3) they involve defensive processes that influence how the individual perceives or remembers attachment-related experiences; and (4) they are conservative and
resistant to change unless life-circumstances disrupt or force the individual to modify defensive processing. Further, Bowlby emphasized that the individual's attachment experiences are prone to being filtered according to representational templates developed during childhood.

From a mental health perspective, the biological concept of adaptation is thought to be synonymous with adjustment (Ainsworth, 1979). Although adjustment is an evaluative term, we propose that the kind of dysfunctional anger expressed by violence or abuse should be considered a severe or pathological adjustment failure. Recent attachment research has shown that evidence linking severe adjustment problems to traditional forms of attachment insecurity (i.e. avoidant and ambivalent attachment) is equivocal (Lyon-Ruth & Jacobvitz, in press; Solomon & George, in press a; van IJzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, in press). Solomon and George (1996) proposed that as long as attachment is organized in relation to the function and goal of the attachment system, it is adaptive, that is, it facilitates and maintains 'good enough' proximity and, therefore, protection. We argue here, therefore, that anxious attachment as defined by avoidance and ambivalence is not sufficient to explain relationship violence. In order to develop this point more fully, we next review qualitative differences in attachment organization.

Secure attachment Secure attachment is the hallmark of flexible, organized adaptation in relationships. Main (1990) emphasized that attachment security fosters direct expressions of the attachment system, allowing the individual to seek proximity and physical contact with the attachment figure without risk. Observations of secure children have established that this is indeed the case at the level of behavior (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Belsky, Rovine, & Taylor, 1984; Egeland & Farber, 1984; Grossman, Grossmann, Spangler, Suss, & Unzner, 1985). In adulthood, based on the analysis of discourse in response to the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), representations of childhood attachment experiences are characteristically coherent, thoughtful and reflective, and secure adults demonstrate a clear commitment to relationships (Fonagy et al., 1995; Main, 1990). Thus, to be securely attached means that the individual is confident that attachment figures are maximally available and responsive and, ultimately, when necessary, will provide protection. Further, the secure individual does not have to manipulate his or her attachment behavior (to heighten or dampen it) in order for the attachment figure to respond to his or her attachment needs. The result is the behavioral and psychological integration of attachment experience, memories and affect such that the individual functions in a manner that is consistent with Bowlby's (1969/1982) notion of a goal-corrected partnership - a relationship that flexibly integrates the needs and perspectives of both the self and the partner.

Anxious attachment Under less optimal conditions - conditions where the attachment figure is unwilling or unable to respond to or satisfy an individual's attachment needs - the relationship will become anxious. The parent's lack of responsiveness leads children to develop secondary behavioral strategies which suppress primary strategies (Main, 1990). Although behavior that suppresses primary strategies is developed at a cost to the child, secondary strategies are thought to facilitate connectedness in the attachment relationship (Main, 1990; Solomon & George, 1996).

Attachment research has identified two organized, secondary behavioral strategies. In the context of rejection, avoidant children suppress their anger, thereby allowing them to remain near enough to the attachment figure to seek proximity and contact if needed. At the representational level, avoidant children have been described as attempting to immobilize the attachment system through defensive processes that deactivate or dismiss from consciousness attachment-related experience or affect (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Solomon, George, & De Jong, 1995).

Dismissing adults (analogous to avoidant children) portray themselves as detached, independent, strong and unaffected by others; actual memories of parental caring and protection and attachment-related sadness, fear and distress are notably absent or minimized (although anger may be acknowledged) in response to questions regarding childhood experience. Relationships are often described more positively than can be supported by memories (Main, 1991). Somewhat paradoxically, in response to attachment picture stimuli or when describing their experiences as a parent, dismissing individuals reveal attachment-related distress, longing, sadness and anger (George & Solomon, 1996; George, West, & Petten, in press).

