



2009-11-18

# The Moderating Effect of Adult Attachment Style in the Intergenerational Transmission of Aggression in Marriage

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The Moderating Effect of Adult Attachment Style in the Intergenerational  
Transmission of Aggression in Marriage

Faith Rebekah Torres

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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December 2009

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## ABSTRACT

### The Moderating Effect of Adult Attachment Style in the Intergenerational Transmission of Aggression in Marriage

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Marriage and Family Therapy Program

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Master of Science

Aggression in the context of marriage and family is a common and serious issue in therapy with couples and families. While it is known that aggression may be transferred across generations, the exact mechanism for how it is transmitted is not fully understood. This study presents adult attachment style as a moderator through which the relationship between family of origin aggression and marital aggression is developed.

The present study examined Relationship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire data for 332 individuals. Anxious and avoidant attachment were examined as potential moderators between family of origin (FOO) physical aggression or parental hostile conflict style and marital physical and sexual aggression perpetration and victimization.

Results indicate that for men, anxious attachment may be a moderator for FOO physical aggression or hostile conflict and marital sexual aggression perpetration, and that avoidant attachment may be a moderator for FOO hostile conflict and marital sexual aggression perpetration. For men, neither attachment style is a significant moderator in models analyzing FOO physical aggression or hostile conflict and marital outcomes including physical aggression perpetration or victimization, sexual aggression victimization, or hostile conflict.

For women, anxious attachment may be a moderator for FOO physical aggression and marital physical aggression perpetration. No other models investigating marital physical aggression perpetration as a dependent variable were significant. For women, neither attachment style is a significant moderator in models analyzing FOO physical aggression or hostile conflict and marital outcomes including physical aggression victimization, sexual aggression victimization, sexual aggression perpetration, or hostile conflict.

Future research should investigate adult attachment as a moderator of intergenerational transmission of aggression using larger and more heterogeneous

samples with more precise measures of aggression to analyze more specific groups of insecure adults in the context of their partner's attachment style. Limitations and clinical implications of these results for therapists working with couples are discussed.

Keywords: attachment, domestic violence, family of origin, hostility, intergenerational, marital outcomes, physical aggression, RELATE, sexual aggression

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the opportunity to thank my family for seeing me through this process and program. I want to acknowledge my mom and dad for instilling the value of education from an early age and for impressing that lesson further by leading by example and earning graduate and professional degrees themselves. It's been fun to have my graduate experience at the same time that my mother has earned her own master's degree. I am also grateful to my mom for many years of caring for and supporting me in efforts to help me put academic excellence first.

I am thankful to my husband, Robert, for the many things he has done to keep me going throughout this program. His support started in the form of relocating across the country with no guarantee of job or home (both of which came soon enough) and continued for two years. Without his support in the form of late night meals after a long day, a listening ear during venting sessions, vicarious indignation, belief in me, patience with me and my schedule, and love, this program might have remained incomplete.

I also need to thank Helena, Brent, and Ava for providing a retreat for me throughout this program, complete with friendship, family, fun, humor, optimism, encouragement, and plenty of chocolate chip cookies. Additionally, I am grateful to my Aunt Roxsann and her family for adopting me into the group and caring for me while in Utah. I have valued their support and family spirit immensely.

I want to thank Dr. Jeffrey Larson for his direction through this program and his generosity in time and effort. His standards for graduate work have driven me to continue working on this thesis until it reached its potential. I would also like to thank Dr. Thomas Holman and Dr. Mark Butler for their expertise and time in the thesis process.

Their fresh perspectives have added greatly to the quality of this work and encouraged me when I felt stuck. I am grateful to Adam Moore for the time and talent that he poured into the statistical analysis of my data. His passion for research inspired me to draw the most out of the data.

I would love to thank Leslie Feinauer for being an adopted mentor to me throughout the program. She has provided a caring and listening ear to me even amidst an incomprehensibly busy schedule. I couldn't have made it through without her compassion, validation, humor, and advice.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my Savior, Jesus Christ, and my Heavenly Father. They have never stopped loving me and watching over me, and I am thankful for the challenges and opportunities I've had to remind me of those truths.

Thank you to all who have been a part of shaping me into who I am, two years later.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Bowlby and Ainsworth's legacy of attachment investigation has led to over a half-century's worth of scientific inquiry, most of which has centered on infant-caregiver bonds (Bretherton, 1992). More recently, the traditional models of attachment have been adapted to include adult romantic relationships within their scope. From an infant-oriented attachment model, Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed conceptually correlated prototypes of adult attachment and a self-report questionnaire which was then further developed into a four-category concept of adult attachment, based on the two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Bartholomew's (Brennan et al., 1998) final categories of adult attachment were defined as secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful, which correlate with the infant categories of secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disoriented/disorganized, respectively.

While much has been done to develop the attachment styles categorically and conceptually, there are still many questions surrounding the effects of adult attachment on the functioning of adult romantic relationships and how adult attachment may evolve from early attachments. The literature has established a moderate relationship between infant attachment style and adult attachment style, demonstrating the possibility of a common thread that weaves through attachment experiences throughout the lifespan (Fraley, 2002; Hamilton, 2000; Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001; Main, 2001; Roisman et al., 2005; Sroufe et al., 2005; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). Fraley (2002) suggests these findings are best accounted for by a prototype model in which attachment experiences in infancy shape and influence the assimilation of later

attachment experiences lending a continuous but flexible nature to individual attachment. Because of the flexibility of the attachment system, there is also the possibility for some discontinuity. Change can occur from security to insecurity, and from insecurity to security. Some individuals with a secure attachment style are not free of past childhood attachment issues, such as rejection, trauma, or loss of attachment figures, but it seems that they have successfully been able to resolve those issues (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). They are often referred to as having “earned-security” because of their internal shift from being insecure from harmful parenting to overcoming a transgenerational legacy of attachment insecurity (Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994; Phelps, Belsky, & Crnic, 1998; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999). These findings seem to indicate that attachment challenges early in life may not automatically predispose an individual to insecure attachment, or that attachment may change due to later life events or choices made by the individual. However, most individuals are not likely to undergo such a drastic internal transition and will instead exhibit some form of attachment stability throughout the lifespan.

In addition to the existence of intrapersonal attachment stability, there is evidence of interpersonal attachment predictability between parental attachment and offspring attachment. For example, van IJzendoorn (1995) found evidence of an “intergenerational transmission of attachment” in which children were influenced by parental “states of mind with respect to attachment” (Main et al., 1985) through caregiving behaviors. Because parental caregiving is influenced by relationship factors such as available social support and marital satisfaction and attachment security is known to influence relationship functioning, it is likely that there is a link between parental marital

interactions, offspring attachment, and offspring marital interactions (Atkinson et al., 2000; Belsky 1999). Therefore, the author proposes that individuals who deal with abuse and other attachment-threatening events in childhood and are unable to resolve relationship insecurity issues may not only be insecure in their attachment, but may have a propensity to deal with relationship conflict in a dysfunctional manner that repeats the patterns of their parents. For example, such a connection may be seen in the individual who developed an avoidant attachment style in her infancy due to an unresponsive and unavailable mother, who fairly consistently downplayed the importance of attachment and her need to connect meaningfully in relationships. According to Busby et al., the transmission of aggression between generations may be possible due to the psychological minimization of negative experiences and the subsequent lack of precautions taken to restructure aggressive relational patterns (2005). This observation is in keeping with the avoidant pattern of behavior outlined above.

While some researchers have investigated the link between relationship aggression or abuse and attachment (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994; Bartholomew, Henderson, and Dutton, 2001; Dutton, 1998), more research is needed to understand exactly how the intergenerational transmission of adult attachment may affect current relationship functioning in adulthood. It is of special importance to investigate how insecurity in attachment may influence negative relationship functioning in order to provide treatment for suffering families.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how adult attachment styles are related to the perpetuation of aggression in the forms of 1) physical abuse, 2) sexual abuse, and 3) hostile conflict style from the family-of-origin to adult marital

relationships. Attachment was investigated as a moderating variable in intergenerational transmission of aggression. As some individuals exhibit earned security in their adult attachment style despite poor attachment interactions in infancy, not all individuals in abusive or aggressive families were destined to be insecure in their attachment. This accounted for the potential break in intergenerational transmission of aggression as secure individuals were less likely to use aggression in their romantic relationships. It was hypothesized that in general, those with insecure attachment styles would be more likely than securely attached individuals to exhibit in their marriages the negative interaction styles (e.g. hostility, aggression) that were present in their family-of-origin.

To better explain the model used in this investigation, consider a hypothetical example. Amy and Tom were born in the same family. Their mother was often severely depressed and became emotionally abusive and neglectful during her most severe episodes. Their father was often absent from the home, but when he was present he was often drunk and physically violent with both the children and their mother. Because of these destructive family interactions between caregivers and infants, both children became insecurely attached as infants and children. However, as a young adult, Tom became involved in a supportive relationship with a young woman who encouraged him to enter into therapy to help him resolve his trauma issues. His therapist helped him work through attachment insecurities and his overall style in adult relationships became secure. He eventually married the young woman, and because of his work in therapy, he was better able to address relationship issues that may have seemed threatening enough to trigger aggressive reactions before. Amy's relationships in adulthood tended toward the familiar and did not challenge her mental representations of insecure attachment schemas.

She did not enter into therapy, and when she married a man whose behavior fit her dysfunctional expectations of relationships, the couple often experienced escalating arguments that triggered feelings of abandonment and eventually became violent. This example demonstrates the moderating effect adult attachment style can have in completing or breaking the intergenerational transmission of aggression that family-of-origin abuse and hostility sets the stage for.

The investigation of these hypotheses is an important step in trying to understand the complex variables that lead to intergenerational abuse and hostility in marriages and families. As many of the presenting problems in relational therapy may be viewed in terms of insecure attachments and attachment threats (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988), it is crucial that we learn to understand exactly how attachment styles are related to dysfunction in adult relationships. By investigating the relationship between family-of-origin negative interaction styles, attachment style as a moderating variable, and marital negative interaction styles, couple therapists may discover better ways to predict and prevent the repetition of painful attachment traumas in clients' lives. By better understanding the unique dynamics between spouses with their own individual attachment styles, it may be possible to assist couples in making more informed choices in marriage partners. A better understanding of the interplay between spouses with differing attachment styles and abuse backgrounds may also help couple therapists to customize their therapy to the specific attachment needs and style of the individual spouses as well as their marriage as a whole.

