The Relationship between Attachment Anxiety and Relational Aggression

Jordan Shoemaker and Matthew Weber
Hanover College
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTACHMENT ANXIETY AND RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between attachment anxiety and relational aggression. Attachment Anxiety is merely the insecure-resistant attachment style that could potentially be displayed between the parent(s) and subject. Relational Aggression is a manipulative aggression that peaks in middle school (Ophelia Study). As a result, subjects are asked to recall their middle school years to complete the three questionnaires presented for this study. There are two types of questionnaires, with one being modified to inquire about each gender parent. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaires (ECR-Q) is used to determine the attachment style between the subject and their parent(s) and is completed twice by each subject (once for each parent). The other questionnaire is known as The Relational Aggression Questionnaire and is used to determine the subject’s level of relational aggression with their peers. These questionnaires provided high Cronbach’s Alphas, but did not receive significant correlational results. One correlation was almost significant with a p-value of .06. This correlation was that between father-daughter attachment anxiety and the amount of relational aggression displayed by the daughter (subject). Various limitations to this study existed. These limitations included: low external validity, poor memory recall ability, low self-report reliability, and diversity in family situations (etc.). Overall, the results were not significant but there are various other directions and ways to strengthen the study that are discussed which could potentially bring about significant results.
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Introduction

Relationships develop early in life between a child and his or her parent. These relationships lead to a certain attachment style between that parent and child. The various attachment styles are: insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, disorganized/ disoriented, and secure attachment (McElwain, Cox, Burchinal, & Macfie, 2003). Once a child develops one of these attachment styles, it can affect all of their relationships as they grow older. According to Cassidy (1994), relationships between the parent and child, while the child is young, influences future functioning for that child. Bad relationships between caregivers and children can cultivate insecure attachment. In this paper, we explore one possible consequence of insecure attachment: relational aggression.

Secure Attachment

Secure attachment between a child and their parent is the optimal situation for a child. Children with this attachment style feel confident that their parent will be consistently available in times of need and use this relationship to explore their surroundings. These children believe that, in times of stress, their parent will be there for comfort and guidance (Main, & Cassidy, 1988). According to Kindsvatter and Desmond (2012), secure attachment in young children is associated with the attention received from the mother to fulfill the child's needs, while insecure attachment was associated with rejection from the mother early on in life causing little faith in the mother's response to the child. These scenarios suggest that secure attachment is a more positive form of attachment between the child and caregiver.
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Insecure-Resistant Attachment

Insecure-resistant attachment is an attachment style that is a little more problematic. Insecure-resistant reflects a history of interaction, with a caregiver who is inconsistently responsive to the infant’s distress, (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cassidy, & Berlin, 1994; McElwain, Cox, Burchinal, & Macfie, 2003). Insecure attachment, among young children, is related to increased instances of negative physical behavior that is asserted towards someone else (Williams, 2011). This attachment style also represents a neglectful caregiver attitude towards the child. This neglectful attitude, in turn, could lead to problems for the child later in life. "Studies investigating the association between attachment and relationship violence have found that, compared to men who are non-violent, men who are violent report significantly higher levels of relationship anxiety, fear of being abandoned in relationships, and more anxious attachment to their partners," (Karakurt, Keiley & Posada, 2013, p. 562). The patterns shown by these types of men are consistent with how young children act while displaying the insecure attachment style during the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In situations such as these, the child develops not knowing what to expect in the way of aid from the parent. Infants typically become clingier towards a caretaker or people that they seem to have a closer relationship with (McElwain, Cox, Burchinal, & Macfie, 2003). Pulling these ideas together, both young children and fully-grown adults with attachment anxiety seem to become clingier towards those they are closest with. In the case of the adult male, this attachment style can lead to certain types of violence within relationships.
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**Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment**

The disorganized/disoriented attachment style is similar to the insecure-resistant attachment. Disorganized/disoriented attachment “reflects the lack of a coherent, organized strategy for coping with heightened arousal of the attachment system due to experiences with a caregiver who is frightening or frightened,” (McElwain, Cox, Burchinal, & Macfie, 2003, p. 139). This attachment style is problematic because a developing child does not have a proper role model for learning how to act when scared or afraid. Whether viewing a parental figure in either a frightened or frightening manner, the parent is always setting a poor example for the child on how to behave. These poor examples could cause strains in the process of forming and maintaining relationships since it would be less likely for the child to act appropriately in social situations.