Ambivalent children also maintain an organized attachment relationship in relation to the parent. At the level of behavior, the petulant mixture of proximity-seeking with resistance, or the more passive, clingy, or coy responses to reunion that typify ambivalent children (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Belsky et al., 1984; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994) are secondary behavioral strategies that intensify the child's signals to the parent (including hoots of anger) as a strategy to maintain proximity. At the representational level, research evidence to date suggests that ambivalent children appear to be preoccupied with attachment and, thus, engage in defensive processes that attempt to disengage or block temporarily attachment from consciousness. Through a process similar to cognitive disconnection (Bowlby, 1980) - analogous to Anna Freud's (1936) concept of isolation of affect and Klein's (1948) concept of splitting - ambivalent children have been shown to disconnect positive and negative attachment feelings when the attachment system is activated at the level of representation. This process is thought to leave the ambivalent child confused and uncertain with regard to parental availability and responsiveness (George & Solomon, 1996; Solomon et al., 1995).

Preoccupied adults (analogous to ambivalent children) reveal representations of the self in response to interview and attachment picture stimuli as enmeshed in the experiences and details of relationships. These adults appear often to be very childish, struggling for autonomy and recognition (George et al., in press; Main, 1990). They often dwell angrily on infractions or
disappointments with attachment figures. Despite their angst, preoccupied individuals value relationships.

In sum, to be _anxiously attached_ (avoidant or ambivalent) means that the individual is not confident that he or she can depend on the attachment figure to provide the kind or degree of protection necessary for immediate or satisfactory physical and psychological safety. The result is the development of secondary behavioral strategies and forms of defensive exclusion that keep the individual connected in relationships but prohibit full psychological integration of attachment experience, memories and affect. Despite the costs that interfere with the development of fully flexible, goal-oriented partnerships, these insecure relationships are organized and appear to provide 'good enough' protection when the attachment system is aroused. Avoidant and ambivalent individuals have developed behavioral and representational strategies that attempt to modulate (by occasional emotional outbursts) the arousal of the attachment system, including anger, thereby keeping the individual from losing control and thus maintaining attachment relationships intact (George & Solomon, in press; Main, 1990).

We next describe attachment disorganization, a form of attachment that is increasingly viewed as a more profound form of insecurity than those just described. Researchers have linked disorganization to such severe attachment threats as child abuse (Lyons-Ruth & Block, 1996; Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Browne, 1985; Carlson, 1998; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Jacobsen & Miller, in press), parental conflict in the context of divorce (Solomon & George, in press b), maternal depression (Teti, Gelfand, Messinger, & Isabella, 1995), life-threatening illness to the mother (Ainsworth & Eichberg, 1991), parental alcoholism (Cavell, Jones, Runyan, & Constantine-Pace, 1993; el-Guebaly, West, Maticka-Tyndale, & Pool, 1993) and child birth defects (Marvin & Pianta, 1996). It has further been suggested that disorganized attachment is a risk factor for maladjustment or psychopathology (Carlson, 1998; Lyons-Ruth, Repacholi, McLeod, & Silva, 1991; Solomon et al., 1995; Teti et al., 1995). We propose that the threatening, angry outbursts of partner violence are grounded in this profound form of relationship insecurity.

**DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT: SEGREGATED SYSTEMS AND UNRESOLVED TRAUMA**

Attachment disorganization was identified precisely because some infants failed to demonstrate organized attachment behavior upon reunion with the parent (Main & Solomon, 1990). These infants appeared dazed, confused, or frightened in response to the parent. During childhood (Main & Cassidy, 1988), and in high-risk samples as early as toddlerhood (Solomon & George, in press b), research shows that the disorganized/disoriented behavior of the infant begins to be replaced by brittle behavioral strategies that seek to control the parent through punitive acts or caregiving behavior. In childhood, therefore, the disorganized group is described as 'controlling'.

