Psychological Abuse Perpetration in College Dating Relationships: Contributions of Gender, Stress, and Adult Attachment Orientations

Barbara Gormley and Frederick G. Lopez

*J Interpers Violence* 2010 25: 204 originally published online 11 June 2009
DOI: 10.1177/0886260509334404

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/25/2/204
Psychological Abuse Perpetration in College Dating Relationships
Contributions of Gender, Stress, and Adult Attachment Orientations

Barbara Gormley
Georgia State University

Frederick G. Lopez
University of Houston

This study investigated whether gender, stressful problems common among college students, and adult attachment orientations (anxiety and avoidance) contributed to self-reported perpetration of psychological abuse in dating relationships among 127 college students. College men’s stress levels were the strongest predictor of perpetration of emotional abuse against their female romantic partners. Attachment avoidance among college men and women was associated with higher levels of emotional abuse perpetration when self-reported stress levels were high. Recommendations for research and practice are provided.

Keywords: psychological abuse; intimate partner violence; gender; attachment; stress

Psychological abuse is common in college dating relationships, and it can be quite detrimental. Psychological abuse is defined as controlling and coercive behavior, including isolating romantic partners from others; denigrating and dominating them; and using recurring criticism, threats, and verbal aggression (O’Leary, 1999). In one study, more than three-quarters of college women reported being the recipients of psychological abuse (Neufeld, McNamara, & Ertl, 1999), and in another study, more than half of college students reported psychological and/or physical abuse in their relationships.
romantic relationships (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Psychological abuse perpetration has been found to predict physical violence (O’Leary, 1999), and recipients of physical and psychological abuse have reported that the effects of psychological abuse are worse (Murphy & Cascardi, 1999)—perhaps because psychological incidents related to intimate partner violence (IPV), 1 rather than physical incidents, have been found to contribute to posttraumatic stress symptomology (Arias & Pape, 1999). Recipients of psychological abuse suffer depression, lowered self-esteem, reduced sense of autonomy, fearfulness, and increased suicide risk (Back, Post, & D’Arcy, 1982; Coker et al., 2002; O’Leary, 1999; Sackett & Saunders, 1999).

In a recent meta-analysis (Archer, 2000), men and women were found to report similar frequencies of perpetrating a range of IPV behaviors. This finding fits with a characterization of mild mutual IPV, or common couple violence (Johnson & Leone, 2005), which tends to be situational and which may arise when a couple or an individual is under stress. A less common but more injurious type of IPV, called intimate terrorism, tends to be one-sided and perpetrated by men; it involves the use of controlling and coercive approaches, as well as physical violence, to gain dominance over a romantic partner (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Johnson & Leone, 2005). Two such severe typologies of men’s IPV have been found to be better differentiated by insecure adult attachment dimensions than by personality problems (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000). Applications of adult attachment conceptualizations have been extended to include female perpetrators (Gormley, 2005), although this extension has not been empirically tested. In general, a female partner has a greater likelihood of injury from a man’s IPV than vice versa (Archer, 2002). Also, men and women may use the same psychological abuse tactics but for different reasons. In a qualitative study of college dating relationships, men reported using coercive relationship tactics to gain power and control, whereas women did not (Lavoie, Robitaille, & Hebert, 2000). Furthermore, a study of college students and dating aggression found support for modeling gender differences and situational factors (Riggs & O’Leary, 1996).

In this study, we examined college men and women for perpetration of psychological abuse in their recent dating relationships. We were interested in gender similarities and differences, including whether stressful situations commonly experienced by college students were contributing to perpetration (as expected in common couple violence) or whether more severe problems attributed to insecure adult attachment orientations were contributors. Specifically, we investigated whether gender, stressful problems,
adult attachment anxiety (fear of abandonment by a romantic partner), and adult attachment avoidance (discomfort with closeness) solely or collectively contributed to self-reported perpetration of emotional abuse.

**Review of Related Research**

A great deal of literature has addressed men’s perpetration of IPV; however, few studies have examined women’s related behaviors or focused exclusively on psychological abuse. Although this study emphasizes psychological abuse perpetration among male and female college students, we supplement our review as needed to include IPV perpetration by adults. Specifically, we review the contributions of stress and adult attachment orientations to psychological abuse aspects of IPV, and we describe gender differences in these relationships.