## Theoretical Context

### *Intergenerational Transmission and Attachment*

Of the six core working assumptions of family therapy proposed by Doherty and Baptiste (1993), the most relevant to this study is that which states that “family interaction patterns tend to repeat across generations” (p. 511), whether negative or positive in nature. This assumption will be built upon in the present study through the investigation of attachment and specific mechanisms through which patterns of attachment interactions may be repeated intergenerationally are proposed. Their effects on the transmission of aggression across generations will also be investigated.

### *Adult Attachment Theory*

Attachment centers on the natural tendency for humans to form and keep close bonds with attachment figures. When attachment needs are met by one’s significant other, the bond that exists is characterized as secure. When needs are not met, several predictable responses occur, such as clinging, angry protest, pursuit, depression, despair, and eventually, if the bond faces continuous threat, detachment (Palmer, 2008). The pattern of responses to attachment threats tend to fall along two dimensions of anxiety or avoidance (Fraley & Waller, 1998). Along these two dimensions, individuals can fall into four types. Insecurely attached individuals who exhibit more avoidant responses are categorized within the theoretical framework of adult attachment as dismissive, and those exhibiting more anxious responses as preoccupied. Those who exhibit both responses are labeled as fearful, and those who exhibit little of either type of response as secure.

The theory of attachment thus makes clear the connection between family-of-origin trauma and infant attachment. When a caregiver is abusive or neglectful this

trauma represents a breach in the attachment bond that is characterized by them being inaccessible or unresponsive. This threat is then responded to by the infant or child in a way characteristic of avoidance or anxiety, and when the threat is frequent or constant, a history of that behavior develops into an insecure attachment style.

Anxious individuals develop a coping mechanism of hyperactivation, in which they characteristically seek proximity to caregivers for comfort despite psychological unavailability, are hypervigilant toward attachment threats and negative affect, and exhibit clingy or controlling behaviors (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Avoidant individuals develop a coping mechanism of deactivation in which they keep distance between caregivers and themselves, avoid interdependence, and push away painful memories in response to the lack of both psychological availability of and proximity to caregivers. Both of these styles function in some degree in other meaningful relationships throughout the lifespan, and the attachment style developed in infancy affects the attachment styles of adolescence and adulthood. Without other significant relationship events that alter one's original attachment orientation, much of the interaction styles of infant attachment will carry into the interactions of marriage in adulthood (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

Beginning in adolescence and into young adulthood, the attachment relationship shifts from a parent-child interaction to a peer romantic relationship. The partners' two distinctly developed attachment styles may not mesh together as naturally as the attachment style of the symbiotic relationship created with the parent at the start of the infant's life (Cairns & Cairns, 2001). Because these styles are not necessarily complementary, conflict may arise simply due to the differences in approach to coping

with attachment threats. While an avoidantly attached adult may seek distance to cope during a time of relationship stress, an anxiously attached adult may seek proximity, creating a situation in which their coping mechanisms are mutually stressful to the other partner. This condition could lead to an acute sense of distress and entrapment, which may escalate the conflict that could eventually erupt in aggression or hostility in an attempt to escape a seemingly impossible conundrum.

Sue Johnson's work in the development of emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT) has recognized the importance of such attachment issues in couple relationships (2004). The problematic interaction outlined above, often called a pursue-withdraw dynamic, has been found to be treatable in therapy using the non-pathologizing perspective of unmet attachment needs outlined by Johnson in EFT (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). In such therapy, Johnson stages and choreographs events that help the couple foster trust and strengthen bonds. The work done in shifting the client's attachment style from insecure to secure is done to help the couple develop their abilities to use assertiveness without verbal aggression, to use rejection less, and offer more support to one another (Johnson, 2002). It is possible that the absence of such skills could lead to escalating and aggressive conflict. Emotionally focused couple therapy as developed by Johnson has as its center the consideration of the adult attachment needs of both individuals and the harmony of the styles together. The connection between attachment and issues such as aggression are implicit in Johnson's assumptions that the presenting problems and psychopathology that appear in therapy are issues that derive from unmet attachment needs.



The relationship between the attachment style created in the family-of-origin through caregiver-infant attachment and the style carried into the marriage through adult attachment is a possible link between the negative interactions in the family-of-origin and those similar to them in the family of creation. For example, avoidant parents are likely to be unavailable psychologically and physically, creating avoidantly attached children. These children will likely be avoidant as adults (Sroufe, 2005), and will likely replicate such a pattern both with their spouses and their own children (Busby et al., 2008), echoing the trauma that played out in their family-of-origin.

Infant attachment provides training, a working model for future interactions, which is likely to be followed in adult romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1973). These working models or mental representations developed in early life often influence the shape of adult romantic relationships, as evidenced by Bowlby's observation that people were often attracted to others who were able to reinforce their preexisting models through their current attachment interactions. This presents a kind of double jeopardy for insecurely attached individuals, as they are prone to be both looking for a mate who is likely to repeat behaviors that generate insecurity in themselves, and are themselves more likely to behave in ways that perpetuate insecurity within their relationships.

The predictable patterns of attachment between generations and throughout the individual's lifespan combined with the connection between attachment style and relationship functioning provides a valuable way to conceptualize the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of violence and other types of aggression. This was the focus of the present study.

## Definition of Terms

*Secure Attachment.* Secure attachment was defined as a style of adult attachment in which the individual exhibits attachment behaviors that are neither avoidant or anxious. In other words, they score low on both avoidance and anxiety dimensions.

*Insecure Attachment.* Insecure attachment was defined as any style of adult attachment in which the individual exhibits attachment behaviors that are either avoidant, anxious, or both. In other words, they score high on at least one dimension. These styles may be further specified as preoccupied, dismissing, or fearful.

*Preoccupied Attachment.* Preoccupied attachment was defined as a style of adult attachment in which the individual exhibits attachment behaviors that are anxious. They score high on the anxiety dimension, but low on the avoidant. The terms “anxious”, “anxious-resistant”, and “anxious-ambivalent” are synonymous with preoccupied attachment.

*Dismissive Attachment.* Dismissive attachment was defined as a style of adult attachment in which the individual exhibits attachment behaviors that are avoidant. They score high on the avoidance dimension, but low on the anxious. The terms “avoidant” and “dismissing-avoidant” are synonymous with dismissing attachment.

*Fearful attachment.* Fearful attachment was defined as a style of adult attachment in which the individual exhibits attachment behaviors that are both anxious and avoidant. They score high on both the anxious and avoidant dimensions. The terms “fearful-avoidant”, “disorganized”, and “disorganized/disoriented” are synonymous with fearful attachment.

*Aggression.* For the purposes of this study aggression was defined as physical abuse, sexual abuse, or hostility in one's style of conflict management. Any of these types of aggression will be considered more specific types of the general term, "aggression".

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

#### *Attachment in Adult Romantic Relationships*

Recently, adult attachment has become recognized as an important theoretical explanation for understanding romantic relationships, sharing many of the same characteristics as those associated with infant attachment. John Bowlby is credited with defining the nature of attachment in his seminal work on attachment and loss (1969/1982, 1973, 1980), which outlines that attachment is an affective bond between an infant and a caregiver that develops innately to assure survival of the species. These bonds have the four features of proximity maintenance, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base. The quality of interaction between infant and caregiver and the caregiver's state of mind with regard to attachment both determine over time the level of security in the individual's attachment style.

According to Bowlby's theory (1969/1982), the attachment behavioral system is activated by the need to meet the goal of "felt security" (Sroufe & Waters, 1977), and at the point of achieving this security the system is deactivated and attention is devoted elsewhere. Not only does this system help provide immediate relief in the face of danger, pain, or stress, but it also helps develop a script for the individual on how to regulate negative emotion and sustain important relationships (Waters, Rodrigues, & Ridgeway, 1998). It is plain that without a well-functioning attachment system, important intra- and interpersonal processes would be delayed or crippled. Secure attachment is beneficial in that it serves two functions for the individual: as a safe haven and a secure base (Bowlby, 1988). The safe haven aspect allows a person to feel protected from threats and

unavoidable stressors as well as relief from fears and conflicts. The secure base provides a safety zone from which the person feels able to explore and take risks.

While infants tend to form lasting attachment bonds with a primary caregiver, not all interactions are classified as attachment related (Weiss, 1998). Attachment interactions are limited to those in which an individual feels threatened or distressed and goes to another for comfort and support. Affiliation interactions, on the other hand, involve both members of the relationship feeling unthreatened and being willing to enjoy time together or to pursue common interests.

While much of Bowlby's work focused on infant attachment, he saw it as a phenomenon that still strongly influenced adult functioning, and the characteristics outlined above easily translate to adult romantic relationships. However, one difference between the nature of infant versus adult attachment is that the attachment relationship in infancy consists of two functionally distinct ends of the relationship, with the infant being dependently attached to the caregiver for survival and the caregiver not being dependent on the infant, while in adulthood the attachment is often more reciprocal and interdependent in nature (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The same authors also identified that the actual physical proximity seeking behavior in infancy can become more symbolic in nature in adult relationships, with adults exhibiting the capacity to be comforted by simply thinking of a secure attachment figure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004). Additionally, adults are able to expand their attachment network and develop a hierarchy of family, friends, mentors, etc. who are able to meet their attachment needs (Ainsworth, 1991; Weiss, 1982), whereas infants tend to target one figure to whom they would go for comfort in a time of need. However, not all loved ones are adult attachment figures. In

fact, Trinke and Bartholomew (1997) have identified a pattern in which adults tend to use romantic partners as safe havens in particular and parents as secure bases.