What is striking about controlling behavior is that it does not appear to reflect primary or secondary attachment strategies. That is, punitive and caregiving acts do not afford the child direct or indirect protection or care from the parent. Rather, punitive and caregiving behaviors appear to be antithetical to attachment—i.e. they place the child in control of the relationship (George & Solomon, in press). George and Solomon reported that many mothers of disorganized/controlling children describe themselves as failing to provide care and protection and the child as taking control of the relationship. Some of these mothers also described fears of themselves or the child losing control (e.g. punishing too harshly, child destructiveness, wild tantrums). These researchers argued that parents of disorganized/controlling children have physically or psychologically abcreated their caregiving system, thus leaving the child feeling abandoned, helpless, vulnerable, threatened and unprotected (George & Solomon, 1996, in press; Solomon & George, 1996).

George and Solomon emphasized that under conditions in which the child's attachment system is activated, the parent's reciprocal caregiving system should also be activated. In organized relationships (secure, avoidant and ambivalent), this indeed appears to be the case; ultimately, children in these relationships receive protection and care from their parents. In disorganized relationships, however, George and Solomon proposed that circumstances that activate the child's attachment system often activated the parent's attachment system as well. Overwhelmed by his or her own attachment needs, the parent then fails to provide care and abdicates his or her position as protector precisely at the moment of the child's greatest need. In addition, these researchers reported that mothers of disorganized children frequently appeared to have the psychological wish to merge, or the sense of merging, with their child, as indicated by descriptions of the child as replicas of themselves, including feelings of their own intense pain, anger and sadness in response to situations in which they should be providing care for the child. Often it was feelings associated with merging with the child that left these mothers immobilized, further threatening their child's sense of safety.

If the parent is feeling vulnerable and unprotected at the moment when the child needs care, it follows that the child would need to develop a mechanism to control the parent's own attachment system in order to reestablish the parent's investment in providing care. Following this thinking, George and Solomon proposed that punitive or caregiving behavior directed toward the parent achieves this goal. Punitive acts (sarcasm, insults, hitting, screaming at the parent) and caregiving acts (stroking, kissing, or making the parent comfortable) are effective means of control because they draw attention back to the child. Further, although effective, these researchers proposed that punitive and caregiving control strategies are the foundation of role reversal, a relationship phenomenon that adultifies the child and places him or her in the position of control and responsibility for the parent and the relationship.
Role reversal has long been associated with developmental costs to the child and, more recently, with attachment disorganization (George & Solomon, 1996, in press).

The costs of disorganization are revealed more fully at the representational level. Although the child develops behaviors to control the parent, mental representations of attachment clearly remain disorganized and disoriented. In middle childhood, Solomon et al. (1995) found that disorganized children portray parents and adults as frightened, frightening, chaotic, abusive, absent, and/or helpless. Children were depicted as helpless to get care, out of control (sometimes angrily), and unable to prevent life-threatening danger, chaos and disintegration of the self or the family. Research on disorganization in adulthood (defined in studies as adults whose children are judged disorganized and adults as unresolved in the AAI) has shown this form of adult attachment to be characterized by mental states revealing marked disorganization, confusion, disbelief and fear regarding attachment threats, especially loss and traumatic abuse (George et al., in press; Main & Hesse, 1990; Solomon & George, in press).

Bowlby (1980) proposed that under conditions of severe childhood suffering attachment-related experiences and feelings may become so painful that they cannot be integrated into an individual’s mental representation of experience. In this case, defensive exclusion is so complete that memories and feelings are segregated from consciousness and maintained in a separate, organized representational system. Bowlby emphasized that segregated systems are key representational features of pathological mourning because they are accompanied by the risk of the unpredictable emergence of uncontrolled attachment-related material. When systems that have been segregated are activated, “such behavior as is then shown is likely to be ill-organized and dysfunctional” (p. 346); thus, their emergence may overwhelm or undermine the individual’s ability to function and cause the individual to lose control. What is especially important here to our understanding of intimate partner violence is that the concept of segregated systems explains the chaotic dysregulation of organized defenses that characterize disorganized/controlling individuals (George & Solomon, in press; Solomon & George, in press).