**Stress**

Stress may contribute to men’s and women’s psychological abuse perpetration for different reasons. A study of college men found that stress based on the masculine gender role contributed to verbal aggression and physical violence in romantic relationships (Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002). Furthermore, Jakupcak (2003) found that psychologically aggressive college men experienced stress due to the demand for emotional expressiveness and vulnerability in managing tense relationship situations and that their fear of emotions helped to explain the relationship between stress and IPV perpetration. One study of college students, however, found that negatively perceived life events and life changes contributed to psychological abuse perpetration by women but not men (Mason & Blankenship, 1987). Whether stressors commonly experienced by college men and women contribute to psychological abuse perpetration merits clarification.

**Adult Attachment Orientations**

An adult attachment perspective has been applied to the problem of psychological abuse to investigate behavior in close relationships. Severe stressors (e.g., separation, loss) are theorized to activate adult attachment orientations and to elicit default reactions derived from these internalized representations of relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Patterns of emotional and cognitive responses corresponding to distinct adult
attachment orientations are theorized to predict relationship behaviors. Unhealthy or insecure adult romantic attachment orientations are described by underlying dimensions or categories (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and the relationships between these patterns of attachment insecurity and psychological abuse perpetration have not been fully clarified for college men and college women. Two dimensions underlie attachment insecurity: attachment anxiety (fear of abandonment) and attachment avoidance (discomfort with closeness). Alternatively, attachment insecurity can be placed into three categories: preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. The preoccupied category is associated with high levels of attachment anxiety; the dismissing category is associated with high levels of attachment avoidance; and the fearful category is associated with high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Bartholomew, 1990). There are methodological and conceptual advantages to studying dimensions instead of categories, as we do in this article. For example, people do not seem to fit into one category or another as much as they have attributes of each dimension; as such, categories can contribute to the instability of attachment styles over time and other measurement problems (Fraley & Waller, 1998).

Although insecure adult romantic attachment orientations have been implicated as important contributors to men’s IPV (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000) and men’s psychological abuse of romantic partners (Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001), the relationship between attachment insecurity and women’s related behaviors is less clear. One study of college women found that higher levels of adult attachment insecurity were associated with more frequent psychological abuse perpetration in their romantic relationships (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). A study of men and women measured attachment to parents rather than that to romantic partners (Morrison, Goodlin-Jones, & Urquiza, 1997) and found that college students’ attachments to their parents influenced the level of hostile behavior reported in dating relationships; that is, insecure men and women in college reported more attacking behavior toward their romantic partners than did secure men and women. Whether adult attachment insecurity contributes to psychological abuse perpetration similarly or differently for college men and women remains to be clarified.

Specifically, different patterns of IPV-related behavior would theoretically be associated with different dimensions and categories of adult attachment insecurity; indeed, a study of male college students found that attachment anxiety was associated with antisociality and aggression, whereas attachment avoidance was related to coercive sexual behavior (Smallbone & Dadds, 2001). Furthermore, in a study of men’s IPV (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski,
& Bartholomew, 1994), both dimensions of attachment insecurity were clear contributors (Dutton et al., 1994); however, in a study of men and women (Roberts & Noller, 1998), attachment anxiety predicted IPV, but attachment avoidance did not. In a study that measured adult romantic attachment orientations categorically (Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998), college men and women who reported reciprocal aggression in their dating relationships had higher scores on preoccupied and fearful attachment categories (but not the dismissing category) than did students who reported that their relationships were not aggressive. However, in a study of college women (O’Hearn & Davis, 1997), the preoccupied and dismissing categories were associated with elevated levels of psychological abuse perpetration, but the fearful category was not. The mixed results regarding the influences of patterns of attachment insecurity on psychological abuse perpetration need explication.

