The Relationship between Parental Conflict and Romantic Attachment in Young Adulthood

Amber Metalla
Hanover College
PSY 344: Social Psychology
Winter 2013
Abstract

Numerous studies have found that an increased amount parental conflict correlates with insecure attachments in young adults. A child’s experience of insecurity or security early in relationships with parents creates working models of the self and towards relationships with others (Cassidy, 2000). Loving, trustworthy, and receptive parents overall tend to result in secure attachment model formation in children. Conversely, neglectful or rejecting parents tends to leads to insecure attachment model internalization in children. My hypothesis was that both avoidant and anxious insecure attachment styles would correlate with increased levels of parental conflict. I administered an anonymous, online questionnaire using participants (N= 37) in a within and between subjects design. They were asked to complete one of two online forms (different order of questionnaires for counterbalancing) featuring items about parental conflict witnessed and their own romantic attachment style, both using a Likert scale of 1 to 5. No significant correlative results were found between insecure attachment styles and increased level of parent conflict witnessed as predicted. Although, a significant order effect was detected between the questionnaires, suggesting that participants may have been likely to sensitize their own attachment evaluations as less anxious if they took the parental conflict questionnaire beforehand, p=.05. Future research should consider the order in which sensitive material included in questionnaires, such as witnessed parental conflict, are implemented in conjunction with self-evaluating romantic attachment surveys.
The Relationship between Parental Conflict and Romantic Attachment in Young Adulthood

Studies have tried to address how and why parents’ relations can affect their children in numerous fashions. Past research has focused on how divorce and attachment style exhibited by parents onto their children are respectively related to how a child’s style of attachment is formed (Cassidy, 2000). Others have tried to measure children’s success in academics, adaptation to environments, and attachment to peers in hopes of trying to find link between the state of a child and parenting style (Cummings-Robau, Lopez, and Rice (2009). My study will attempt to shift the focus a step further: Does parental conflict affect romantic attachments in young adulthood?

— A child’s experience of insecurity or security early in relationships with parents creates working models of the self and in relation to others (Cassidy, 2000). Loving, trustworthy, and receptive parents overall tends to result secure attachment model formation in children. Upon development, a child can then implement positive working model later on in life. Conversely, neglectful or rejecting parents tends to leads to insecure attachment model internalization in children, which thereby negatively transfers into their own peer and romantic relationships later on in life. Further explanation of secure and insecure attachment styles is necessary in order to comprehend the difference between the above working models of attachment children use to form relationships with others.

Cassidy, (2000) generally describes attachment as a fundamental step in relationship building; it first occurs first between an infant and a caregiver, and then later occurs between romantic partners. Cassidy also defines adult romantic relationships similarly to that of general
attachment, and such relationships can be shaped by the attachments established in childhood with parents and role models.

There are three attachments styles possible. Secure attachments can be described as follows according to Cassidy (2000): one finds it easy to seek closeness with others, is comfortable depending on and offering dependence towards others, all without fear of abandonment (Cassidy, 2000). Conversely, insecure-avoidant attachments tend to be displayed as follows: one is rather uncomfortable getting close to, trusting, and depending upon other people. These individuals typically are not drawn to interpersonal relations and limit the expression of emotions. Infants with avoidant attachments tended to have mothers who were uncomfortable with close bodily contact, and limited emotional expression (Cassidy, 2000). Lastly, insecure-anxious attachments can be described as follows: one feels as though others are reluctant to sustain the closeness he or she desires, and abandonment is often a worry. Individuals actively seek out close relationships, but yet are often not comforted or satisfied with attachment that is established. Mothers of these infants were inconsistent in their parenting styles, and varied between loving nurturance and not responding to the infant's needs (Cassidy, 2000).

Infant-caregiver relationships and adult romantic relationships share a number of qualities when it comes to attachment (Fraley, 2010). According to Hazan and Shaver, (1987), both of the relationships involve members feeling secure when the other is nearby, feel insecure when separated, close bodily contact, and mutual preoccupation with and interest in one another. Generally, adult romantic attachments and infant-caregiver relationships both result from the enactment of behavioral systems and motivational systems carried out during the development of the relationship and manifest through what we now know as attachment (Fraley, 2010).
In order to provide further evidence that parental conflict can have long-term consequences for adjustment in adulthood, I will discuss two studies that took college age students’ adjustments to college life into consideration. Doyle and Markiewicz (2005) found a significant relationship between marital conflict between parents and college age children's adjustment to college life. The study showed that those who indicated high levels of conflict between parents also demonstrated generally a lower degree of mental and emotional adjustment to college life. Cummings-Robeau, Lopez, and Rice (2009) also compared security scores of parental attachment to their children and adult child’s attachment to the parents to self-reports of interpersonal problems in college students, and found that parental and adult attachment security scores correlated. Results generally supported associations between security of parental attachment to children and adult child’s attachment orientations to peers.