In recent studies, childhood trauma has been linked to mental representations of adult attachment designated as ‘cannot classify’. This classification is assigned when no single state of mind with respect to attachment (secure, detached, enmeshed, or unresolved) is evident, for example, when discourse moves between two defensive positions or manifests different states of mind when discussing different childhood relationships. In particular, the ‘cannot classify’ classification appears to be associated with adults whose children are judged disorganized and with notable forms of adult psychopathology and unfavorable experience (Hesse, 1996). The descriptions of the representational qualities of this group, in concert with the history of these individuals, leads us to hypothesize that ‘cannot classify’ mental states is also a form of segregated systems, although as yet this hypothesis requires empirical scrutiny.

In sum, a synthesis of recent advances in attachment theory and research suggests that disorganized/controlling attachment means that the individual feels physically and psychologically unsafe, abandoned and extremely vulnerable. At the representational level, attachment relationships are not evaluated as an effective means of care and protection, and although the individual may desperately seek relationships, fundamentally the individual feels left to protect him- or herself. Further, because of experiences of threatened protection and unresolved trauma and loss, disorganized/controlling attachment renders the individual at risk of losing behavioral and mental organization and control when the attachment system is aroused.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF ADULT RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

Our model begins with the premise that violence in the context of intimate relationships is rooted in attachment disorganization, and thus is linked to experiences of threatened protection, unresolved trauma and, at the level of representation, segregated systems. Not all individuals with disorganized/controlling attachments are physically or psychologically abusive, but we have shown that this attachment pattern includes hostility, aggression, and behavioral maladaptation.

When we examine the literature on partner abuse and victimization from the lens of attachment disorganization, five strong parallels between these areas of investigation emerge. First, there are parallels at the level of behavior. As we have shown, disorganized children develop behavioral strategies to control the attachment figure. These behaviors are often strikingly hostile, confrontational, or manipulative and, especially in older children, can be abusive in nature. Openly hostile attack and manipulation are one of the hallmarks of intimate relationship violence. Research has shown that abusive men have been described as engaged in angry control of or domination over partners. These men also reported childhood experiences with parents (especially fathers) of traumatic levels of punitive control, including severe shaming and insults (Dutton, 1998; Holtzworth-Monroe, Smurzler, & Stuart, 1998).

Second, there are parallels at the representational level. Profound relationship anxiety rooted in childhood experiences of failed parental protection has been linked to controlling behavior in children. Similar to disorganized/controlling children, abusive men have been found to evaluate themselves as vulnerable, unprotected, abandoned, helpless, and often wildly out of control of themselves and relationships. Further, abandonment anxiety has been postulated to be a core feature of the abusive personality (Dutton, 1995).

Third, as we have shown, recent advances in attachment theory and
research have established a link between attachment disorganization, un-resolved grief and segregated systems (Bowlby, 1980; George & West, in press; George et al., in press; Solomon & George, in press b). Segregated systems appear to characterize adult relationship violence as well. Several recent studies of the attachment interviews of perpetrators and victims of violence showed that unresolved loss and abuse and ‘cannot classify’ classifications, representational statuses that we argued earlier were manifestations of segregated systems, were more prevalent in violence samples than in normative samples (Gardner, 1993; Holtzworth-Monroe, Hutchinson, & Stuart, 1992; Stalker & Davies, 1995; van IJzendoorn et al., 1997).

Also characteristic of segregated systems are difficulties in affect regulation such that predicting the context and timing of the inevitable emergence of segregated material is difficult. This expectation fits well with research that has found abusive men to be deficient in reality-testing, impulsive and defensively immature such that they are unable to regulate anxiety and anger (Dutton, 1998; Jacobse & Gortner, 1997).2

Fourth, according to attachment theory, segregated systems lead to pathological mourning, a mental state that we have shown earlier to be linked empirically to attachment disorganization. We would expect, then, and it has been found, that abusive men report childhood histories of severe abuse and trauma (Downey, Khoun, & Feldman, 1997; Kalmuss, 1984; Herman & van der Kolk, 1987). Further, our model suggests that both individuals with disorganized/controlling attachment and abusive perpetrators should reveal heightened trauma-related symptoms, that is, grief responses or post-traumatic stress symptoms. In recent studies, elevated levels of post-traumatic symptoms (e.g. dissociation, anxiety, depression, elevated anger) have been associated with disorganization in parents (Coulson, 1996; Magana, 1997), abusive mothers (Lyons-Ruth et al., 1991) and abusive men (Dutton, 1998). Disorganized/controlling attachment is also thought to be related to the trauma associated with childhood experiences of psychological or physical abandonment (Solomon & George, in press). Severe paternal rejection has been reported as the strongest discriminator of an abusive personality in male perpetrators of relationship violence (Dutton, 1998).