Gender differences have been found in the relationships between insecure adult attachment dimensions and psychological abuse perpetration. In one study of psychological abuse perpetration (Hoover, Murphy, & Taft, 1999), the interaction between gender and attachment anxiety predicted psychological abuse; that is, when levels of attachment anxiety were high, women reported more psychological abuse perpetration than men. Another study (Gormley & Lopez, in press) found that adult attachment anxiety did not contribute to psychological abuse perpetration by college men and women when stressors were considered as contributors. Rather, higher levels of stressful personal problems formed the strongest contributor to explaining college men’s psychological abuse perpetration in their romantic relationships with female partners, but the same was not true for college women. Furthermore, Gormley and Lopez (in press) found that gender and stress influenced the relationship between attachment avoidance and psychological abuse perpetration. For college men, attachment avoidance contributed to psychological abuse perpetration, whereas for college women, attachment avoidance contributed to psychological abuse perpetration only when stress levels were low. Gender and stress changed the relationships between adult attachment dimensions and psychological abuse.

**Research Hypotheses**

The main effects and the interactions among our primary predictors were tested for their contributions to psychological abuse perpetration. Our primary
predictors were gender, stress, adult attachment anxiety, and adult attachment avoidance, and our outcome variable was emotional abuse perpetration.

Hypothesis 1: Higher levels of stressful problems, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance were expected to correlate with higher levels of emotional abuse.

Hypothesis 2: Stress was expected to moderate the relationships between attachment dimensions and emotional abuse, such that higher levels of stress would augment these associations. In particular, it was expected that the relationship between attachment avoidance and emotional abuse would be strengthened by concurrent reports of high levels of stress.

Hypothesis 3: Gender differences in each of the above relationships were examined. It was expected that stressful problems would be a stronger contributor to emotional abuse among men and that attachment anxiety would be a stronger contributor to emotional abuse among women.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students (N = 127) attending a large state-supported university in the Midwest were recruited from education, criminal justice, and other academic courses (66.7%) and residence halls (33.3%). Most of the 66 women and 61 men were White (80.6%), although other racial and ethnic groups were represented: African descent (9.7%), Asian descent and Hispanic ethnicity (3.2% each), Arabic descent and Native American (1.6% each). The mean age was 20 years, and most were underclassmen: freshmen (24.4%), sophomores (35.4%), juniors (16.5%), seniors (22.8%), other (0.8%). The majority were heterosexual (98.4%). Most were in a serious relationship (41.7%) or were casually dating (20.5%). Only a few were living together (2.4%) or married (2.4%). Of those not currently dating anyone (33.1% overall, 37.7% of men, 28.8% of women), half had been in a relationship within the last 6 months (50.0%), and all but two had been involved during the past year (85.7%). The mean length of the most recent relationship was 22 months.

Measures

Stress. A version of the Personal Problems Inventory (Cash, Begley, McCown, & Weise, 1975; modified by Ponce & Atkinson, 1989) assessed the level of students’ self-reported problems and thus served as our proxy
measure of stress. Participants rated 20 problems experienced by college students (e.g., career choice, trouble studying, academic performance, conflicts with parents, difficulties making friends) according to the current severity in their lives (1 = not at all a problem, 6 = very significant problem). Responses to the 20 items were summed, and scores could range from 20 to 120. Inventory scores were reliable in the current sample (α = .87), and reliability coefficients for men (α = .91) and women (α = .82) were comparable.

**Adult attachment orientations.** The revised Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) included 36 items that measured the two dimensions assumed to underlie adult attachment organization. Attachment anxiety (18 items) was characterized as fears of partner rejection and abandonment (e.g., “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me”). Attachment avoidance (18 items) was characterized as discomfort with dependence (e.g., “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close”). Participants rated each item on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly). Scores were averaged for each dimension and can range from 1 to 7. Internal consistency for each subscale was high in the original measure: α = .91, anxiety; α = .94, avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), and through the use of item response theory, adjustments were made that improved stability in the revised version (Fraley et al., 2000). In the current sample, the subscales were highly reliable: anxiety, α = .91 overall and for men and women separately; avoidance, α = .92 overall, α = .90 for men, and α = .93 for women. The Anxiety and Avoidance subscales of the revised scale were moderately intercorrelated (r = .40), and this finding differs from previous correlations of these subscales using the earlier version of the scale (r = .11; Brennan et al., 1998).