If parents act in loving, trustworthy, and responsive ways towards their children, the child can form a secure attachment model and implement that model later on in life. This can ultimately promote openness and trust in others across peer and romantic relationships. Conversely, when parents act in neglectful or rejecting ways, the child will internalize an insecure attachment model, which then transfers negative consequences into peer and romantic relationships (Cummings-Robeau, Lopez, and Rice, 2009).

Further evidence of such is found in Cassidy (2000) who hypothesized that upon insecure attachment formation, working models of the self can lead to specific patterns of emotion regulation, thinking, and behavior socially in relationships in children in regards to his or her parents as well as a child’s other close relationships, such as with peers, teachers, etc.

Witnessing domestic violence has also been found to have some type of connection with the development of unhealthy romantic relationships. These kinds of relationships on severe end
of the spectrum have also been found to have a profound effect on romantic attachment in adults.

Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, and Sabourin (2009) conducted a study involving 644 adults who experienced violence at a young age, and were currently in long-term romantic relationships. The study found that witnessing domestic violence at a young age could later affect the child’s relationships as an adult. Witnessing domestic violence can ultimately predict anxiety over abandonment, avoidance of close relationships (insecure avoidant attachment style), and also violence in the child’s own romantic relationship upon reaching adulthood.

In summary from the study above, witnessing incidents of domestic violence can in fact disrupt a child’s notion of parental availability and responsiveness. Children easily recognize and respond to conflicts between parents involving feelings of tension or anger with feelings of personal rejection or abandonment (Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009). When conflict and fear are common between parents, this hinders a parent’s ability to tend to a child's needs, and also allows for a lack of open, honest communication among family members. (Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, and Sabourin, 2009).

Numerous studies have found that an increased amount parental conflict correlates with insecure attachments in young adults. However, the question remains, are both avoidant and anxious insecure attachment styles correlated with increased levels of parental conflict? I attempted to answer this question through administration of an online questionnaire that will address two subject areas: parental conflict and romantic attachment in young adults between the ages of 18 and 16.
Method

Participants

The number of participants totaled at 37. Participants were students at Hanover College, conveniently sampled. Most students volunteered to sign up for participation in order receive extra credit in a psychology classes.

Students of any demographic or gender were eligible to participate, as long as they were 18 years of age or older. The percentage of the participants who were female totaled at 54% and 46% percent of the participants were male. The demographics of participants were as follows: Caucasian 92% percent, African-American 5% percent, and biracial 3% percent. Age range of participants fell between 18 and 26; the average age of participants was 21.5.

Materials

The study utilized two questionnaires. The first questionnaire, created by myself, measured the level of marital conflict, both psychological and physical between parents, Cronbach’s alpha= .92. The questionnaire content was inspired by The Conflict Tactics Scales 2 (CTS2), created by Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman (1990), Cronbach’s alpha=.91. There were 15 items included in the questionnaire. Each item described a specific event typical of parental conflict. For example, two sample items on the questionnaire read as follows: “Have your parents ever during an argument/disagreement ever offered to compromise,” and “Have your parents ever during an argument/disagreement ever insulted/cursed at his/her partner.” The subject was asked to identify how often the event occurred in his or her parent’s relationship, on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, 1 being never occurred and 5 being very often occurred. If the participant had multiple relationships to consider, such as stepparents, the participant was asked to choose the most conflict-filled relationship as the relationship of reference.
The second questionnaire, created by Collins and Read (1990), measured types of romantic attachment in young adults. The questionnaire included 18 items that described two different attachment styles, avoidant or anxious, Cronbach’s alpha of .84 and .89 respectively. For example, a style attachment that is neither avoidant nor anxious reads, “I am comfortable depending on others.” In general, a secure attachment score would result in high scores of secure items and low scores on anxious/avoidant items. An example of an attachment style labeled avoidant would be, “I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others,” and an example of an anxious attachment style reads: “I often worry that romantic partners won’t want to stay with me.” A score of anxious or avoidant attachment would result from high scores on anxious/avoidant items and low scores on secure items. The subject was to identify how much the item was characteristic of his or her personality on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, one being not very characteristic and 5 being very characteristic. The survey was conducted anonymously online, asking only of the participants’ sex, age, and ethnicity. Complete copies of the questionnaires utilized can be found in the Appendix.