Finally, disorganized/controlling attachment has been theorized and found to be associated with psychopathological risk, for example, dissociative symptomology (Carlson, 1998; Liotti, in press). Recent researchers describing male abusers have suggested that the abusive personality and fearful attachment are in some ways similar to DSM-IV personality disorders, in particular, disorders that involve post-traumatic stress. It has also been suggested that partner asocialiveness is correlated with borderline personality organization and with sadistic and antisocial personality disorder (Dutton, 1998). However, given the poor association between attachment classification and specific forms of psychopathology, it is unlikely that intimate partner violence would be associated with any single disorder. Rather, we propose that the qualities of eruptive anger, combined with representations of self as extremely vulnerable and subject to abandonment, might place the abuser at risk for a range of disorders that include these defining characteristics.

Based on interpretations of partner violence as a form of ‘fearful’ adult attachment, the most comprehensive model of male victimization to date has emerged from the social personality adult attachment literature (Bartholomew, 1990; Dutton, 1995, 1998; Murphy, Meyer, & O’Leary, 1994). On the surface, this approach appears to be similar to the one proposed here. According to this view, the etiology of violence is linked to childhood experiences of disrupted attachment and post-traumatic stress. Angry, yet unable to tolerate being alone, the abuser is interpersonally dependent on his or her adult partner and caught in a conflict between engulfment and abandonment: partner blame and acts of physical and emotional abuse ensue. Violent outbursts are interpreted as dysfunctional attachment-protest behaviors that develop into a cyclical mood pattern similar to those associated with borderline personality organization.

How does the social personality approach differ from the developmental perspective that we take here? Our view emphasizes that fearful adult attachment, as defined by social personality attachment researchers, is likely to be a form of adult attachment that is subsumed under the developmental construct of attachment disorganization. The fearful category is defined in part in terms of the individual’s strong and unresolvable approach/avoidance conflict (Bartholomew, 1990), a quality of relationships that Main has long argued is the root of abuse (George & Main, 1979), and disorganized attachment (Main & Hesse, 1990). Conclusions regarding the etiology of abuse drawn from the fearful category must be considered with caution, however. Developmental attachment theorists suggest that this category, as well as the other attachment ‘styles’ defined using this model, may reflect more general personality traits than attachment (Crowell & Treboux, 1995; George & West, in press). Disorganized/controlling attachment, therefore, offers a more encompassing construct that has a developmental base.

Our model understands angry behavior as an expression of profound anxious attachment. Following this thinking, there are two key aspects to understanding the expression of abuse. The first is that initially abusive acts are likely to be the direct result of dysregulation of segregated systems and unresolved trauma or experiences of threatened protection. Vulnerability activates the attachment system; activation can potentially occur in response to any cue that suggests the partner is acting or thinking in a way that threatens physical or psychological safety and protection. In other words, activation is likely when the perpetrator sees or interprets the partner’s behavior as involving threat, abandonment, humiliation, shame, or embarrassment. We showed earlier how mental representations based on childhood experiences of failed protection lead to hypersensitivity to such cues, be they real or imagined. Hypersensitivity increases the likelihood that the abuser interprets external or internal cues as threatening.

In the moment of assault, then, violence is viewed as the product of the
sudden activation and dysregulation of the perpetrators' attachment system, a behavioral and representational system that is normally segregated and tightly controlled. Recall that the research evidence suggests that once activated, defensive regulation breaks down. The individual is then flooded uncontrollably with perceptions of his or her partner as threatening and of him- or herself as unprotected, helpless, abandoned and overwhelmed by personal trauma. It is at the moment of dysregulation that we believe the most intense expression of anger and hostility occurs.