**Insecure-Avoidant Attachment**

Unfortunately, the insecure-avoidant attachment style is the worst of the attachment styles. Insecure-avoidant reflects a history of interactions, with a caregiver who actively rejects the infant’s signals of distress and rebuffs his/her attempts to maintain proximity (Ainsworth et al., 1978; McElwain, Cox, Burchinal, & Macfie, 2003, p. 138). A child in this situation will ignore their parent and usually act oblivious to the status of that parent. For example, if the caregiver leaves the room, they will act as if nothing had changed, similar to how they would act when the caregiver reenters the room. Experience tells the child that the parent will not be responsive to their needs and has learned to not put too much stock into whether or not the caregiver is present.
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**Attachment Styles and Social Development**

According to Karakurt, Keiley, and Posada (2013), “Through interactions with their caregivers, infants learn what to expect from their caregivers and accordingly adjust their behavior.” According to Williams (2011), social development, or forming and maintaining relationships, could potentially be influenced by the person's attachment style when the person was a child. The infant’s attachment style depends on interactions with their caregiver, which also affects their development of social skills. These social skills would include interactions with other people, creating bonds, etc. Different attachment styles can affect developing social skills positively or negatively depending on which attachment style the infant has with their caregiver. If the attachment style is an avoidant or resistant/ambivalent relationship, then the infant is going to be affected more negatively. This negative effect is contrary to infants that have a secure attachment style. A negative marriage that has violence in it causes a negative view of the mother as a secure base (Posada, & Pratt, 2008). In other words, the relationship between a mother and child is very vital but can be easily damaged in a negative environment. In this type of situation, the child could develop more physically aggressive tendencies. As a result, these tendencies could be expressed in interactions with their peer group since this type of behavior is all with which the child has been exposed.
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Relational Aggression

Attachment styles that develop during the beginning stages of childhood tend to correlate with attachment styles exhibited later in life. In other words, parent-child attachment can be very representative of other intimate relationships as that child grows older. Posada and Pratt state that, “aggression in the family is likely to be associated with patterns of secure base behavior organization that indicates an insecure attachment,” (Posada and Pratt, 2008, p. 17). Since earlier studies have shown that insecure attachment can lead to relationship violence, relational aggression is a very plausible outcome of an insecure attachment. “Relational aggression is behavior that is intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating his or her relationships with others,” and “affects both genders,” (Ophelia Project Pamphlet, 2012, p. 1). Essentially, this type of aggression is focused on subtle manipulation of others. The primary time for expression of relational aggression is during middle school, especially between the ages of 11 and 14 (Ophelia Project, 2012). Examples of this type of aggression include social exclusion, spreading gossip/rumors, or even threatening to give someone the “silent treatment.”

These attachment types can be easily transposed to other members of a person’s social circle later in life. After piecing through the relevant literature, no current studies have been conducted investigating child-caregiver relationships and how these individual relationships impact aggressive tendencies later in life. Therefore, it was hypothesized that college students that exhibited an insecure-resistant attachment style with their same gender parent will tend to be more relationally aggressive with their current peer group.
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Method

Participants

There was a minimum requirement for twenty participants in this study and twenty-four subjects participated. The composition of those participants were as follows: 46% males and 54% females, aged between the ages of 18 to 22. 87.7% was Caucasian, 4.1% Italian, 4.1% Non-Hispanic, and 4.1% other. The participants were reached out to via email to complete the survey. They were randomly selected through campus student email directories. Within each class (Class of 2015-2018), students were arranged alphabetically by last name and the first out of every eighth person was chosen as a potential candidate for participation.

Materials

An online survey was created combining a demographic survey, attachment styles questionnaires, and a relational aggression questionnaire. The attachment styles questionnaire was a modified version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR-Q) (Williams, 2011). The internal consistency for the ECR-Q was 0.91 for attachment-anxiety (Eberhart & Hammen, 2010). The scale measured attachment-anxiety in the relationships between the subject and their individual parents. Each question was rated on a modified Likert 1-6 scale, with one representing “strongly disagree” and six representing “strongly agree.” The research question was investigating participants’ relationships with the same sex parent, so the subjects would receive an ECR-Q referring to each of their parents separately. The only difference between the two
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questionnaires was that the word mother and father were interchangeable. Each questionnaire was comprised of 35 statements for the participants to score. An example for the mother-daughter/son relationship was:

6. My mother made me doubt myself. 1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (somewhat disagree) 4 (somewhat agree) 5 (agree) 6 (strongly agree)

A sample question for the father-son/daughter relationship was:

7. I usually discussed my problems and concerns with my father. 1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (somewhat disagree) 4 (somewhat agree) 5 (agree) 6 (strongly agree)