Procedure

A convenience sample was obtained using students enrolled at Hanover College via email distributed to 150 random email addresses; six participants were acquaintances from my personal email contacts, and all individuals were between the ages of 18 and 26. Participants were asked to fill out two online questionnaires. I received each participant’s informed consent electronically. The study was anonymous, no deception was used, and informed consent was obtained before the subjects continued to the questionnaire pages electronically.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two forms that included both the questionnaire that assessed their own adult romantic attachments, and the questionnaire that
assessed parental conflict levels. Each form reflected a different order of surveys for counterbalancing. Data collection ran from March 12th, 2013 until March 18th, 2013.

Participants were debriefed electronically moments after completing both questionnaires. The page explained that their ratings of marital conflict would be compared to their ratings of adult romantic attachment in order to see if increased marital conflict in parents relates to increased avoidant or anxious romantic attachment in children as young adults. They were thanked for their participation, and were free to exit the page.

**Results**

Using the analysis program Jaguar created by Bill Altermatt, the Cronbach’s alpha level of the questionnaires utilized in the study were calculated. The alpha level for the Parental Conflict Scale created by myself was .92 Items 1-5 on the scale were reverse scored, due to the positive nature of the items. The alpha levels of Collins and Read, (1990) Romantic Attachment Scale for the anxious and avoidant attachment measures respectively were .89 and .84. Items 1, 5, 6, 12, and 14 were reverse scored due to the secure attachment qualities of the items.

Next, a Welch’s two sample t-test comparing the factor of order by questionnaire (Parental Conflict Scale and Romantic Attachment Scale) was run against the data. The entire table can be found under Figure 1 in the appendix. A significant order effect for questionnaire was detected, p=.05. When the Parental Conflict Scale was administered first, participants were less likely to rate themselves as highly anxiously attached they were on the following Romantic Attachment Scale. There was no significant order effect detected regarding avoidant attachment evaluation and the order of the questionnaires.

Accounting for the order effect, only the remaining 18 participants that took the Romantic Attachment Scale first out of the total of 37 participants were run in the correlational
analysis of parental conflict vs. avoidant and anxious attachment styles. No significant relationship was detected, as all p values were above p=.05. However, if the results had been significant anxious attachment styles would have positively correlated with parental conflict (blue line), which can be found in Figure 1, r=.39. Avoidant attachment style would have yielded little to no relationship with parental conflict (blue line), which can be found in Figure 2, r=.08.

Figure 1. Plot of self-reported anxious attachment measures vs. the amount of parental conflict witnessed, by which questionnaire was administered first (parental conflict vs. romantic attachment questionnaires).
Discussion

Although no significant correlative results were found between insecure attachment styles and increased level of parent conflict witnessed as hypothesized, the significant order effect by questionnaires raises some interesting questions. Why were participants less likely to identify themselves with the anxious-romantic attachment when first taking the parental conflict questionnaire? While no definite answers can be clearly identified with the results obtained, I have some speculations as to why this pattern of results occurred.

One would think that if the parental conflict scale provoked anxiety in some of the participants that they would identify more so with the anxious attachment style, maybe due to some sort of emotional priming effect. However, the pattern of results was the exact opposite. It
may be that participants were more likely to “psych themselves out,” and did not want to come
across as unhealthy in their own attachments given that their parents’ relations during a
confrontation were not healthy. Therefore, the participants who reported witnessing a higher
level of parental conflict may have been more sensitive towards their own attachment
evaluations, and filtered their responses accordingly.

It is also very interesting that the same affect did not occur with those who identified
themselves as avoidantly attachment. This may be due to the very nature of avoidant
attachments: an overall lack of interest or uncomfortableness in close relationships in general
(Cassidy, 2000). This lack of interest or comfort may have manifested itself via feelings of
indifference within the participant, thereby allowing the participant to be more honest when
taking the parental conflict questionnaire first.