The theoretical concept that makes the connection between infant and adult attachment possible is that of mental representations or working models. According to Bowlby (1969/1982; 1973), working models allow for the individual to make predictions of outcomes of complex social situations and to modify the mental representations based on new experiences. They give the person the internal models of self and others which contribute to their sense of self value and what can be expected of others. These mental representations are developed over time through repeated interactions between infant and caregiver and will eventually influence how a person behaves, feels, thinks, and interprets their world. Based on the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver and the outcome of the infant's attachment behavior, working models may develop which reflect a need for simple proximity seeking, or hyperactivation or deactivation. While there may be many accessible working models, there is one model typically more characteristic than the others which contributes to the features of one's personality, operate consciously and unconsciously in new relationships, and are change-resistant (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Sroufe (2005) has established that in terms of development and the organization of behavior, the attachment relationship between infant and caregiver is a central organizing piece that always continues to shape experience. It never becomes irrelevant in development, despite the dramatic transformations individuals go through in the transition to adulthood. Sroufe found evidence to support the hypotheses that 1) infant attachment is an initiating condition that creates intrapsychic and interpersonal structures that are an element in future reactions to experience, and 2) that early attachment will

determine other mediating variables that may enhance the effects of optimal or less than optimal attachment experiences. Both processes in development undoubtedly affect how one becomes an adult and who one becomes as an adult.

This concept of the working model is further expanded upon with the prototype model of attachment (Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990; Fraley, 2002). This model, as opposed to the revisionist model, proposes that the working models developed in early life are constant influences on the assimilation of new information with regard to attachment. While it is possible to have experiences that force one to reevaluate mental representations in order to account for conflicting information, there is a considerable level of stability in attachment from infancy to adulthood. A meta-analysis conducted by Fraley (2002) showed evidence of a moderate level of stability in attachment across the lifespan and has found that the data was best explained by the prototype-like process outlined in the model.

In addition to the stability shown over the lifespan, research has shown a certain amount of predictability of attachment patterns across generations. Main et al. (1985) identified a pathway for this relationship when they proposed that the attachment working models of parents will influence children through as these mental representations determine the parents' abilities to provide safety and security to their children. Grossman et al. (2005) found that the sensitivity and supportiveness of both mothers and fathers during early years are predictors of adult attachment classification. Steele and Steele (2005) conducted a longitudinal study that gave evidence not only of the intergenerational transmission of adult attachment, but that also supported the prototype hypothesis of attachment stability. Additionally, Atkinson, Paglia, et al. (2000) found

that infant security was more likely the higher the mothers' sense of available support and marital satisfaction. This finding provides a bridge not only between infant-caregiver attachment patterns across generations, but between adult attachment relationships across generations. Theoretically, the available support and marital satisfaction measures reflect an adult attachment component, with the more support and satisfaction associated with higher security. Security in adult attachment relationships influences the mother's ability to provide care to her infant and this caregiving pattern in turn affects the infant's later adult attachment, which affects their adult romantic relationships.

The classification of attachment is based on security and insecurity. Security is generally developed through a history of having attachment needs met by an available and responsive caregiver. Secure individuals have learned that when they feel stressed or threatened, seeking proximity, which is a primary attachment strategy, brings comfort and relief. Insecurity usually develops from a history of not having attachment needs met, whether inconsistently or not at all. These individuals learn that proximity seeking is insufficient in eliciting satisfactory responses from caregivers, and that one of two secondary strategies must be employed, either hyperactivation or deactivation. The hyperactivation strategies are "exaggerations of the primary attachment strategy" which may be shown through intense protest or energetic efforts to regain proximity and are used based on past successes in eventually achieving security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Deactivation strategies exist to distance the individual from potential abandonment or rejection from partners and involve the suppression or denial of attachment needs and the maintenance of distance in relationships. Some individuals



fluctuate erratically between the two secondary attachment strategies due to a history of failure to reach attachment goals after employing any and all of the attachment strategies.

In addition to secure and insecure attachment, classifications can be broken down further to reflect the use of these secondary strategies. In building upon the work of Ainsworth (1978) and Main and Solomon (1986) in the classification of infant attachment patterns, Bartholomew's (1990) conceptualization of adult attachment outlines four categories of attachment style based on the two dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance, labeled secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful.

Secure adults are characterized by the ability to see others as dependable and trustworthy, and themselves as loveable and valuable within a relationship. Preoccupied individuals are characterized by a pattern of anxiety in relationships, appearing needy, clingy, obsessive, in constant need of comfort, and never satiated by the attentions of a partner. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), they also have a tendency toward being easily overwhelmed by negative cognition and emotion as they have a diminished capacity to control the spread of one negative thought to another. Additionally, the hyperactivated behaviors of preoccupied individuals may lead to coercion, intrusiveness, or aggression toward a partner that often ultimately lead to the abandonment or rejection that they most fear. Dismissing adults tend toward an avoidant pattern of behavior in which they are seen as distant, extremely self-reliant, afraid of closeness, and disparaging of intimacy. Their tendency toward deactivation often leads to a defensive inflation of self-concept, denigration of their partners, distrust, and impaired abilities to regulate affect, making their relationships more troubled and at risk for failure. As with preoccupied individuals, dismissing individuals' deactivated strategies often become

maladaptive when they help to create the attachment issues they were adopted to defend against. Fearful individuals are typically characterized by unresolved trauma in childhood such as loss or abuse. They are disorganized in their attachment responses as they fluctuate between approach and avoidance, and may be fearful, defensive, rigid, and emotionally unpredictable (Basham, 2007). They experience difficulty in consistently using hyperactivated or deactivated strategies, exhibit the least empathy for those in distress, are cognitively rigid, and are more likely to be in highly distressed and violent relationships as adults (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

With regard to the effect of attachment style on pathology, the literature maintains that while attachment patterns may be risk factors for psychopathology, one's attachment style does not guarantee later development of mental disorders, or, on the other hand, a clean bill of mental health (Sroufe, 2005). While many individuals with insecure attachment styles do not meet criteria for a mental disorder diagnosis, mental disturbance is increased in the insecure population when compared to securely attached individuals.

Regarding specific insecure types, a different set of psychopathological risks emerge for each style. Avoidant attachment in infancy is correlated with conduct problems which is congruent with the associated interpersonal alienation and anger involved in their attachment history (Sroufe, 2005). Anxious attachment in infancy is associated with increased anxiety levels by age 17 ½. Depression has been found to be moderately related to preoccupied and dismissing attachment (Duggal, Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2001). Infant disorganized/disoriented attachment is a strong predictor of mental and behavioral issues later in life. It has been found to be associated with conduct disorders, likely due to increased dissociation and impulsiveness (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Other characteristics of disorganized or fearful attachment have been found to have an overlap with personality disorders. One key feature was serious self-injurious behavior which was shown to be strongly correlated with a history of disorganized (fearful) attachment (Sroufe, 2005). The connection between insecure attachment styles and increased risk of psychopathology sets a tone for marital interactions that are less than ideal, and these tendencies of mental disorders cannot be considered irrelevant in the presence of marital dysfunction.

*Family of Origin Influences on Attachment and Aggression in Childhood and Adulthood.* There is an inarguable link between infant attachment style and adult attachment style. As infant attachment develops within the parent-child relationship, the tie between adult attachment and family of origin functioning becomes clearer. Non-optimal conditions in the family of origin such as poverty, stress, abuse, and mental disorders, may affect the functioning of the caregiver and render them less capable of providing consistent or nurturing care to the infant. The development of insecure attachment as a result of poor family of origin functioning is not a finite event within the context of the home environment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Following the establishment of the interaction between attachment figures and the infant, the child continues to grow and adapt to the home environment. Without significant family change or outside intervention, it is unlikely that the parent and child will significantly alter their basic patterns of attachment behaviors. This consistency in interpersonal interactions and attachment experiences will certainly shape the individual's views on what it means to be in a close relationship with another as well as their expectations for reciprocal behavior. For some, this familial education or model will teach that closeness means pain and

others should be controlled and/or kept at a distance. For others, their education will teach them that they are not valuable persons within a relationship, but that closeness is the only comfort for them, even when it has to be obtained through manipulation of others or sacrifice of self. Others will learn that relationships are dangerous and inconsistent even though they are needed to some degree. They will not have clear rules or scripts on how to interact with others, leaving them vulnerable to potentially dangerous impulses and emotional acts that may be more readily inhibited in others, such as physical aggression or pursuit when a partner withdraws. Many will probably learn that relationships are rewarding and protective interactions with loving others, and that developing healthy relations with others means finding a balance between caring for one's self and for others.

Among some of the most common and harmful forms of aggression in families are physical abuse of spouses or children, sexual abuse of spouses or children, and hostile marital conflict style. Physical abuse is defined as physical acts that are violent, including slapping, pushing, kicking, hitting hard with a fist, hitting with objects or other types of violence (Holman et al., 1997). Sexual abuse in families-of-origin is defined as inappropriate acts that include a parent or sibling fondling a child, a parent or sibling engaging in sexual intercourse with a child, or some other type of inappropriate sexual activity. Sexual abuse in one's marital relationship is defined as times in which individuals feel pressured to participate in physically intimate behavior when they don't want to. Hostile marital conflict style is defined as using insults, sarcasm, and put downs when upset, finding it difficult during intense discussions to listen to others because of the need to make one's point, and having intensely negative feelings toward others during

conflict, which pertains to both family-of-origin experiences as well as adult marital interactions. This study will look at the existence of physical and sexual abuse in any form (spousal or child) in the family of origin in relation to its existence as spousal abuse in the marital relationship. Hostile conflict style within spouses' parents' marital relationship will be looked at in relation to spouses' hostile conflict style within their own marital relationship.

Many studies have examined the intergenerational transmission of various behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes. Fonagy et al. and Fonagy and Target have identified a dynamic by which the working model of the parent helps determine their response to their child's affective state and influences the child's emotional regulation development (1995; 1997). Olson et al. (2006) conjecture that children in violent families may be taught that aggression is a valid form of conflict resolution. In the process of transmission, if the parent's internal working model dictates their outward responses to attachment threats, which may include aggression, their children may also learn to use similar external responses for regulating their emotions.

Busby, Holman, and Walker (2008) recently investigated the pathways through which aggression in the family of origin might be transmitted into adult relationships. They found that those who experience violence in the family-of-origin, whether as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses, are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of violence in later romantic relationships. Additionally, participation in perpetration of violence in the family of origin was significantly associated with relationship aggression. Participation in violence of other types (victimization and witnessing) in the family of origin had a moderate correlation with relationship aggression as well. The findings on

these interpersonal interactions in the family of origin have direct implications on early attachment relations. Whether one is a witness or is victimized themselves, these traumatic events threaten the security of the attachment to the perpetrators, as parents who are perpetrators may become emotionally unavailable or unresponsive during episodes of abuse.