**Psychological abuse.** The Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Murphy, Hoover, & Taft, 1999) measured attacks on a partner’s self-esteem and other coercive strategies. Four factors that correlate with physical aggression include Denigration, Dominance/Intimidation, Hostile Withdrawal, and Restrictive Engulfment. The measure contained 29 items (e.g., “Belittled the other person in front of other people” and “Became angry enough to frighten the other person”). Participants rated themselves on a 7-point scale for frequency of occurrence in the previous 6 months or in the last 6 months of their previous relationship (0 = never, 6 = over twenty times). Item ratings can be summed to produce a total emotional abuse score ranging from 0 to 168. According to the
authors, the measure’s total scores have demonstrated limited associations with social desirability measures and moderate to strong associations with indicators of physical violence. Scores in the present sample were reliable: $\alpha = .95$ overall, $\alpha = .96$ for men, $\alpha = .89$ for women.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Demographic influences on our measure of psychological abuse were initially examined, and no significant zero-order correlations or mean differences were found involving emotional abuse and age, number of relationships, relationship status, whether a relationship was current or in the past, length of relationship, or recruitment approach. Gender differences as found in preliminary analyses were not mean differences in variables but rather differences in correlational patterns. Table 1 presents correlational analyses of predictor variables for each gender and for the subscale and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlations of Predictor Variables and Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscales by Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Adult attachment anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adult attachment avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stressful problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Restrictive engulfment $^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Denigration $^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Hostile withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Dominance, intimidation $^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Adult attachment anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adult attachment avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stressful problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Restrictive engulfment $^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Denigration $^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Hostile withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Dominance, intimidation $^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Correlations above the diagonal for women, $n = 66$; correlations below the diagonal for men, $n = 61$.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$^a$ Emotional abuse subscales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$^*$ $p &lt; .05$. $**p &lt; .01$. $***p &lt; .001$.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at UNIV HOUSTON on November 22, 2010
full-scale scores on our outcome measure. None of our predictors correlated with outcome measures among women, and only attachment anxiety and stressful problems correlated with outcome measures among men.

**Primary Analyses**

First, hierarchical linear regression was used to examine the individual contributions of our key predictors to our index of psychological abuse (i.e., the full emotional abuse scale). Second, we tested moderator relationships affecting these respective predictions (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). Continuous variables were centered in preparation for creating and testing interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991; Holmbeck, 1997). To test hypotheses, main effects (gender, stress, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance) were entered first, and a set of two-way interaction terms were entered second (the interactions of gender with stress, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance and the interactions of attachment orientations with stress).

Table 2 summarizes the regression analyses of the emotional abuse scores. In Step 1, stress levels were positive and significant indicators of perpetration of emotional abuse, with a large effect size ($F = 6.90, p < .001$). In Step 2 ($F = 7.02, p < .001$), the interaction of gender and stress was not only positively and significantly correlated with emotional abuse,
but it also had a large effect size; that is, higher levels of stressful personal problems as reported by college men were associated with higher levels of self-reported emotional abuse of female dating partners, but no such relationship was observed among college women (see Figure 1). The interaction of attachment avoidance and stress was also positively and significantly correlated with emotional abuse and had a moderate effect size; that is, college men and women with high levels of attachment avoidance and stress reported more frequent emotional abuse perpetration.
Discussion

Of all the plausible main effects in our multivariate analysis, only stress had a significant effect on our outcome, and this effect was moderated by gender. Unexpectedly, attachment anxiety did not make a significant contribution to explaining emotional abuse, either alone or in conjunction with other variables, even though bivariate correlations were significant among men. As anticipated, attachment avoidance was a significant contributor to emotional abuse perpetration but only when stress levels were high. Generally speaking, men’s stress was a better indicator of emotional abuse perpetration than adult attachment orientations, perhaps because our relatively normal sample primarily engaged in mild forms of psychological abuse.