Although the number of participants was cut approximately in have during the analysis of
parental conflict vs. romantic attachment in young adults due to the discovered order effect, an
important realization resulted. Future research should consider the order in which sensitive
material included in questionnaires, such as witnessed parental conflict, are implemented in
conjunction with self-evaluating romantic attachment surveys. A more population-representative
sample would also be needed in order to find a connection between parental conflict and insecure
romantic attachment styles in young adults.

In light of this discovery, there is also an abundance of questions raised as a result of this
study. Why does recalling parental conflict before evaluating one’s own personal attachments
make one sensitized to his or her answers? If there is an effect that this study simply was not
capable of detecting, are individuals who witness parental conflict avoidant/anxious across time
and situations or are these tendencies specifically related to romantic attachment alone? Could a potential affect be detected based upon a specific type of parental conflict, physical or psychological? Further, more in-depth research on and analysis of the topic is necessary to answer the many valid and relevant questions in relation to parental conflicts’ potential relationship with romantic attachment in young adulthood.
References


Appendix

Table 1. Welch two sample t-test comparing the factor of order by questionnaire (PC=Parental Conflict Scale, ROM=Romantic Attachment Scale).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>mean of PC</th>
<th>mean of ROM</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>95% CI Lower</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>-0.650</td>
<td>-1.295</td>
<td>-0.00511</td>
<td>-2.046</td>
<td>34.87</td>
<td>0.0483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>-0.155</td>
<td>-0.620</td>
<td>0.30969</td>
<td>-0.678</td>
<td>34.96</td>
<td>0.5024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>-0.681</td>
<td>0.41000</td>
<td>-0.504</td>
<td>34.88</td>
<td>0.6176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questionnaire 1: Parental Relations

Please read each of the following statements. Rate each item based on how often you remember each item occurring between your parents/a parent and a significant other. If you have multiple parental relationships to consider (such as a stepparent) please choose the relationship that exhibited the most conflict. Think of each item in terms of when your parents/a parent and a significant other got into a disagreement or argument. Use the scale below by placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided below each statement, 1 being the event never occurred between your parents/a parent and a significant other and 5 being the even occurred very often. If you cannot remember if an of event occurred, please also choose 1.

Explained his or her side of the story

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened Happened very often

Offered to compromise

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened Happened very often

Showed compassion towards partner

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened Happened very often
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Never happened</th>
<th>Happened very often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreed to try out a partner's solution to a problem</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued the partner's feelings</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulted/cursed at partner</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shouted/screamed at partner</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened bodily harm</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened psychological harm</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened sexual harm</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
<td>□□□□□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Physically assaulted partner**

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] Happened very often

**Grabbed partner**

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] Happened very often

**Threw something at partner**

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] Happened very often

**Pushed or shoved partner**

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] Happened very often

**Used a weapon to assault a partner**

1 2 3 4 5

Never happened [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] Happened very often

---

**Questionnaire 2: Your Relations to Others**

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which it describes your feelings about romantic relationships. Please think about all your relationships (past and present) and respond in terms of how you generally feel in these relationships. If you have never been involved in a romantic relationship, answer in terms of how you think you would feel. Please use the scale below by placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided below each statement.
1. I find it relatively easy to get close to people
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

2. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

3. I often worry that romantic partners don't really love me
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

4. I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

5. I am comfortable depending on others.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

6. I don’t worry about people getting too close to me.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

7. I find that people are never there when you need them.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

8. I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

9. I often worry that romantic partners won’t want to stay with me.
   1  2  3  4  5
Not very characteristic of me   Very characteristic of me

10. When I show my feelings for others, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
19

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

11. I often wonder whether romantic partners really care about me.

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

12. I am comfortable developing close relationships with others

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

13. I am uncomfortable when anyone gets too emotionally close to me.

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

14. I know that people will be there when I need them.

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

15. I want to get close to people, but I worry about being hurt.

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

16. I find it difficult to trust others completely

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

17. Romantic partners often want me to be emotionally closer than I feel comfortable being.

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me

18. I am not sure that I can always depend on people to be there when I need them.

1  2  3  4  5

Not very characteristic of me    Very characteristic of me