Other variables that were found to affect relationship aggression were perceptions of one's partner as well as their personality. As discussed previously, perceptions of others are colored by attachment experiences, and one's own personality can be defined as a developmental product which has its roots in the attachment history of the individual. Busby, Gardner, and Taniguchi (2005) related that their experiences with participants in relationship education programs had shown some participants to be excessively worried about childhood trauma, viewing themselves as "abusers waiting to happen," while others tended to minimize the trauma and did nothing to change their aggressive propensities. These observations conceptually correlate with a preoccupied attachment style anxiety about relationships and an avoidant attachment style denial of the influence of relationships, respectively.

Shaver and Mikulincer's (2002) concepts of hyperactivation in preoccupied or anxious individuals provides theoretical background for understanding some individuals' obsession with being an "[abuser] waiting to happen," as it appears that they are overly concerned with the potential for negative affect and trauma in the attachment relationship. Their concept of deactivation in dismissing or avoidant individuals also explains the alternate response in others to "minimize their experiences," in that they ignore the importance of intimate relationships and deny the pain by devaluing the

closeness. All pathways through familial background, individual characteristics, and couple contextual variables that were found to be significant in Busby et al.'s (2008) study of aggression reflect an attachment component, yet the connection between adult attachment style and intergenerational transmission of aggression has not yet been fully investigated.

### *Attachment and Physical and Sexual Aggression*

While much of the attachment literature connects family of origin functioning to attachment, the findings of studies on attachment and aggression do not explicitly tie together all three components of 1) family-of-origin functioning, 2) attachment, and 3) aggression in adult romantic relationships. However, they do provide valuable information on the link between adult attachment and aggression in adult relationships. The purpose of this study is to make clearer the connection between these three variables.

Only in the past decade has research on the relationship between attachment and adult relationship aggression become a focus in the literature. For example, Roberts and Noller (1998) found that expressed aggression and anxiety were related for both men and women and that women with a more anxious partner are more likely to report aggression against them. Bookwala and Zdaniuk (1998) found self-reported reciprocally aggressive relationships to have the reporting partners score as more preoccupied on an attachment scale. Kesner (1998) found violent males in intimate relationships to be more fearful in their insecurity and their partners as less secure, more avoidant, and less preoccupied. In other words, the violent males were more fearfully attached, and their partners were more avoidantly attached. Dutton et al. (1994) found that abusiveness by a male perpetrator was highly correlated with him having a fearful attachment style and moderately

correlated with having a preoccupied attachment style. Bartholomew et al. (2001) found that a majority of women escaping abusive relationships were classified as insecure, with 53% preoccupied and 35% fearful. They related these attachment classification results to the difficulty the women experienced in leaving the relationship. Browning and Dutton (1986) found that when shown an abandonment scenario on video, male perpetrators of abuse displayed marked anger/arousal responses that were significantly higher than controls, indicating a relationship between attachment abandonment and rage. Fonagy (1999) proposed that male perpetrators of violence against women in romantic relationships may have disorganized attachment systems which conceptually relates to the fearful style of attachment. Although this portion of the literature has focused on the empirical findings of a relationship between attachment and aggression, there has also been some focus on the theoretical exploration of the relationship between the two variables.

One of the most prominent points in the literature is that aggression in relationships is not a simple matter of insecure attachment issues. Cairns and Cairns (2001) asserted that youth who are aggressive weren't necessarily deficient in the skills needed to develop attachment relationships. In fact, many of the boys identified as aggressive belong to groups that were more stable over time and tightly woven together than their non-aggressive counterparts. The authors asserted that it is likely that "the development of aggressive strategies grows out of close affiliations and relationships, not because of their absence" (p 32). Mayseless (1991) brings awareness to a dynamic that reflects on the importance of insecurity in becoming a victim. Situations in which one feels their relationship to be threatened by abandonment or rejection are more likely to



behave in ways that elicit aggressive responses, as they wish for some kind of interaction and engagement from their partner. Even if the interaction is punitive or abusive, it is preferable for the partner who lacks the availability of the other partner. This demonstrates that insecurely attached individuals who are especially sensitive to abandonment or rejection may behave in ways that elicit victimizing responses from partners who become perpetrators. Therefore, the findings of both studies indicate that you aren't aggressive simply because of insecure attachment alone, and that insecurity can also lead to victimization in the presence of aggression in relationships.

Another theory begins with the concept of synchrony (Cairns & Cairns, 2001). They postulate is that long-term relationships depend on a level of synchrony, in which two people enjoy similar modes of interaction, goals, and approaches to life. When a relationship has formed on a more superficial level and moves toward a more intimate and attachment-oriented depth, a lack of synchrony may occur due to potential disparities in attachment styles and approaches, such as the a preoccupied male matched with a dismissing female. The demand from the other person to change to fit their attachment style better may be seen as a threat to one's self identity, or the lack of synchrony may be perceived as a threat of the end of the relationship, which would evoke a strong protest from both partners. According to Cairns and Cairns (2001), the first line of defense against the attachment threat may be to withdraw. This unfortunately would evoke further protest from an anxious partner as it would be seen as the beginning of the termination of the relationship. Because of this, it would be the least productive defense mechanism as it provokes the partner more, despite the intentions to diffuse the situation. The second line of defense would be to remove or terminate the threat, which could be

accomplished with aggressive behavior. In the same study, Cairns and Cairns (2001) reported the findings of a study in which rhesus monkeys were found to cling more to a punitive mother in order to lessen the negative behaviors toward them. In applying that animal behavior to human interactions, therefore, an aggressive partner's violent protest behavior could be seen as an unconsciously coercive act in which they are manipulating the partner to stay because the partner wants to avoid further punishment. The problematic interaction could be compounded by the reaction of the abused partner. For example, if an abused partner was anxious and were to respond with increased clinginess it could further entrench both partners in their roles of pursuer and withdrawer. On the other hand, if the abused partner is an avoidant partner and has responded to aggression with clinginess and comfort-seeking, it could serve as reinforcement of the aggressive coping strategy of the anxious partner. These theoretical considerations of possible interplays between attachment and aggression speak to the truth of Holtzworth-Munroe et al.'s assertion that the interaction of both spouses' attachment styles may be more important to the occurrence of marital dysfunction than one spouse's attachment (1997). This awareness of the importance of understanding the dynamic interplay of two attachment styles makes clear the need for further research on the topic.

#### *Attachment and Hostility as Another Form of Aggression*

Hostile marital conflict is another variable besides physical and sexual abuse that may be considered damaging in marital relationships and perhaps more subtle than violence. According to Gottman, hostile marital conflict is among the best predictors of marital unhappiness, and is defined as a negative interactional process that may include hot and frequent arguments, insults, name calling, unwillingness to listen, lack of

emotional involvement, and a ratio of more negative behaviors than positive (1994). In one study, Topham, Larson, and Holman (2005) found that the relationship between mother and daughter and the quality of parental discipline in childhood were good predictors of the wife's perception of hostile conflict in her marriage. This finding suggests that the attachment relationships in one's early family history may be strong influences on hostility in future relationships.

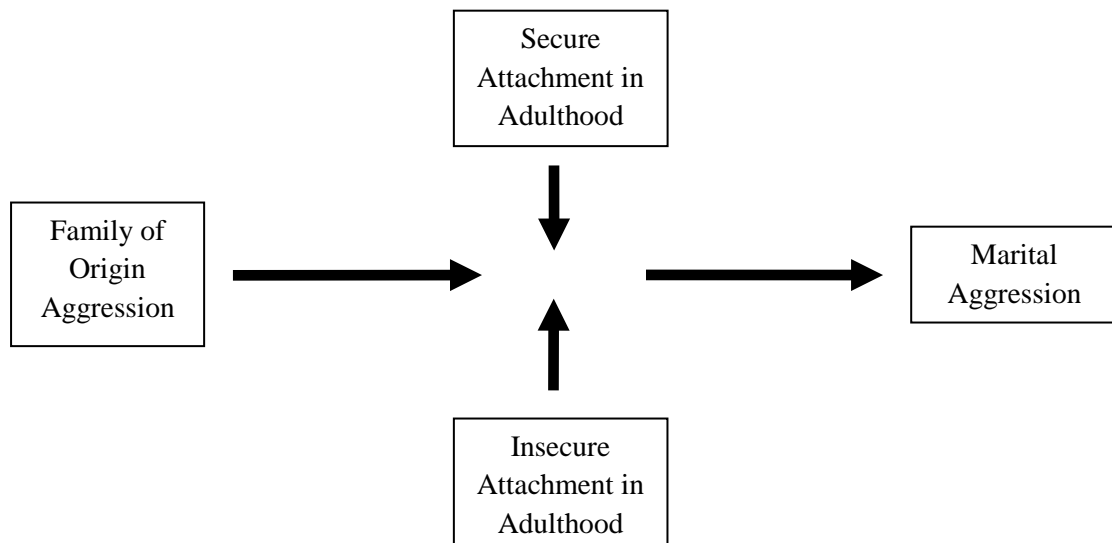
It may be that hostile conflict style is simply a reflection of the beginning of the process of physical or sexual aggression, as its components contribute to conflict escalation rather than resolution. Its connection to attachment may be easier to conceptualize, as the conflict style is clearly a pattern of behavior that is developed in the context of an attachment relationship. The process used in conflict within an intimate relationship speaks rather directly to the efficacy of the relationship in attending to attachment needs. A hostile marital conflict style will make it less possible for intimacy needs to be met by either partner, and it is likely that current marital functioning is influenced by attachment styles which were established previously in the family-of-origin. As hostile conflict style has been identified as a negative force in marriage, it is crucial to at-risk marriages to understand how awareness of one's attachment history and current functioning could help in avoiding major marital unhappiness.

In the current literature, there are inconsistent findings for the relationship between family-of-origin violence and violence in adult romantic relationships (Busby et al., 2008). Family-of-origin relationships to aggression in marriage become nonsignificant when control variables, such as family functioning and childhood problem behaviors, are introduced, and research has found temperament and personality factors to

be more related to aggression than the presence of family-of-origin aggression. However, it may be that attachment styles provide a link between patterns that are established in the family-of-origin and the individual or couple contextual variables, such as communication, that have been shown to be related to aggression. It is clear that in order to understand and help prevent aggression within marriage, attachment needs to be further investigated as a possible moderating influence on the intergenerational transmission of aggression. The present study considered adult attachment as a moderating variable between family-of-origin and marital aggression.

## An Investigative Model of the Moderating Effect of Attachment on the Intergenerational Transmission of Aggression

The model in Figure 1 (p. 30) demonstrates the hypothesized moderating function of attachment on the intergenerational transmission of familial aggression. It was proposed that aggression in the family of origin would increase the likelihood of aggression in the marriage of the next generation, unless moderated by the presence of earned security in offspring adult attachment. It was also proposed that aggression in the family of origin would decrease the likelihood of being securely attached, but that if secure attachment is achieved in spite of dysfunction in the family of origin, it would decrease the likelihood of the repetition of familial aggression in marriage.



*Figure 1.* Model of the Moderating Effect of Attachment on the Intergenerational Transmission of Aggression in Marriage.

In this model, any one of the three types of aggression in the family of origin was considered a risk factor for any type of aggression in marriage. According to Busby et al.

(2008), all types of violence in the family of origin (perpetration, witnessing, and victimization) were related to elevated levels of violence in couple relationships. Therefore, distinguishing between types of violence in the family of origin and their relationships to types in the marital relationship was not necessary for the purposes of this study. For example, this study did not distinguish between pathways of parental spouse and child abuse, and child abuse in the family of origin was considered as predictive of spousal aggression in marriage as parental spouse abuse. Family of origin aggression and insecure attachment were both hypothesized to be risk factors for later spousal aggression in the family of procreation.

This model controlled for family of origin income, as children who are raised in low socioeconomic backgrounds have been found to be more likely to exhibit insecure attachment (Aber et al., 2000; Fish, 2001; Spieker & Booth, 1988; and van Ijzendoorn et al. 1999).

Additionally, tests of this model were done by gender to account for the possible differences between men and women with regards to aggression and effects of the family of origin. Archer (2000) found that women reported perpetrating more acts of aggression in romantic relationships overall, while men were more likely to injure their partners because the severity of their aggression was greater. For these reasons, the study considered results in terms of gender to account for its effects on aggression. In addition, Holman and Birch (2001) found that the relationship between the quality of the wife's relationship with her parents and later marital satisfaction was nearly twice as strong as that of the husband's parent-child relationship and his marital satisfaction. Busby et al. (2008) found that perpetration of violence in the family of origin and the presence of

aggression in current relationships is a statistical relationship that is twice as strong for women as it is for men. These family of origin findings make it clear that gender introduces another variable in how family of origin experiences can come into play in marriage and must be controlled for in this study by testing separate gender models.

## Chapter 3

### Method

#### *Sample*

The participants for this study included adults who were 18 years of age or older and who took the RELATE questionnaire between March 2009 and July 2009. All participants were married to their partner when they took the questionnaire and marriages included both first marriages and remarriages of any length.

*Demographics.* The sample consisted of 185 female (55.7%) and 147 male (44.3%) participants, 86.1% of which were in their first marriages, and 13.9% of which were remarried. All participants were cohabiting with their spouse at the time they were surveyed. Participants were mostly Caucasian (88.0%), with Latinos comprising 4.0%, Asian-Americans 3.1%, and African-Americans 2.5% of the total sample. Religious affiliation in the sample revealed an oversampling of Latter-day Saints (41.0%), with Protestants being the next largest group (28.3%), then Catholics (14.3%), and Jewish participants (3.0%). Individuals with no religious affiliation comprised 11.0% of the sample.

The age range of female participants was 19 to 67, with an average age of 33.57 (SD = 10.3). The age range of male participants was 19 to 78, with an average age of 36.42 (SD = 11.54). The education level for participants in this sample was composed of 6.3% with less than a college education, 34.4% with some college education, 34.1% with an undergraduate degree, and 25.3 with graduate level education. The income level for participants in this sample was composed of 33.1% earning less than \$20,000, 35.0%



earning \$20,000-59,999, 15.3% earning \$60,000-99,999, and 15.6% earning over \$100,000.

Nineteen percent of the sample had been married for less than one year, 31.1% for 1-5 years, 17.5% for 6-10 years, 16.2% for 11-20 years, 11.7% for 21-30 years, and 2.7% for longer than 30 years.

*Controls.* The variables used as controls in this study were father's income and mother's income. The average father's income fell within the middle- to upper-class income level, with 54.6% of the sample having an income range between \$20,000 and \$119,000. The average mother's income fell within the lower- and middle-class income level, with 69.5% of the sample having an income range between \$0 and \$59,000.

*Independent Variables.* Forty four percent of participants reported never experiencing violence in the home, 32% reported experiencing violence rarely, 16.6% reported sometimes, 3.9% reported often, and 2.7% reported experiencing violence very often in the home. The average response was at a level of 1.88 (SD = .99), indicating an average response of never or rarely. The presence of family of origin hostile conflict style, as shown by either mother or father or both, was indicated in 53.3% of the sample.

*Moderator Variables.* The scores on the avoidant and anxious attachment scales in this sample ranged from 1 to 6.33 (potential scores ranged from 1 to 7), with an average anxious score of 2.91 (SD = 1.18) and an average avoidant score of 3.10 (SD = 1.06). Approximately 16% of the sample scored within the range considered to be avoidant (more than one SD above the mean), and slightly less than 20% of the sample scored within the range considered to be anxious (more than 1 SD above the mean).

Only 3.6% (N = 12) of the sample scored high enough on both scales to be considered both anxious and avoidant, or fearful.

*Dependent Variables.* In this sample, 23.2% reported having a hostile conflict style in their marriage. Concerning the perpetration of marital physical aggression, 80.2% of participants reported never having been violent toward their current partner, 16.4% reported having done so rarely, 2.7% reported sometimes, and .6% reported very often. In response to the item on the victimization of marital physical aggression, 80.2% reported never having been a victim of it in the current relationship, 14.9% reported rarely, 3.4% reported often, and less than 2% reported often or very often. With regard to the perpetration of marital sexual aggression, 78.5% reported never having pressured their current partner against his/her will to participate in sexual behaviors, 16.1% reported rarely having done so, 3.6% reported sometimes, 1.5% reported often, and .3% reported very often. For victimization of marital sexual aggression, 76.9% reported never having been pressured to participate in intimate sexual activities, 13.7% rarely, 6.4% sometimes, 2.1% often, and .9% very often.

### *Measures*

*RELATE.* The online questionnaire, RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE; Holman, et. al, 1997), is designed to provide feedback to couples on their strengths and challenges within the relationship. It consists of 276 items and evaluates individual, familial, cultural, and couple variables. The variables include ratings for both self and partner, allowing for several points of input on marital functioning. Items included in RELATE use one standard deviation above means on negative characteristic subscales and one standard deviation below the mean scores on positive characteristic subscales to

determine couples' challenge areas (RELATE; Holman, et al, 1997). According to Busby et al. (2001), RELATE's subscales have high construct validity, concurrent validity, and internal consistency (.70-.90). For a detailed account of the development, psychometric properties, and procedures of RELATE see Busby, Holman, and Taniguchi (2001).

#### *Aggression Measures.*

*Physical Abuse Measures.* Physical abuse in the family of origin was defined by RELATE by the following description: "Sometimes families' conflicts can lead to physical acts that are violent. These acts may include slapping, pushing, kicking, hitting hard with a fist, hitting with objects, or other types of violence." Physical abuse in marital relationships was defined by the following description: "Sometimes differences in relationships may lead to slapping, pushing, kicking, hitting hard with a fist, hitting with an object, or other types of violence."

Five items from the RELATE questionnaire were intended be used to assess family of origin physical abuse. These questions included (a) "Considering all of your experiences while growing up in your family, how would you rate the general level of violence in your home?"; (b) "How often was your father violent toward your mother?"; (c) "How often was your mother violent toward your father?"; and (d) "How often were you violent in your family?", which were rated on five-point Likert-type scales with answers ranging from "Never" to "Always". The fifth question assessed how often the person who was most violent toward the participant was violent. An answer on any of the five items above the "Never" level (a two or higher) was considered aggressive for

the purposes of this study. The items on this subscale had a test-retest reliability of .81 (Busby et al., 2001).

These five items measuring family of origin physical aggression were tested using a factor analysis procedure. All items loaded onto a single scale, except one, which measured the frequency of participant perpetration of aggression in their family of origin and was subsequently removed from the scale for this study. However, upon further investigation of the data, over half of the participants were missing significant quantities of data for three of the four remaining items, compromising the entire scale and diminishing the sample by more than 50%. Therefore, it was determined that family of origin physical aggression should be measured by the single item, “Considering all of your experiences while growing up in your family, how would you rate the general level of violence?”

The two items used to assess the presence or absence of physical abuse in marriage were (a) “How often is YOUR CURRENT PARTNER violent toward you?”; and (b) “How often are YOU violent in any of the ways mentioned above toward your current partner?”, which were also rated on five-point Likert scales with a test-retest reliability score of .95 (Busby et al., 2001). An answer above the “Never” level (a two or higher) on either of the two items were considered aggressive for the purposes of the present study. The items were used separately to assess both perpetration and victimization as dependent variables.

*Sexual Abuse Measures.* Sexual abuse in the family of origin was defined by RELATE with the following description: “Sometimes in families sexual activities occur that are inappropriate. These acts include a parent or sibling fondling a child, a parent or

sibling engaging in sexual intercourse with a child, or some other type of inappropriate activity.” In the marital relationship, sexual abuse was defined by the following description: “Sometimes individuals feel pressured to participate in physically intimate behavior when they don’t want to.”

Family-of-origin sexual abuse was intended to be assessed with three five-point Likert scale questions, the first question asking (a) how often the most abusive person toward the participant was abusive, as well as (b) “How often were you sexually inappropriate to a family member?” and (c) “How often did inappropriate sexual activities occur between other family members, but not directly involving you?” The questions in this subscale had a test-retest reliability score of .95 (Busby et al., 2001). An answer above the “Never” level (a two or higher) on any of the three items was considered sexually abusive and therefore aggressive.

However, these items measuring family of origin sexual aggression were not responded to by most participants and were therefore not useful as predictor variables. Therefore, no measures of sexual abuse in the family of origin were used in the analyses, and the measurement of family of origin aggression was limited to measures of physical aggression.

Marital sexual abuse was assessed using two questions, which included (a) “How often have you been pressured against your will to participate in intimate sexual activities (such as fondling, oral sex, or intercourse) by YOUR CURRENT PARTNER?” and (b) “How often has your current partner been pressured against her/his will to participate in sexual behaviors (such as fondling, oral sex, or intercourse) BY YOU?” Both questions were rated using a five-point Likert scale, with a test-retest reliability score of .95 (Busby

et al., 2001). An answer that was above the “Never” level (a two or higher) on either of the two items was considered sexually abusive and aggressive for the present study. The items were used separately to assess both perpetration and victimization as dependent variables.

*Hostile Conflict Style Measures.* Hostile conflict style in the family of origin parental marriage (parents’ marriage) was assessed in RELATE by presenting four ways of handling conflict and asking participants to indicate both of their parents’ ways of handling conflict by selecting only one conflict style. Hostile conflict style in the current marriage was assessed in RELATE by presenting four ways of handling conflict and asking participants to indicate their way of handling conflict by selecting only one conflict style. For the purposes of the present study, this variable was measured categorically with the categories being either hostile or not hostile. If either parent’s style in the family of origin was answered as hostile, this was considered family of origin hostility.

Hostile conflict style was defined by RELATE as a pattern of behavior in which the subject gets “pretty upset when [he/she argues]. When [she/he is] upset at times [she/he insults her/his] partner by using something like sarcasm or put downs. During intense discussions [he/she finds] it difficult to listen to what [his/her] partner is saying because [he/she is] trying to make [his/her] point. Sometimes [she/he has] intensely negative feelings toward [her/his] partner when [they] have a conflict.” This item had a .47 correlation with the RDAS, demonstrating concurrent validity for this measure (Busby et al., 2001).

Hostile conflict style was recoded as a dummy variable so that a score of 1 indicated the presence of hostility and 0 indicated the absence of hostility. For family of origin hostility, both mother's and father's conflict styles were combined into a single score, such that the presence of hostility in either parent's style indicated general family of origin hostility. For marital hostility, the participant's score alone was used to indicate hostility for the purposes of this study.

*Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ)*. The AAQ was used to assess attachment style. The AAQ has been found to have both construct and criterion validity and to be reliable as a measurement of adult attachment (Simpson et al., 1996). For avoidance scales, Cronbach alphas of .70 for men and .74 for women have been reported, and for anxiety, scores of .72 for men and .76 for women (Simpson et al., 1996). This scale used 17 items which were answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) and fell along two dimensions, one measuring avoidance, the other measuring ambivalence, or anxiety.

The first dimension of avoidance showed the level of behavior that orients the individual toward avoiding or withdrawing from close or intimate relationships. The eight items measuring this dimension were scored such that a higher total score indicates higher levels of avoidance, with the range of scores possible being from 8 to 56. The data set was missing some participants' responses for a single item in the avoidant attachment scale. In order to salvage the attachment measures for these participants, a series-mean imputation was used to fill in the missing data for this item. The avoidant scale was calculated thereafter.

The second dimension of anxiety assessed the extent to which participants saw their relationships negatively and were preoccupied with issues of commitment, loss, and abandonment. The nine items measuring this dimension were scored such that a higher total score indicates higher levels of anxiety, with the range of scores possible being 9 to 63.



## Chapter 4

### Results

The present study examined attachment as a potential moderator in the intergenerational transmission of aggression. Five separate dependent variables (perpetration of marital physical aggression, perpetration of marital sexual aggression, victimization in marital physical aggression, victimization in marital sexual aggression, and marital hostile conflict style) were used in two types of regression analyses to answer the questions in this study. Four of the variables were scale variables drawn from the RELATE national database regarding both perpetration of and victimization in marital physical and sexual aggression. These variables measured the degree to which respondents felt they had either perpetrated or been the victim of marital physical or sexual aggression. The fifth variable was a binary variable indicating the presence of a hostile conflict style in marriage by participant self-report.

Initially, univariate analyses of the sample indicated that there were few participants who reported higher levels of aggression, whether physical, sexual, or hostile conflict style, in either their families of origin (only 23.2% reported experiencing violence in the home sometimes, often, or very often) or marital relationships (aggression percentages ranged from 20-24% for all types). This may be attributable to an oversampling of Caucasian, religiously active, college educated, and middle-income individuals who were presently married included in the study. The homogeneity of the sample is likely related to the skewness in both independent and dependent variables within the sample, with predominantly lower levels of aggression being reported by participants.

Bivariate correlations (see Table 1) among all continuous variables used indicated a strong correlation in this sample between victimization and perpetration of marital physical aggression ( $r = .682, p < .01$ ), indicating that participants who reported higher levels of physical violence in the home were likely to be participating in both roles. Pearson correlations also showed weak relationships between family of origin physical aggression and father's income ( $r = -.193, p < .01$ ), and being the victim of marital sexual aggression ( $r = .157, p < .05$ ). Additionally, family of origin physical aggression had moderate correlations to being both the victim ( $r = .269, p < .01$ ) and perpetrator ( $r = .341, p < .01$ ) of physical aggression in one's own marriage. These findings are consistent with the literature (Busby, Holman, & Walker, 2008). Regarding attachment, family of origin physical aggression was moderately correlated to avoidant attachment ( $r = .283, p < .01$ ) and weakly correlated with anxious attachment ( $r = .186, p < .05$ ). This may reflect a direct association between family of origin aggression and insecure attachment. Avoidant and anxious attachment were moderately correlated with one another in this sample ( $r = .387, p < .01$ ).

Table 1.

*Zero-order correlations among continuous control, independent, and dependent variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Father's income	—	.242**	-.031	-.050	.001	.102	-.193**	-.060	-.154*
2. Mother's income		—	.038	.022	-.089	.090	.002	-.028	-.061

3. Marital physical aggression—Victim	—	.682**	.291**	.118	.269**	.141	.202**
4. Marital physical aggression—perpetrator		—	.247**	.025	.341**	.186*	.217**
5. Marital sexual aggression—victim			—	.318**	.157*	.375**	.206**
6. Marital sexual aggression—perpetrator				—	.026	.289**	.131
7. FOO physical aggression					—	.283**	.186*
8. Avoidant attachment						—	.387**
9. Anxious attachment							—

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Several models were tested for men and women separately. First, ordinary least squares regressions were calculated with marital physical and sexual aggression variables as dependent variables. Each regression was run once for men and once for women in the sample. The regression used mother and father income as control variables as determined by a review of the existing literature on the subjects (i.e. Aber et al., 2000). Each model was run using either avoidant or anxious attachment as a predictor variable. In order to determine whether attachment acts as a moderator of the relationship between family of origin (FOO) aggression and marital aggression, three variables were entered into each model: FOO physical aggression level or parental hostile conflict style, one of the attachment variables (anxious or avoidant), and a variable measuring the interaction of these two variables. For hostile conflict style, a binary logistic regression was run

using the same predictor and control variables, this time to predict the presence or absence of participant hostile conflict style in marriage. The following list demonstrates the variables that were included in each regression analysis along with the interaction term including the first and second variable. All of these regressions were run once for wives and once for husbands, doubling the number of regression models shown.

1. FOO Phys. Agg → Anxious Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Perp.
2. FOO Phys. Agg → Anxious Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Vict.
3. FOO Phys. Agg → Anxious Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Perp.
4. FOO Phys. Agg → Anxious Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Perp.
5. FOO Phys. Agg → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Perp.
6. FOO Phys. Agg → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Vict.
7. FOO Phys. Agg → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Perp.
8. FOO Phys. Agg → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Perp.
9. FOO Phys. Agg → Anxious Attachment → Marital Hostile Conflict
10. FOO Phys. Agg → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Hostile Conflict
11. FOO Hostile Conflict → Anxious Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Perp.
12. FOO Hostile Conflict → Anxious Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Vict.
13. FOO Hostile Conflict → Anxious Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Perp.
14. FOO Hostile Conflict → Anxious Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Vict.
15. FOO Hostile Conflict → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Perp.
16. FOO Hostile Conflict → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Phys. Agg. Vict.
17. FOO Hostile Conflict → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Perp.
18. FOO Hostile Conflict → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Sex. Agg. Vict.

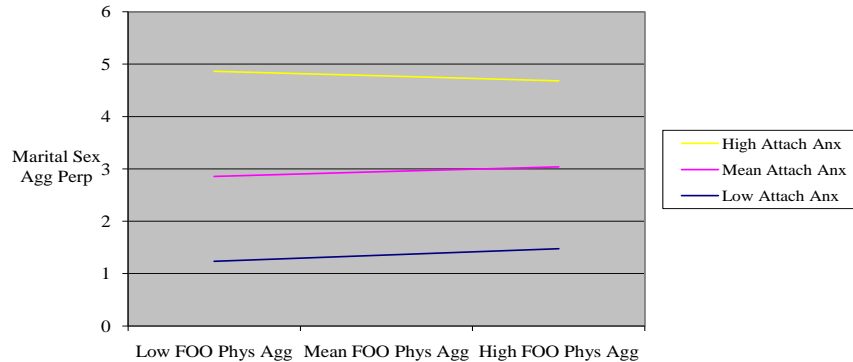
19. FOO Hostile Conflict → Anxious Attachment → Marital Hostile Conflict

20. FOO Hostile Conflict → Avoidant Attachment → Marital Hostile Conflict

### *Husbands*

Of the 20 regressions run for husbands, four were significant. The first regression predicted men's perpetration of marital sexual aggression in relation to anxious attachment and FOO physical aggression. Father's and mother's income were entered as control variables, and family of origin physical aggression and anxious attachment were entered as independent variables. Finally, an interaction term for FOO aggression and anxious attachment was entered in order to test for moderation. The model was significant,  $F(5, 136) = 4.94, p < .001$ . The model adjusted  $R^2$  was .12. The interaction term was significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating a significant moderation effect. The standardized beta coefficient for FOO aggression was .44 and for anxious attachment was .63. The standardized beta coefficient for the interaction term was -.73. In order to examine how anxious attachment moderated the relationship between family of origin physical aggression and the perpetration of marital sexual aggression in men, the regression equation was graphed using mean family of origin physical aggression and anxious attachment, as well as scores one standard deviation above and below the mean for those variables in this sample. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Interaction of FOO Physical Aggression and Adult Attachment Anxiety in Predicting Men’s Marital Sexual Aggression Perpetration.

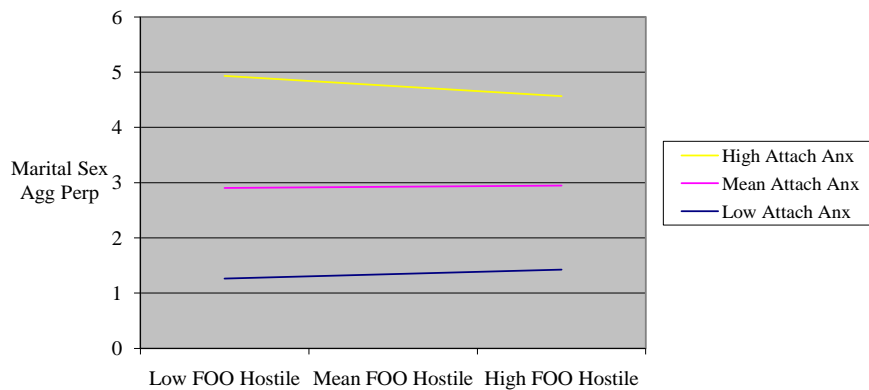


As expected, higher levels of attachment anxiety predicted higher levels of perpetration of marital sexual aggression for all family of origin aggression levels. However, the impact of husbands’ anxious attachment level on the relationship between FOO physical aggression and the perpetration of marital sexual aggression was much greater for individuals whose families of origin were characterized by lower levels of outward physical aggression (see slopes of lines in Figure 2).

The second regression equation predicted husbands’ perpetration of marital sexual aggression in relation to anxious attachment and FOO parental hostile conflict style. Father’s and mother’s income were entered as control variables, and family of origin parental hostile conflict style and anxious attachment were entered as independent variables. Finally, an interaction term for FOO parental hostile conflict style and anxious attachment was entered in order to test for moderation. The model was significant,  $F(5,$

136) = 4.95,  $p < .001$ . The model adjusted  $R^2$  was .12. The interaction term was significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating a significant moderation effect. The standardized beta coefficient for FOO parental hostile conflict style was .37 and for anxious attachment was .45. The standardized beta coefficient for the interaction term was -.54. In order to examine how anxious attachment moderated the relationship between family of origin parental hostile conflict style and the perpetration of marital sexual aggression in men, the regression equation was graphed using mean family of origin parental hostile conflict style and anxious attachment, as well as scores one standard deviation above and below the mean for those variables in this sample. See Figure 3.

*Figure 3.* Interaction of FOO Hostile Conflict Style and Adult Attachment Anxiety in Predicting Men’s Marital Sexual Aggression Perpetration

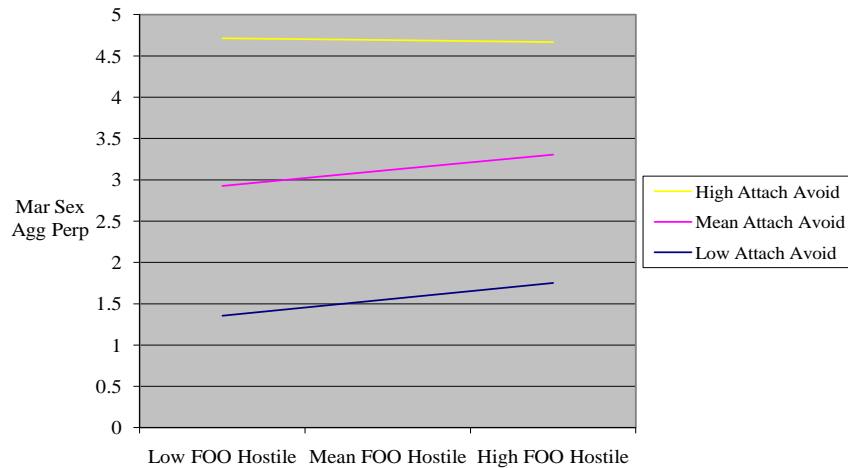


As expected, higher levels of attachment anxiety predicted higher levels of perpetration of marital sexual aggression for all family of origin hostile conflict levels in this model as well. However, the impact of men's anxious attachment level on the relationship between FOO parental hostile conflict style and the perpetration of marital sexual aggression was much greater for individuals whose families of origin were characterized by lower levels of parental hostile conflict style (see slopes of lines in Figure 3).

The third significant regression for men predicted perpetration of marital sexual aggression in relation to avoidant attachment and FOO parental hostile conflict style. Father's and mother's income were entered as control variables, and family of origin parental hostile conflict style and avoidant attachment were entered as independent variables. Finally, an interaction term for FOO parental hostile conflict style and avoidant attachment was entered in order to test for moderation. The model was significant,  $F(5, 136) = 3.51, p < .01$ . The model adjusted  $R^2$  was .08. The interaction term was significant ( $p < .01$ ), indicating a significant moderation effect. The standardized beta coefficient for FOO parental hostile conflict style was .76 and for avoidant attachment was .25. The standardized beta coefficient for the interaction term was -.85. In order to examine how avoidant attachment moderated the relationship between family of origin parental hostile conflict style and the perpetration of marital sexual aggression in men, the regression equation was graphed using mean family of origin parental hostile conflict style and avoidant attachment, as well as scores one standard deviation above and below the mean for those variables in this sample. See Figure 4.



Figure 4. Interaction of FOO Hostile Conflict Style and Adult Attachment Avoidance in Predicting Men's Marital Sexual Aggression Perpetration



In this model, higher levels of attachment avoidance predicted higher levels of perpetration of marital sexual aggression only for lower levels of family of origin parental hostile conflict style. Lower levels of attachment avoidance predicted higher levels of perpetration of marital sexual aggression for higher levels of family of origin parental hostile conflict style, and lower levels of perpetration for lower levels of family of origin parental hostile conflict style. The impact of men's avoidant attachment level on the relationship between FOO parental hostile conflict style and the perpetration of marital sexual aggression was roughly equal for individuals whose families of origin

were characterized by lower levels of parental hostile conflict style and those characterized by higher levels (see slopes of lines in Figure 4).

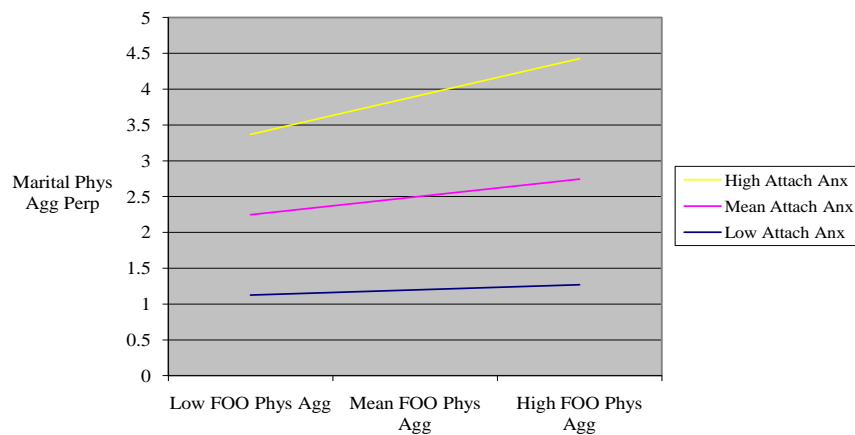
Therefore, the results indicate that for men, anxious attachment may be a moderator for FOO physical aggression or hostile conflict and marital sexual aggression perpetration, and that avoidant attachment may be a moderator for FOO hostile conflict and marital sexual aggression perpetration. The results also show that for men, neither attachment style is a significant moderator in models analyzing FOO physical aggression or hostile conflict and marital outcomes including physical aggression perpetration or victimization, sexual aggression victimization, or hostile conflict.

#### *Wives*

For wives, one model was found to be significant in the 20 regression analyses tested. This regression equation predicted women's perpetration of marital physical aggression in relation to anxious attachment and FOO physical aggression. Father's and mother's income were entered as control variables, and family of origin physical aggression and anxious attachment were entered as independent variables. Finally, an interaction term for FOO physical aggression and anxious attachment was entered in order to test for moderation. The model was significant,  $F(5, 174) = 7.76, p < .001$ . The model adjusted  $R^2$  was .16. The interaction term was significant ( $p < .01$ ), indicating a significant moderation effect. The standardized beta coefficient for FOO physical aggression was -.12 and for anxious attachment was -.14. The standardized beta coefficient for the interaction term was -.60. In order to examine how anxious attachment moderated the relationship between family of origin physical aggression and the perpetration of marital physical aggression in women, the regression equation was

graphed using mean family of origin physical aggression and anxious attachment, as well as scores one standard deviation above and below the mean for those variables in this sample. See Figure 5.

*Figure 5.* Interaction of FOO Physical Aggression and Adult Attachment Anxiety in Predicting Women’s Marital Physical Aggression Perpetration



As expected, higher levels of attachment anxiety predicted higher levels of perpetration of marital physical aggression for all family of origin physical aggression in this model as well. The impact of women’s anxious attachment level on the relationship between FOO physical aggression and the perpetration of marital physical aggression was much greater for individuals whose families of origin were characterized by higher levels of physical aggression (see slopes of lines in Figure 5).

Therefore, the results indicate that for women, anxious attachment may be a moderator for FOO physical aggression and marital physical aggression perpetration. No other models investigating marital physical aggression perpetration as a dependent variable were significant. The results also show that for women, neither attachment style is a significant moderator in models analyzing FOO physical aggression or hostile conflict and marital outcomes including physical aggression victimization, sexual aggression victimization, sexual aggression perpetration, or hostile conflict.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### *Summary of Findings*

Results of regression analyses indicated that neither parental hostile conflict style nor physical aggression in the family of origin was strongly related to adult outcomes in marriage, including perpetration or victimization in physical or sexual aggression and hostile marital conflict, with the exception of one model for women. This model looked at anxious attachment as a moderator of the relationship between family of origin physical aggression and perpetration of marital physical aggression, and showed greater levels of FOO physical aggression related to higher levels of marital perpetration of physical aggression at mean levels of attachment anxiety. The lack of more significant relationships between family of origin aggression or hostile conflict style and these marital outcomes is not consistent with the literature (i.e. Busby, Holman, & Walker, 2008), and may be attributable to limitations of a small sample size and homogeneous characteristics that led to little variation in the report of abusive behaviors.

Tests for moderation by attachment indicated that there were no significant attachment moderation effects for victimization in either physical or sexual aggression in marriage for either gender. These findings were not consistent with the literature, as other studies have indicated increased levels of attachment insecurity in men and women who are victims of marital aggression (i.e. Bartholomew et al., 2001; Kesner 1998). Considering the limitations of this study, no conclusions can presently be drawn about the discrepancy in these findings until they are replicated or contradicted by other studies with more heterogeneous samples and better measures.

In testing for moderation effects of adult attachment and the relationship between FOO physical aggression and perpetration of marital physical aggression, only one model was found to be significant. This regression indicated that for women, under all conditions of attachment anxiety, the greater the family of origin aggression, the greater the levels of marital physical aggression perpetration. High levels of attachment anxiety had the strongest effect and low levels of attachment anxiety the weakest effect on perpetration of marital physical aggression, indicating that attachment anxiety did moderate the relationship between family of origin physical aggression and marital physical aggression perpetration. All other models predicting perpetration of physical aggression in marriage were nonsignificant. These findings are in harmony with the current body of literature that links anxious attachment and perpetration of physical aggression (i.e. Roberts & Noller, 1998) and the literature that links family of origin aggression and marital aggression (i.e. Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998). The findings of this study provide a valuable link between those three variables (family of origin aggression, anxious attachment, and marital aggression) that no other studies have established.

For models predicting the perpetration of sexual aggression in marriage and testing for the moderating effects of adult attachment, three were found to be significant for husbands. The first two examined attachment anxiety as a moderator, one using family of origin physical aggression as a predictor and the other using family of origin parental hostile conflict style. Both showed similar moderation effects. Specifically, under conditions of high attachment anxiety, the greater the family of origin hostility or aggression the lower the levels of perpetration of marital sexual aggression. Under conditions of average attachment anxiety, there is little change in perpetration across all

levels of FOO hostility or aggression. Under conditions of low attachment anxiety, the greater the FOO hostility or aggression, the greater the levels of perpetration of marital sexual aggression. These findings suggest that individuals who come from abusive or hostile family backgrounds may have adopted an anxious attachment coping style that was adaptive to their situation and serves a positive function in future relationships. Perhaps the hypervigilance adopted by anxiously attached individuals makes them more perceptive of and sensitive to their sexual partner's needs, while their need for connection and intimacy in a relationship makes them less likely to alienate a partner through acts of sexual coercion (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, these same findings suggest that individuals who lack a history of abuse or hostility in their family backgrounds and adopt an anxious attachment style perhaps as a result of other negative factors (i.e. parental depression, neglect, personality disorder etc) may be less adaptive in their attachment coping strategies. If one's attachment insecurity derives from patterns of abuse and hostility and is therefore adaptive to those relationship issues (perhaps as prevention of or protection from abuse or hostility), it may be less likely to later contribute to the emergence of these same issues in marriage. Those who have attachment anxiety but have not experienced family abuse or hostility will likely lack anxious attachment coping mechanisms that are adaptive to such relationship problems. There is little in the research to help interpret these findings, indicating a need for further research in this area.

The final significant model examined attachment avoidance as a moderator using family of origin hostile parental conflict style as a predictor. Results of this analysis indicated that under conditions of high attachment avoidance, the greater the family of origin hostility, the lesser the levels of marital sexual aggression perpetration. Under

conditions of average attachment avoidance, there is little change in perpetration across levels of FOO hostility. Under conditions of low attachment avoidance, the greater the family of origin hostility, the greater the marital sexual aggression perpetration. This may suggest that individuals whose avoidant attachment style is attributable to hostility in their parents' conflict styles are less likely to value intimacy in response to attachment deactivation strategies and more likely to avoid or withdraw during times of conflict or resistance in sexual encounters, as opposed to acting aggressively (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Individuals who exhibit low levels of attachment avoidance may perhaps be anxious and more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression in marriage as indicated in the findings previously mentioned. However, these findings are difficult to interpret due to the fact that the analyses in the present study do not distinguish between avoidant groups with low, average, and high levels of attachment anxiety.

Tests for moderation predicting hostile conflict style in marriage yielded no significant results, indicating that adult attachment may not be a moderator in the relationship between FOO aggression or hostility and hostile conflict style in marriage. These findings are somewhat inconsistent with the existing literature, as Topham et al. (2005) found the relationship between mother and daughter to be a good predictor of the wife's perception of hostile conflict in her marriage. While these findings were not measuring attachment directly, they do suggest that the attachment relationships in one's early family history may be strong influences on hostility in future relationships. On the other hand, it may be that attachment style alone is not a good predictor of the effects of an aggressive family of origin on aggressive outcomes in marriage, possibly due to variability in attachment outcomes in spite of family history, as exemplified by earned



attachment security. However, the literature seems to be lacking in studies directly considering intergenerational hostility in relation to attachment and these connections should be further investigated.

It is important to note that the findings of this study do not necessarily establish adult attachment as a moderator in the intergenerational transmission of aggression, and that further research may further demonstrate that adult attachment style has little relationship to aggression in family relationships from generation to generation. On the other hand, the theoretical basis for such a moderating relationship as has been outlined in this study suggests the need for further research that may more fully flesh out the nature of the associations (or lack thereof) between these variables.

The results of this study affirm several relationships established in other studies, such as the connection between attachment insecurity and perpetration of marital aggression or between family of origin aggression and attachment insecurity. More importantly, however, this study begins to provide a vital link between all three elements as it starts to establish adult attachment style as a moderator in the intergenerational transmission of aggression in marriage. The results of the present study are suggestive findings that urge future research in this area.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study had several limitations. Out of the 40 regression models run, only four yielded significant results. This low number of significant models may be few enough to indicate chance findings, such that the conclusions of this study should be taken with caution. One methodological limitation that should be addressed in future research is the measurement of independent and dependent variables. Use of single-item measures for

both family of origin and marital aggression and hostility in this study may have weakened the relationships existing between variables. More robust scales that consist of multiple items and which exhibit reliability and validity should be developed to generate more sensitive and dependable results.

Additionally, analyses in the present study did not distinguish between high, mean, and low levels of one attachment dimension when investigating the other type. For example, groups of highly anxious participants were grouped together without separating them further into high anxious and low, mean, and high avoidant groups. Therefore, results for low attachment anxiety individuals could either be indicative of low attachment anxiety and high attachment avoidance (dismissive type) individuals, or of low attachment anxiety and low attachment avoidance (secure type) individuals. Similarly, and results for high attachment anxiety or high attachment avoidance individuals could be descriptive of fearful type individuals, or of preoccupied and dismissive individuals, respectively.

The final and perhaps primary limitation of this study was the small sample size and homogenous sample composition, which led to little variance in the aggression scores for families of origin and marriages. Because the results were run separately for males and females, the sample suffered from small numbers and should be increased in future research by allowing for a greater time period for data collection. Additionally, very large sample sizes could allow for selectiveness for a more diversified subsample, which was an additional limitation in this study. As the composition of the sample in the present study was overly representative of Caucasian, LDS, educated, and middle-class populations, the frequency of reports of family of origin and marital aggression was

lower than would be expected in a more diverse sample. The skewness exhibited in the independent and dependent variables likely affected the models calculated, and future research should be careful to counteract these effects so as to yield more reliable results.

To better understand results related to individuals, investigating couples may help in understanding particular dynamics between differing combinations of attachment types. For example, the relationship of an anxiously attached spouse with another anxiously attached spouse may look quite different than a relationship with an avoidant spouse. How these different combinations of attachment styles within a marriage affect levels of marital aggression has yet to be investigated.

Other questions that may enrich investigations on the moderation of attachment in the intergenerational transmission of violence include how differentiating between roles in family of origin violence (witness, perpetrator, victim) affects this relationship, how collecting partner report changes results, and how other moderators (maternal depression, father's absence, family structure, sibling violence versus parental violence) may impact the relationship.

Finally, no research has been done which explicitly reports on these relationships using longitudinal data. In the future, studies should examine participants' attachment styles and family of origin variables from an early age as well as their attachment styles and marital outcomes in adulthood.

### *Implications*

The findings of this study show some, although limited support for a relationship between adult attachment and the intergenerational transmission of aggression. These results may have important implications with regard to therapeutic applications. For

example, during the assessment phase of therapy, clients who present with couple violence and other types of aggression should be asked for information regarding family of origin aggression and their attachment style assessed. Having this information at assessment may allow clinicians to determine whether or not aggression is related to attachment dynamics within the relationship. At this point, emotionally focused therapy (EFT, Johnson, 2004) may be an effective approach to helping treat couple violence, hostility, and sexual coercion. In some cases in which the severity of perpetration and victimization is perceived to be outside the scope of EFT, other approaches may be more appropriate, but attachment-related interventions may still be integrated into the framework of therapy so as to address the causes of aggression more holistically.

Within the mental health care industry, many professionals see the treatment of abuse and other forms of aggression to be an individual-oriented support and empowerment of the victim with little intervention directed toward perpetrators. This polarization in intervention styles in which victims (typically perceived to be the wife) are counseled to seek help and leave the situation and perpetrators (typically perceived to be the husband) are left to be dealt with by the law is likely alienating to many couples who struggle with less severe forms of aggression. For example, a husband or wife whose spouse engages in verbal abuse or pushing and shoving may not feel that the abuse is severe enough to warrant leaving the relationship, or that mental health professionals may not know how to intervene appropriately at their level of abuse. However, an approach that deals with the dynamics within the relationship and helps couples understand how to heal past attachment injuries may be more effective with varying levels of aggression (less severe, moderately severe, and severe) and more inviting to

couples who are seeking to make the relationship work. These findings indicate that understanding attachment's moderating relationship to aggression is vital in making marriage and family therapy more accessible to and effective in our society.

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