The second key aspect is that physical and psychological forms of abuse are also likely to be behaviors of punitive control. Further, as a product of a dynamic shift that is brought about when controlling behavior emerges (i.e. reversed roles), the perpetrator is at risk of psychological merging with the attachment figure, a phenomenon that, as we described earlier, is thought to be related to attachment disorganization. In our view, psychological merging explains the conflict between engulfment and abandonment that has been described as characteristic of the physically abusive male.

In sum, our model provides a reconceptualization of intimate partner violence as a form of pathological mourning that is compatible with, but more parsimonious than, other models. In the final section of this paper, we draw upon this model to consider some essential aspects of an attachment-based psychotherapy.

THE THERAPEUTIC TASK

The great benefit of a developmental theory such as attachment to the psychotherapist is that it suggests what to look for - it supplies a conceptual scheme to organize information about an individual. By integrating information about the relational past with attachment theory, the therapist creates hypotheses about the individual's development. In the case of the abusive male, who is typically pressured by the court into coming into therapy, these formulations may be especially critical in freeing him from obligation and harnessing his curiosity and need for understanding. This is another way of saying that therapy is useless unless the patient wants it himself.

Additionally, this kind of patient may tell a pat story full of breast-beating guilt feelings and effectively rationalized clichés. For example, his relational patterns may be so embedded in manipulation and defensive denial of his own problems that confrontation of his resistance against therapy is vital. Thus, the first task of the therapist is to expose tactfully these early resistances, since working with such resistances may prevent the individual from either running out of therapy or creating a corruptive misalliance with the therapist. This can be done by pointing out to the patient that his way of relating has not produced contentment for him, and has exacted a price from both himself and his partner. The stance of the therapist should be one that says,
narrative-centered agenda. From this standpoint, and following Bowlby (1963), therapy means facing a long-delayed mourning response with the undoing of denied losses and deactivated (repressed) affects.

As noted above, a second major type of agenda is a pattern-centered agenda in which the abusive male is imprisoned in a dichotomous, adversarial approach to intimacy. A common example of this polarized approach to relationships is the combination of fear and lonely withdrawal. Putting indefinite and unknown patterns of behavior or modes of thought into a reality-oriented format directs the individual's attention towards the exploration of ideas. The best formulated pattern agendas are metaphorical in nature and challenge limiting ways of relating. Metaphorical formulations of the type "You seem to see relationships only in terms of victims and bullies" do not invite debate but rather help the abuser to increase his perception of the old conflicts that first of all led to the development of his presenting complaints.

Consider a clinical example of a 32-year-old man whose wife had left him because he was abusing her. As in so many cases, the emotional climate of his childhood household, where there was strife and brutality, may best be described as a war zone. This crisis-ridden environment was dominated by his mother who had many male partners. He and his siblings had witnessed numerous beatings of his mother by her boyfriends. He recalled that he had felt 'scared, lonely and wanting to run away' at these times. He also had suffered from attacks from his mother when she was drunk. In his words, 'There was something about her that was just real evil. . . screaming, yelling and bitching about everything. She used to whip us real bad.' He reported that he had felt 'so frightened, lonely and hurt' in childhood.

Feeling actively disliked at home, he became resentful, suspicious and alienated from school values, including self-control and the respect for authority. Inevitably, he accumulated both a school and a court record for aggression before he reached his 16th birthday and was placed in a reform school. He reported that he felt that his mother could have saved him from reform school but she didn't and he 'felt betrayed'.

That past was always with him, to the extent that his loneliness, anger, longing and feelings of failed protection had been transferred to his wife. In this relationship, his feelings appeared unreasonable and confusing to himself. He was preoccupied with being left by his wife; in his words: 'I felt alone, deserted, kind of reminded me of my mom, to be honest with you. . . . I felt angry, betrayed. I felt more angry than betrayed. I felt a lot of hatred.'

According to Green (1986), aspects of mourning appear in every therapeutic enterprise. As illustrated in the above example, most mourning that is relevant to the psychotherapeutic process is mourning for what was never experienced rather than for what was experienced and then lost. Bowlby (1963) discussed the clinical implications of pathological mourning in a most lucid manner and demonstrated that repressed affects, particularly angry yearning, are the basic problem in much psychopathology. An attachment-based psychotherapy is principally concerned with the undoing of denied losses (defined broadly as the failure of the parent to respond to the child's attachment needs) so that a chaotic mass of extreme anger and other segregated feeling states and dissociated beliefs may be recognized and integrated. Mourning—the struggle to reintegrate the internal world and the sense of self in the face of failed protection from childhood attachment figures—needs to be completed.

In mourning, what is recovered are the disavowed affects (and content) associated with traumatic attachment experience. Such affects, when re-experienced within the safety of the therapeutic relationship, allow for the strengthening of the abuser's sense of personal narrative. Here, as Holmes (1993) pointed out, the creation of a coherent narrative from attachment-related content converts memories of old affective states into something quite different 'through the creation of new meaning' (Modell, 1993, p. 185). In this regard, Fonagy (1991) wrote vividly about the expansion of narrative coherence through the individual's own inner reflective activity.

As Fonagy noted, psychotherapy is a directing mentalistic activity in which profound involvement with the therapist's mental state (transference interpretations provide the medium for this involvement) mobilizes and further the patient's reflective capacity. Once the abuser gets to know his or her own mind, there is an accompanying temporal translation of attachment-related experiences such that 'new experiences of other minds can more readily be integrated into the framework of past relationship representations' (Fonagy et al., 1995, p. 267). New meanings, in other words, are created within a circular movement from the present to the past and back again from the past to the present, a temporal round that tests and changes and continually recategorizes old memories (Edelman, 1992). Recategorization within the context of psychotherapy may be said to be marked primarily by bringing unresolved and thus segregated attachment experiences within the domain of the representational model of the self. Instead of being in bondage to old affective categories, the abuser is freed by self-reflection to transform them and gains in turn the restoration of narrative meaning and coherence. In other words, he moves from a state of disorganization toward the organization of thoughts about self in relation to his partner, and ultimately behavior in relation to her.

Consistent with this emphasis on development of narrative competence is the accent on the role of interpretation in an attachment-based psychotherapy. Thus, as Morris Eagle, a keen observer of psychoanalysis and attachment theory, observed: 'It is ironic that during a period in psychoanalytic history in which the therapeutic value of insight, awareness, and remembering has been radically de-emphasized, attachment research reminds us of their value and relevance' (1995, p. 129). In this vein, it must be remembered that prominent among attachment principles is the idea that the provision of a secure base facilitates exploration. This principle is, of course, central to the establishment of a therapeutic space in which the abuser may find the
freedom to transform and integrate disorganized and unresolved attachment into something organized and coherent.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank Christina Schnider, who, while working on her senior thesis at Mills College, asked questions that led to the expansion of our thinking about domestic violence. We also want to thank Ronald Aldous for his many stimulating discussions on the subjects of psychotherapy. This work was supported in part by the Letts-Villard Endowed Chair awarded to the second author.

NOTES

1 The most thorough descriptions of representations of adult attachment are based on the classification system developed by Main and Goldwyn (1985–1994) for the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984, 1985, 1996). The quasi-clinical measure is the "gold standard" of adult attachment assessment. During the course of the interview the individual is asked to respond to a series of theoretically guided questions regarding childhood experience. A full description of this measure is beyond the scope of the paper. Interested readers are referred to Main et al. (1985) and Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn (1993).

2 Defensively immature, in the psychoanalytic sense, refers to such primitive methods of defense as splitting (keeping contradictory aspects of intrapsychic experience separate) and projective identification (unwanted aspects of the self are projectively disavowed by placing them in someone else) which have arisen and remain active as a result of developmental arrests.

REFERENCES