The relational aggression questionnaire was measured on a Likert 1-5 scale, with one representing “never” and five representing “regularly.” The questionnaire measured the degree of negative reactions between the participant and their peer relationships while in middle school. This questionnaire was not gender specific, so each participant received the questionnaire only once. This questionnaire focused more on general peer relationships, and there were 25 statements for each participant to score. Participants were asked to rate each statement according to their recall of social interactions while in middle school. An example would be as follows:

3. I tried to influence them by making them feel guilty. 1 (never) 2 (once or twice) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (regularly)
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Procedure

The participants received a link for the study via their school provided email address. First, they read through the informed consent form, and by pressing continue, they agreed to the terms of the consent form. They then took about 20-30 minutes to complete the questionnaires and demographic information. Questionnaires were distributed to each participant in a random order to combat a potential ordering effect by the questionnaires themselves. Finally, after completing the questionnaires, the participants were presented with the debriefing form. The study was performed through drive.google.com.

Results

Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated for all three questionnaires. The Cronbach’s Alpha for the ECR-Q [father] was 0.9158. The Cronbach’s Alpha for the ECR-Q [mother] was 0.96101. Finally the Cronbach’s Alpha for the Relational Aggression Questionnaire was 0.90284. All these Cronbach’s Alphas were high and deemed these questionnaires significant and reliable.

After the Cronbach’s Alphas were determined, three correlations were calculated. First, the two genders (male and female) were subset and then individually run to determine if correlations existed between attachment anxiety to each parent and relational aggression to peers (see Table 1).
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Table 1. Relational Aggression Table that shows the correlations between attachment anxiety and relational aggression depending on gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attachment Anxiety to Mother</th>
<th>Attachment Anxiety to Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>( r = -0.101 )</td>
<td>( r = 0.076 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>( r = 0.011 )</td>
<td>( r = 0.520 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \dagger = p = .06 \)

The correlations did not yield any significant results. One correlation between father-daughter attachment anxiety and relational aggression came close to being significant with a p-value of .06. This correlation showed a higher tendency for these females to act relationally aggressive towards their peers. The researchers graphed this correlation to reveal a slightly positive correlation (displayed in Graph 1).
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Graph 1. Daughter and Father Attachment Anxiety and Relational Aggression
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Discussion

The results from Table 1 and Graph 1 showed that the results were not significant, with one correlation being close to statistical significance. The correlation that was the closest could have been a result of having more female participants, therefore more data variety on females. The remaining correlations were closer to 0, which proved not to be significant. These non-significant findings could have occurred because our sample was limited to college students (mostly Caucasian), causing a very poor external validity.

Another limitation could be that the participants were asked to remember back to a time anywhere from 6-10 years ago. This memory recall could be harder to accurately report since it has been several years since the college aged participants were in middle school. Since “insecure attachment in 7th and 8th graders is related to increased instances of externalizing behaviors,” (Allen et al., 2007; Williams, 2011, p. 20), subjects were asked to think back to middle school while completing the questionnaires in an attempt to maximize instances of relational aggression.

Poor memory recall is related to another limitation to this study, biased self-reporting on behavior. Self-report on behavior is notoriously biased since the idea of displaying relational aggression has a more negative connotation. A strong possibility exists that participants would not be willing to appear in a negative light, even though responses were kept completely anonymous. Therefore, subjects probably had a tendency to slightly falsify self-reports for the time period designated by the questionnaires.
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Since the questionnaires were the only source of information, there could have been other factors besides the attachment anxiety that caused relational aggression. There was no qualitative data collected so interviews were not available for analysis by the researchers. If qualitative data was collected, the researchers could have drawn stronger conclusions as to why these potential relationships occur.

Conclusions and Future Study

Direction for future studies could include looking for relationships between the various attachment styles and other types of aggression. For example, looking at whether disorganized attachments are associated with any type of aggression. A second direction would be looking for relationships between genders and types of aggression exhibited. For example, this direction could investigating whether men or women are more likely to relational aggression. A third direction would be looking at different age groups or modify the questionnaires. The final direction mentioned by the researchers was looking at attachment anxiety in middle school (when it is said to peak according to the Ophelia Project) and then looking at relational aggression within current peer groups.

Overall, this study could be important to improve the efficiency of anti-bullying or parenting programs. The Ophelia Project stated that, “90% of students reported being the target of bullying or relational aggression.” (Ophelia Project Pamphlet, 2012, p. 1). Results of this study could help determine which relationship with a parent could lead to aggression (relational or not), and how to address this negative attachment style based on gender of the child.
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References