College men who reported many problems that they perceived as being severe reported more frequent emotional abuse perpetration in their dating relationships. This finding extends previous findings regarding stress based on the male gender role and its contribution to IPV (Jakupcak et al., 2002) to include the contributions of stressful problems encountered by college men and women, and it contradicts previous findings regarding stressful problems and their contribution to college women’s (but not college men’s) psychological abuse perpetration (Mason & Blankenship, 1987). As such, gender differences in the contributions of stressful problems should be investigated further. In our study, men seemed to take their stress out on their female romantic partners, whereas women did not do so to their male romantic partners, which suggests that different relationship expectations may correspond to gender role norms; that is, men may be more inclined to consider female romantic partners’ roles to include being of service to their emotional needs (Miller, 1986). It may be interesting to study what female college students do to cope differently with their problems. Alternative explanations may involve the ways that men and women perceive the stressfulness of situations and so respond differently. One study found that women tend to perceive situations as being more stressful but are more likely than men to utilize emotion-focused coping strategies, who may rely more heavily on avoidance coping when they experience negative affect (Eaton & Bradley, 2008). In contrast to the women, the men in this study may have found themselves without adequate coping resources, thus finding themselves more likely to become emotionally abusive in romantic relationships. Furthermore, among men, stress alone predicted a great deal of psychological abuse perpetration, whereas among women, stress seemed to only exacerbate the influence of insecure attachment orientations.

This study demonstrates the utility of examining the influence of adult attachment orientations in the context of stress levels. According to attachment theory, attachment orientations become activated in response
to stressful events; thus, only those students with high stress levels would be expected to demonstrate behaviors related to insecure attachment orientations, such as affect dysregulation, cognitive distortions, and ineffective conflict resolution strategies (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Stress was a better predictor of psychological abuse than attachment anxiety; also, stress moderated the relationship between attachment avoidance and psychological abuse. These findings corroborate previous results based on a different measure of psychological abuse (Gormley & Lopez, in press). Whether the combination of many stressors and high levels of attachment avoidance contribute more to college men’s than to college women’s psychological abuse perpetration, as in the previously mentioned study, deserves further investigation with larger samples.

These findings regarding attachment avoidance suggest that college students with avoidant attachment orientations who also report many stressful personal problems may become uncomfortable with closeness, refuse to seek help, expect others to be unable to provide them with support (Simpson & Rholes, 1994), and employ ineffective conflict resolution strategies, including escalation and anger (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Fishtein, Pietromonaco, & Barrett, 1999)—all conditions that may contribute to their risk of becoming emotionally abusive in their romantic relationships. They also may be less able to express dependency needs or collaborate with their partners in conjoint efforts to reduce relationship stress (Simpson & Rholes, 1994). Instead, they may withdraw and become defensively critical of their partners. Because these students are unlikely to consider counseling, outreach efforts are needed to educate students about the risks of psychological abuse and the benefits of therapy.

**Limitations**

The variables included in our model explained college men’s psychological abuse better than college women’s, and future studies should include variables likely to explain women’s related behaviors. Our findings may not generalize to people with characteristics different from the participants in our sample, such as gay men and lesbians and severely abusive populations. Also, those who were not in relationships retrospectively responded to surveys, which may influence the accuracy of self-reports. The study was cross-sectional; it did not solicit input from victims or observers; and the impact of psychological abuse on the recipient, as well as whether physical violence was present, was not measured. A larger sample (e.g., $N = 200$) might have
improved the power to detect marginal effects; for example, in our model, attachment anxiety among women approached significance. A three-way interaction term between gender, stress, and attachment avoidance was dropped from the model because of marginal significance; as such, future studies would contribute to our understanding of this population by oversampling men who report severe stress and attachment avoidance.

**Note**

1. Note that intimate partner violence includes both psychological and physical abuse.

**References**


**Barbara Gormley** is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Georgia State University. She was not only an National Institute of Mental Health postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, San Francisco, where she specialized in clinical services research, but also a clinical intern at Harvard Medical School.

**Frederick G. Lopez** is a full professor of counseling psychology at the University of Houston. A former Fulbright Senior Scholar (Portugal), he has been recognized as one of the most cited and productive scholars in counseling psychology.

For reprints and permission queries, please visit SAGE’s Web site at http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav.