The Adult Attachment Interview and Observed Couple Interaction: Implications for an Intergenerational Perspective on Couple Therapy

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One of the assumptions of intergenerational family therapy is that how a person thinks and talks about family-of-origin experiences has important implications for current family relationships. The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) is a measure of attachment security based on how coherently the person can discuss attachment experiences in childhood. This study examined the relationship between attachment security, as measured by the AAI, and couple interaction, as measured by the Georgia Marriage Q-Sort (GMQ), in a sample of 28 couples in therapy for relationship problems. During a conflict resolution discussion, those individuals who were less coherent in discussing their family of origin expressed more negative affect, less respect, less openness, more avoidance, and less willingness to negotiate when interacting with their partner. No evidence of intra-couple effects or “buffering” was found. The findings support a key assumption of intergenerational approaches to family therapy and suggest that applying attachment theory is a promising direction for refining and developing new interventions for couples.


In the past two decades, research on
couples from an attachment perspective has developed from two different research traditions. One tradition builds on the extensive developmental research on attachment relationships between parents and young children and uses the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985) as the measure of adult attachment style (Hesse, 1999; Waters & Cummings, 2000). The other tradition, from the perspective of social psychology, grew rapidly from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) research on romantic love and attachment, and primarily uses self-report measures of attachment style (Feeney 1999; Simpson & Rholes, 1998). The two approaches to measuring adult attachment style are not equivalent and there is continuing debate about the reasons for the lack of convergence between interview and self-report measures of adult attachment style (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 1999; Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000).

The AAI is an interview about attachment-related family-of-origin experiences, particularly early experiences in childhood with parents and other primary attachment figures (George et al., 1985). The coding of the interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1994) is based not on the nature of the childhood experiences themselves but on how coherently the individual can describe and discuss his or her early relationships with parents in the present. An individual high in attachment security is able to discuss experiences with parents with balance and a sense of perspective, without either cutting off or being overwhelmed when asked to talk about attachment experiences.

This approach is consistent with intergenerational family therapy theories (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Bowen, 1978; Nichols & Schwartz, 2001), which emphasize the influence of current perceptions of the family of origin on the individual's attitudes, expectations, and behavior in other close relationships (e.g., partner, children). The AAI is a well-established measure with extensive evidence for reliability and validity (Hesse, 1999). Research on the AAI and the couple relationship holds promise for testing some of the assumptions underlying intergenerational family therapy, as well as suggesting more fine-tuned approaches to couple therapy. A major tension in couple therapy is deciding when to focus on current couple interaction and when to focus on past relationships in order to have a positive impact on the current couple relationship (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Research on whether attachment style, as measured by the AAI, relates to current couple interaction has the potential for further understanding of some of these important issues.

Attachment theory is increasingly presented as a theory of great usefulness for clinicians (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Clulow, 2001; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003; Wood, 2002). Emotionally-focused couple therapy (EFT, Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Johnson, 2002, Johnson & Whiffen, 1999), an empirically supported couple therapy (Baumcom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998), is based on attachment theory. Although some authors (Donley, 1993; Roberto-Forman, 2002) have suggested ways to integrate attachment theory with intergenerational family therapy theories, research support for the assumptions underlying such an integration is lacking. One assumption that can be derived from both attachment theory and intergenerational family therapy theories is that how a person talks and thinks about past family-of-origin relationships has important implications for the current couple relationship. Examining the relation between attachment security, as measured by the AAI, and couple interaction could test such an assumption. To
date, the only research (see below) documenting the relation between AAI and couple interaction has used nonclinical samples. The purpose of the present research was to provide information on the relation between adult attachment style, as measured by the AAI, and observed couple interaction in a clinical sample.

The Adult Attachment Interview

The AAI is a semi-structured interview (George et al., 1985) with questions about the individual's childhood relationships with parents, what happened during times of illness or injury, views of why parents behaved as they did, any experiences considered a setback to development, the overall impact of childhood experiences on current life, and current relationships with parents. The transcribed interview is coded (Main & Goldwyn, 1994) for inferred experiences in childhood using several rating scales, as well as "state of mind" ratings based on how coherently the individual discusses these experiences. The concept of coherence is based on Grice's (1975) maxims that coherent narrative is of high quality (believable), relevance, detail, and clarity. The individual is classified as "secure," "dismissing" (avoidant), or "preoccupied" (anxious) based primarily on the AAI state of mind ratings, with less weight placed on the inferred experiences in childhood ratings. The overall coherence of mind rating is considered the best summary measure of attachment security (Waters, Treboux, Fyffe, & Crowell, 2001). In addition, individuals are assigned a secondary classification of "unresolved" based on low coherence ratings for the portions of the interview related to loss and trauma.

Much of the attachment literature focuses on differences in attachment classifications (secure, preoccupied/anxious, dismissing/avoidant). However, for clinicians, classification is not as relevant as how attachment security is manifested in interaction processes in the therapy room, as well as client descriptions of interaction outside the therapy room. The AAI ratings and conceptualization offer a rich way of thinking about these processes that is highly relevant to intergenerational approaches to family therapy.

Three verbatim examples from AAI transcripts from the current study are provided to illustrate similarities between the AAI and the manner in which intergenerational family therapists might think about process. The first example is from the AAI transcript of a male classified as preoccupied on the AAI. He is providing an illustration of one of five adjectives he has just given (in this case, "not very giving") to describe his relationship with his father in early childhood.

I don't think I can tell you five times that he told me he said he loved me. I don't think I can or my brothers. I mean he told [sister] once in a while, but I mean, I don't remember — and we were talking about this like three weeks ago. Me and [wife] were discussing this. I have a big problem with like me and [wife]. I always wanna show her affection and I always wanna give her a kiss or I always wanna hold her hand — something like that you know? And, I know why I do that because of when I was younger I can always remember—not one time can I ever remember, maybe once or twice, but I mean, overall I cannot remember my father giving my mother a kiss as he went out the door. She always asked for one first. Or anytime they did anything — mother's day, anniversary or something like that, she planned. If they went anywhere or did anything she planned. You know he'd buy her flowers or something you know. But I mean never. You know I can remember coming home and him be off have two days off and not wanna do anything that I wanted to do. He wanted to work at the house. He wanted to do yard work and housework. And not doing—wanna do anything that I want—or nothing with me that I would have enjoyed.
It is as if this individual is still caught up and somewhat overwhelmed by these childhood experiences with his father, exhibiting a lack of emotional distance and balance in perceptions.

The second example is from the transcript of a female asked to illustrate the adjective, “good” that she has just given to describe her childhood relationship with her mother.

Just we got along. We were a lot more alike than my sister was to her. We had the same interests. We used to make things, build things, draw, color. You know, do that kind of stuff together (Does a particular time stand out?) I don't know why this stands out. My dad, after my parents were divorced, my dad bought me a dollhouse with like 2,000 pieces to put together. And my mom was like. I must have been 9, somewhere round there, and she took me back to the store where he bought it, returned it and let me spend all the money. And that was just – I was like wow!

The narrative of this female, classified as secure, is clear and vivid.

This illustration is from the transcript of a male, the husband of the client in the preceding example, providing a specific description of his mother as nurturing.

At that time? Five to twelve? Oh that’s hard to say. I don't know if I can really picture one particular event right now. (What’s your earliest memory of her being nurturing?) Well I guess, the earliest, well that’s not really a memory, it's more from pictures. it’s when we’re first, well, not my youngest sister but the middle sister was when she was born, I remember real vaguely things there but it was let’s see I guess she was about a year old and I was about three or four years old. Maybe it was just from pictures, I don't remember if I do remember. But that was, I don't know how to describe the situation.

Hmm, I don't know if I know if I can pick from just a particular event. It's just the overall, the overall relationship. I don't know that I can, especially in that time period.

Even when prompted, this individual, classified as dismissing, cannot provide a clear example from childhood illustrating his mother as nurturing. He seems cut off from his childhood experience.

The AAI coding was originally developed by comparing the interviews of parents about their childhood with the attachment security of their young children in the strange situation laboratory procedure (Main & Goldwyn, 1994). Clinicians with an intergenerational perspective on therapy would expect consistency between the individual’s ability to discuss past and current family relationships in a coherent manner (neither emotionally overwhelmed nor distant/cutoff) with the individual’s behavior with his or her partner, children, and own personal well-being. Research using the AAI has been extensive, with particularly strong research evidence on the value of the AAI as a predictor of parenting behavior (van IJzendoorn, 1992; van IJzendoorn, 1995; van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Duyvesteyn, 1995), child’s attachment security, (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996), other child outcomes such as failure to thrive infants (Benoit, Zeanah, & Barton, 1989), and adult psychopathology (Dozier, Stovall, & Albus, 1999; Pearson, Cohn, Cowan & Cowan, 1994). Children and adults classified by the AAI as insecure with respect to attachment are substantially overrepresented in clinical samples (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996; van IJzendoorn et al., 1995). Until recently, an important gap in AAI research was evidence about the relation between the AAI and observed interaction between adult attachment figures (Waters & Cummings, 2000).
eral studies have now been completed, but none of these studies has included a clinical sample.

Research on the AAI and Couple Interaction

Eight studies were located that included both the AAI and observational coding of couple interaction. Two samples consisted of dating undergraduate couples (Creasey, 2002; Tyrrell & Dozier, 1999). One sample consisted of young dating couples from the developmentally at-risk participants in the Minnesota Parent-Child Longitudinal Project (Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, et al., 2001). Three included middle-class couples in the early years (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, et al., 1992; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999) or middle years (Bouthillier, Julien, Dube, et al., 2002) of marriage. In addition, the Stony Brook Longitudinal Study includes data on the AAI and couple interaction at several points in time over the transition to marriage and parenthood (Crowell, Gao, Lawrence-Savane, et al., 2001; Crowell & Treboux, 2001; Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002). Only one study focused on distressed couples; however, they were recruited for research on couple violence and the wife's attachment style was not assessed (Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, & Yerington, 2000).

Secure vs. not secure. The clearest finding across all seven studies is that, in general, individuals categorized as secure on the AAI evidenced fewer dysfunctional negative behaviors and more positive behaviors when observed interacting with their partners, whether the coding is of general or attachment-specific behavior. For example, Tyrrell and Dozier (1999) found that individuals categorized as secure provided more clarity and detail when in the speaker role in a confiding task and were less rejecting and more supportive when in the listener role. Creasey (2002) reported that participants categorized as secure evidenced more positive and fewer negative conflict management behaviors. Roisman et al. (2001) found that those coded secure on the AAI at 19 years of age were coded at ages 20 to 21 as using more positive secure base behaviors when interacting with a dating partner. Of course, not all hypothesized differences were found in these eight studies. For example, Roisman et al. (2001) did not find an expected difference in negative affect between those coded secure and not secure. However, the general pattern across the studies is one of a consistent relationship between attachment security as measured by the AAI and couple interaction behaviors, with high security associated with more positive couple interaction.

Attachment security, relationship satisfaction, and stress symptoms. Attachment security is just one of many factors that may influence couple interaction. Even though extensive research evidence has accumulated about the importance of attachment style in relationships, security of attachment is not synonymous with a healthy relationship. For example, in the Babcock et al. (2000) sample, six of the violent maritally-distressed males were coded as secure on the AAI. In the longitudinal Stony Brook sample (Crowell & Treboux, 2001), there was no relation between security on the AAI prior to marriage and divorce or separation five years after marriage, with a divorce/separation rate close to 20% for every combination of couple security (both secure, insecure/secure, both insecure). In research on the AAI and relationship satisfaction, some studies have found no relationship between couple satisfaction and attachment security (Cohn et al., 1992; Paley et al., 1999; Tyrrell & Dozier, 1999), while others have found a modest, but statistically significant association (Benoit et al., 1989; Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002; Fam. Proc., Vol. 42, Winter, 2003
Cowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Eiden, Teti, & Corns, 1995). Insecurity on the AAI has been associated with individual symptoms of distress in some studies (Dozier et al., 1999; Pearson et al., 1994), but not in others (Waters, Crowell, Elliott, et al., 2002). It is well established that distressed couple interaction in general is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and higher individual symptoms of stress (Baucom et al., 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). It is important to examine in the current clinical sample whether attachment security is related to couple-interaction even when taking relationship satisfaction and stress symptoms into account.

**Couple effects.** The possible impact of the attachment style of one partner on that of the other partner has been of great interest, particularly the idea of "buffering," in which having a secure partner may help the insecure partner use a more positive style of interaction. In general, however, behavior in couple interaction has been found to be related to the individual's own attachment style, not the partner's, and with no evidence of a buffering effect (Creasey, 2002; Paley et al., 1999). A buffering effect was found in only one study (Cohn et al., 1992). This study reported evidence of buffering in that both secure and husband secure/wife insecure couples showed less distressed interaction than the couples who were both insecure. Unfortunately, the only two couples in the sample coded husband insecure/wife secure were eliminated from this analysis, and those classified secure but unresolved were included in the insecure category. Even more problematic, couple interaction was coded jointly for the two partners, with no separate couple behavior scores for husband and wife. Even though this study is often cited as evidence of buffering (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Hesse, 1999; Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002), this conclusion is not warranted by the data.

In addition to the lack of clear evidence for a buffering effect, the strongest evidence to date against a buffering effect is found in the Stony Brook longitudinal study (Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002). Of the couples followed between 3 months prior to marriage and 18 months after marriage, 21 of 161 individuals moved from insecure to secure on the AAI and only 3 moved from secure to insecure. The researchers (2002) conducted several analyses to identify a buffering effect, but concluded, "No combination of 'change'/partner premarital AAI classifications appeared more likely to favor a person's becoming secure" (p. 474). Following an intergenerational perspective, we expected the individual's own attachment security to be more closely related to his or her behavior when interacting with the partner than the partner's attachment security or the partner's behavior in the interaction.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were 28 couples in therapy at a sliding-fee scale university clinic serving a community in the Southwest. To recruit the couples, therapists briefly described the study to client couples, and study personnel contacted couples willing to participate. All cases involving two adults in a long-term romantic relationship were eligible for the study. Data collection was done in five different periods over one and one-half years. The sample represents clients of 11 therapists (1 to 6 cases each). Even though all therapists knew about the study, variation occurred in whether therapists had couples in their caseload and, if so, whether they were willing or remembered to ask their clients to participate. Only three couples refused to participate when asked. The majority
(24 couples) came to the clinic for couple problems; some \( n = 4 \) had initially sought help for parent-child relationship problems, but were receiving couple therapy at the time of entrance to the study. At the time of data collection, couples had been in therapy for between 0 and 15 sessions \( M = 7 \).

As expected, most of the couples were distressed, as indicated by a mean score on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) of 95 \( (SD = 21, \text{Range} = 43-129) \) for males and 84 \( (SD = 27, \text{Range} = 23-128) \) for females. The majority of the couples were married \( n = 23 \) or living together \( n = 3 \). The other two couples were separated. Length of relationship ranged from one to 33 years and 22 of the couples had children. The mean age was 35 for males \( (SD = 10, \text{range} = 22-56) \) and 32 for females \( (SD = 9, \text{range} = 17-53) \). All but 9 of the 56 participants were European American. Education level for males ranged from high school or less \( n = 12 \) to some college \( n = 12 \), with only 4 having completed a college degree. Most of the females \( n = 21 \) had some college, with only 4 having a high school degree or less, and 3 having completed a college degree. Most were employed full-time, and 6 of the 56 participants were students.

**Procedures**

After completing the informed consent procedures and the Marital Problem Checklist (MPC; Gottman, 1979), the partners were separated for the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). Following the AAI, the partners were videotaped while discussing four different topics, including a current problem or concern marked as most serious on the MPC. After the couple discussion, the questionnaires were completed. The experimenters monitored the couple to insure that the questionnaire responses were not discussed.

**Measures**

**Attachment security.** Each AAI (George et al., 1985) was transcribed and later coded for adult attachment style using the coding system developed by Main and Goldwyn (1994). Coding was done by the first author who has been certified as a reliable AAI coder following attendance at a two-week intensive training institute conducted by Mary Main and Erik Hesse, coding practice transcripts, and coding a set of 30 reliability transcripts. The second and third authors received training in the AAI from the first author and also coded the transcripts, providing an informal check on the coding through discussion of all disagreements.

The overall rating of coherence was used as a continuous measure of attachment security. In addition, individuals were categorized as either secure or insecure, with the insecure category including those classified as dismissing, preoccupied, or “cannot classify,” a primary category assigned to individuals whose interviews had both strong preoccupied and dismissing characteristics. The was also coded for evidence of unresolved loss or trauma and individuals were assigned a secondary classification (“unresolved” or not) in addition to the best-fitting primary category. This secondary classification was not the focus of the current study.

The AAI Classification System (Main & Goldwyn, 1994) has strong evidence for validity and reliability (Hesse, 1999), based particularly on the relation between the AAI classification of the adult and the infant’s attachment classification coded in the Strange Situation, as well as the parent’s behavior with the child (van IJzendoorn, 1995). Longitudinal data are now available indicating stability between a child’s attachment status in the Strange Situation before age three and their AAI classification in young adulthood (Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield,
Adequate test-retest reliability (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 1993) and stability over the transition to marriage have been documented (Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002). Evidence of good discriminant validity for the AAI is available. Specifically, the AAI is not related to intelligence, ability to remember non-attachment events, education, verbal ability, and social desirability (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 1993) or cognitive complexity, style of discourse, and social desirability (Crowell, Waters, Treboux, et al., 1996). The AAI coding is not dependent on the accuracy of the respondent’s accounts of childhood (Roisman, Padron, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002).

Couple interaction. Videotapes of the discussion of a current problem or concern were coded using the Georgia Marriage Q-sort (GMQ; Wampler & Halverson, 1990). The original Q-sort was modified to focus on each individual instead of on the couple, by slight rewording and elimination of items that were redundant once the generic wording was used. Items are grouped into six subscales. “Positive affect” includes 3 items on expression of positive affect, use of humor, and affectionate touch. “Negative affect” includes 8 items describing hostile, blaming, and critical behavior. “Respect” is a 4-item subscale with items on respect and understanding. “Avoidance” is an 8-item subscale including withdrawal, giving in to partner, social conversation, and avoidance of discussion. “Negotiation” contains 5 items with content on moving to a solution to a problem, use of compromise, and maintaining focus on the issue. The 7-item “open” subscale includes items on clear expression of agreement, open expression of feelings and thoughts, and expression of disagreement in a constructive manner. Evidence for validity for the GMQ is available, with expected agreement with self-report measures of marriage (Owen & Cox, 1997; Stright, 1994; Wampler, 1991) and other observational measures of marriage (Wampler & Halverson, 1990).

Coders used both verbal and nonverbal cues to place the Q-sort items into nine categories along a dimension of salience from “most like this individual” to “least like this individual.” Coding of each of the two partners’ behaviors in the couple discussion was separated by several weeks to allow the coders to focus on only one individual at a time. Each of the videotapes was coded independently by two of the three coders who had received intensive training on the coding system using the Q-sort manual (Wampler, 1991). For all interactions in which interrater agreement was less than a correlation of .70, a consensus Q-sort was done by discussion between the two coders and the trainer. The mean agreement between the two initial coders was .80 (Spearman-Brown; \( r = .66 \)). The final score of each item was an average of both coders for that individual or the consensus code if the initial agreement was below .70.

Relationship satisfaction and stress symptoms. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to assess relationship satisfaction. This is a commonly used measure with support for adequate reliability and validity (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994). The measure of symptoms of psychological distress was the global severity index (GSI) from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis, 1993). The BSI is a 53-item inventory with good evidence for reliability and validity. The t-score for the GSI, based on separate male and female norms for nonclinical samples was used as the measure of stress symptoms.

RESULTS

AAI Classification

Of the females, 17 were classified as secure and 11 as insecure (4 dismissing, 4
Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between AAI Coherence and Marriage Q-Scores, Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), and General Symptom Inventory (GSI)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correlation with AAI Coherence</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>5.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>-.41*</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>-.55***</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>.61***</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>.69***</td>
<td>5.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSI</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sample size is \( n = 28 \) for males and \( n = 28 \) for females except for the DAS that was missing for one male and one female. One-tailed tests, *** \( p < .001 \), ** \( p < .01 \), * \( p < .05 \).

Attachment Security and Couple Interaction

The correlations between the AAI coherence score and the GMQ subscales are presented in Table 1. For males, coherence was significantly correlated with GMQ negative affect, respect, avoidance, open communication, and negotiation. The only correlation not significant was between coherence and positive affect. For females, coherence was significantly correlated with all but two of the GMQ subscales, positive affect and avoidance. Correlations between coherence and the DAS or GSI were not statistically significant for either males or females (Table 1). As would be expected, the results of \( t \)-tests between the secure and insecure groups are parallel to the pattern of the correlations (Table 2). To summarize, both the male and female partners classified as insecure evidenced more dysfunctional behaviors in the problem-solving discussion. For both males and females, those classified as secure expressed significantly more respect, used more negotiation, were more open, and expressed less dysfunctional negative affect than those classified as insecure.

Because the results were stronger for males than females, male and female partners were compared on their use of different styles of interaction. There were no gender differences for respect, open communication, negotiation, positive affect, or negative affect. Males were more avoidant than their partners, \( t (27) = 2.52, p < .02 \).

**Table 2**

*Differences Between Those Categorized as Secure and Insecure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Secure</th>
<th></th>
<th>Not Secure</th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>-2.81**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>-2.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>3.88***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>3.76***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td>94.70</td>
<td>2T.06</td>
<td>95.65</td>
<td>21.68</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSI</td>
<td>65.53</td>
<td>23.06</td>
<td>74.22</td>
<td>24.76</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sample size is secure, 11 males and 17 females, and insecure, 17 males and 11 females. One-tailed tests. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

**Attachment Security, Relationship Satisfaction, and Stress Symptoms**

The correlations between AAI coherence and the DAS and GSI were not statistically significant and there were no significant differences on the DAS and GSI between those classified as secure and not secure. However, as would be expected, observed couple interaction was related to relationship satisfaction and stress symptoms. For males, there were statistically significant correlations (p < .05, one-tailed test) between the DAS and negative affect (r = .58), openness (r = .45), positive affect (r = .45), and respect (r = .48). For females, the correlations between avoidance (r = -.38), negotiation (r = .36), openness (r = .35), and positive affect (r = .38), and the DAS were statistically significant. Correlations with the GSI were weaker, with none of the correlations for females significant and only two of the six (negative affect, r = .37; open communication, r = -.44) statistically significant for males.

Because AAI coherence and the DAS were both related to the observed couple interaction, but not significantly related to each other, simultaneous multiple regression was used to assess the joint contribution of AAI coherence, the DAS, and GSI to predicting the GMQ subscales. As can be seen in Table 3, the $R^2$ for males ranged from .26 to .53 with all but the $R^2$ for positive affect statistically significant. For avoidance, open communication, and negotiation, AAI coherence was the only significant predictor. For negative affect and respect, both coherence and the DAS were significant predictors. The GSI was not a significant predictor of any of the GMQ subscales. Thus, attachment security for males was a significant predictor of observed couple interaction behavior even when relationship satisfaction and

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*FAMILY PROCESS*
Table 3
Simultaneous Regression Analyses Predicting Marriage Q-Sort Subscales from the Individual’s AAI Coherence, Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), and General Symptom Inventory (GSI)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AAI Coherence</th>
<th>DAS</th>
<th>GSI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2(3,23)$</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>-.39</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>.13</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.16</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.29*</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.13</td>
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</table>

Note. Sample size is $n = 27$ for males and $n = 27$ females. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

stress symptoms were included as other predictors.

The results for females were weaker, with the $R^2$ ranging from .13 to .29. The only significant $R^2$ was that for predicting open communication, with the only significant beta for coherence (Table 3).

**Couple Effects**

Although not expected, several strategies were employed to check whether observed behavior in interaction with the partner was related to the individual’s own attachment security, or instead, was related to the partner’s behavior and/or the partner’s attachment security. First, no statistically significant correlation was found for either males or females between an individual’s AAI coherence rating and the partner’s interaction behavior, relationship satisfaction, or stress symptoms. The behavior of the partners was not highly related either, with the exception that the use of positive affect was significantly correlated between the partners ($r = .64, p < .001$). As expected, the DAS scores of the partners were significantly correlated ($r = .71, p < .001$), and the GSI scores were not significantly correlated with each other ($r = .24$).

A second strategy was to run a series of simultaneous multiple regression analyses predicting the individual’s behavior with the partner from the individual’s own attachment security, the partner’s attachment security, and the partner’s comparable GMQ score. The results of these analyses can be seen in Table 4. For males, the $R^2$ ranged from .30 to .48, with negative affect, respect, avoidance, and openness predicted only by males’ own attachment security. Negotiation for males was predicted by the male’s attachment security as well as his partner’s attachment security and his partner’s use of negotiation. The direction of the betas indicated that the male was more likely to use negotiation when he was higher in security, his partner used more negotiation, and his partner was lower in attachment security. For males, positive affect, which had not been related to any of the
other variables in previous analyses, was predicted only by the female partner's positive affect (Table 4).

As would be expected from previous analyses, results of the multiple regressions for females were weaker, with a significant $R^2$ only for positive affect, open communication, and negotiation. Attachment security for females was related to the female's use of open communication, negotiation, respect, and negative affect. The results for negotiation were parallel to that of the males, with female use of negotiation predicted by her own higher attachment security, her partner's higher use of negotiation, and her partner's lower attachment security. As with the males, the only significant predictor of a female's positive affect during couple interaction was her partner's positive affect (Table 4).

Finally, as others have done (Creasey, 2002; Paley et al., 1999), couple attachment scores were created by combining those of both partners into four categories: both secure ($n = 8$), female secure/male not secure ($n = 9$), male secure/female not secure ($n = 3$) and both not secure ($n = 8$). ANOVAs were conducted using the couple attachment category as the independent variable and the male and female Q-sort subscales as the dependent variables. Even though several ANOVAs were statistically significant, the pattern of findings adds no new information. As is clear in Figure 1, it is the individual's own attachment style that is related to his or her interaction with the partner. For example, the ANOVA for the couple attachment score is statistically significant for the negotiation subscale for both males, $F(3, 24) = 4.73, p < .01$, and females, $F(3, 24) = 3.28, p < .04$. Figure 1 shows that when the male partner is secure (i.e., in the both secure and male only secure categories), his use of negotiation is higher than in the categories in which the male partner is not se-
cure (i.e., female only secure and both not secure). The same pattern can be seen for the female partner's negotiation scores. Examination of the other GMQ measures indicated the same pattern—the individual's own attachment style was related to the individual's behavior.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study provide support for an intergenerational perspective on couple and family therapy. The goal of this study was not to reconcile attachment theory with intergenerational approaches to family therapy, even though many of the assumptions of attachment theory are consistent with those underlying intergenerational family therapy theories. Rather, the purpose was to use the AAI (Mann & Goldwyn, 1994), a well-validated measure based on narrative coherence when discussing childhood events, to test a key assumption underlying intergenerational approaches to couple and family therapy. In this study, how an individual thinks and talks about his or her relationships in childhood was related in predictable ways to observed couple interaction during a conflict resolution discussion in a laboratory setting. The relations found between AAI coherence and couple interaction are not likely to be the result of other factors, such as age, education, verbal fluency, or general style of communication (Crowell et al., 1996; Hesse, 1999; van IJzendoorn, 1995).

Given the very different natures of the measure of adult attachment style (based on coding the coherence of an interview narrative focused on early childhood relationships with attachment figures) and the measure of couple interaction (based on a laboratory discussion of a current problem in the relationship), the findings of predicted relationships between adult attachment security and couple interaction may seem surprising. To clinicians and researchers using an intergenerational perspective, however, these data are consistent with theory. The key is not...
the content of the childhood or current family-of-origin experiences, but rather how the individual thinks about and talks about these experiences. An individual who is able to discuss experiences with parents in a coherent manner, with balance and clarity, as opposed to being overwhelmed or cutoff from these experiences, is also able to relate in a more positive manner to current family members, in this case the partner in a long-term committed romantic relationship. However, even though a strong association between coherence with respect to family-of-origin experiences and current couple interaction was found, no conclusions about direction of effects can be made given the cross-sectional nature of this research.

The pattern of results in this study was stronger for males than females. However, in this sample, attachment security was confounded with gender; more females (61%) than males (39%) were classified as secure on the AAI. Thus, the weaker pattern of results for females could be due to these differences in security. In attachment research in general, using the AAI, few gender differences have been found (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996). In research specifically on the AAI and couple interaction, mixed results have been found, with results stronger for males in some studies (Cohn et al., 1992; Creasey, 2002; Crowell & Treboux, 2001; Tyrrell & Dozier, 1999) and stronger for females in other studies (Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002). The reason that more women than men were classified as secure in this sample is unclear, although it may have something to do with the nature of this sample that consisted of couples that had sought therapy for relational problems. It is interesting that only 3 of the 28 couples (11%) fell into the category of male classified as secure and the female as not secure.

For both males and females, higher coherence on the AAI was related to the use of less negative affect (defensiveness, attack), more respect, more open communication, and more negotiation. Again, these results were weaker for females. Use of avoidance was the only couple interaction behavior that was related to male coherence, but not related to female coherence in any of the analyses. In this sample, females used significantly less avoidance than their male partners in general, the only couple interaction behavior for which there was a statistically significant difference in behavior between male and female partners. Thus, it appears that females, regardless of attachment security, are less likely to use avoidance.

The only couple interaction behavior not related to AAI coherence in either males or females was the use of positive affect. Use of positive affect was also not related to relationship satisfaction or general stress symptoms. The only predictor of positive affect was the use of positive affect by the partner. Regardless of the partners' attachment security, relationship satisfaction, or stress symptoms, the use of positive affect, such as laughter, humor, and affectionate touch, was most related to similar behavior by the partner. This finding is especially interesting when contrasted with negative affect that is related to coherence, but not related to the partner's use of negative affect.

In general, the pattern of results indicates that AAI coherence is less closely related to the general affective nature of how a person talks to his or her partner (positive affect, negative affect, respect) and more closely related to how that person problem-solves (avoidance, open communication, negotiation). Use of open communication, negotiation, and engagement (low avoidance) requires an ability and/or willingness to expose one's self and work cooperatively with the partner.
These are characteristics, perhaps, most closely related to how well the individual has processed and dealt with family-of-origin experiences. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, it cannot be ruled out that positive problem solving with the partner enables one to deal better with past experiences in the family of origin.

The Role of the Partner

The individual's own behavior with the partner was most strongly related to his or her own AAI coherence, not the partner's AAI coherence or the partner's behavior. The exceptions were for the expression of positive affect and the use of negotiation. Interestingly, the use of negotiation was also predicted by the partner's use of negotiation, with more negotiation associated with higher coherence, lower partner coherence, and higher use of negotiation by partner. The importance of the characteristic of the individual, in this case, AAI coherence, in contrast with partner behavior or characteristics, lends support to the perspective of intergenerational family therapy that emphasizes the importance of individual growth and the centrality of individual characteristics such as differentiation (Bowen, 1978) or destructive entitlement (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986).

However, an intergenerational perspective would also suggest more of a systemic view in terms of expecting concordance between the partners in level of functioning, in this case, concordance in level of attachment security. In this study, there was no significant concordance in attachment security between the partners, consistent with the generally modest concordance in attachment security between partners found with the AAI (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996). A systemic view would also suggest that partners have a strong impact on each other, both in ongoing interactions and over time. However, there was no evidence of “buffering” in this sample, that is, where a secure partner might have a positive impact on an insecure partner. Such a finding would be theoretically compelling because it addresses one of the major ways an individual could change in terms of attachment security. Longitudinal studies, while finding general stability for the AAI, have also found evidence for predictable change in security of attachment over time (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Roisman et al., 2002; Waters et al., 2000). To date, however, there is no direct evidence from a longitudinal study that the partner has an impact on changes in attachment security (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002). Thus, although predicted from both attachment theory and an intergenerational perspective, evidence from this study is consistent with others in not finding a strong impact of the partner on one's interaction behavior. These findings suggest that when family-of-origin experiences are having a negative impact on current relationships, the most effective avenue to relationship change may be through the individual, by focusing on the individual's perspective on the family of origin, rather than working through the current relationship to change the individual. Even though the analyses from this study suggest that the direction of influence is from the individual to the relationship, additional research is needed to assess ways in which the partner and the current relationship might influence the coherence of an individual's perception of experiences in the family of origin.

Limitations

In addition to the small sample size, one of the limitations in the current study is the lack of a reliability coder for the AAI. Because of small numbers and lack of theory on how the AAI secondary classification of “unresolved” might impact
couple interaction (Creasey, 2002), the unresolved category was not considered. Studying couple discussions specifically around issues of loss and trauma (Johnson, 2002) would be useful. Because more females were classified secure, it was not possible in this study to separate clearly the effects of gender and attachment security. The sample, while heterogeneous with respect to education, age, and length of relationship, was limited in terms of variability with respect to race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Couples were in therapy for varying lengths of time, but it was not possible to examine the possible effects of therapy on attachment security. Finally, in future studies, it would be important to include other observational measures related to key constructs, such as differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978), derived directly from intergenerational family therapy theory.

Clinical Implications

Dysfunctional couple interaction is a key indicator of troubled relationships and has been convincingly tied to a host of negative outcomes including relationship dissatisfaction, divorce, negative child outcomes, and poorer mental health, particularly depression (Baucom et al., 1998; Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). Research on couple interaction, particularly distressed interaction (Gottman, 1994), has produced some of the most powerful evidence for understanding and effectively intervening to improve couple relationships (Baucom et al., 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). Even though couple therapy can be effective, many couples are not helped at all. Furthermore, positive changes from therapy too often do not last (Baucom et al., 1998; Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002; Jacobson & Addis, 1993).

A renewed focus on individual differences in the context of systemic therapy (Gottman & Notarius, 2002) may be a powerful means of improving couple therapy approaches. Extensive research is available on how the attachment behavior system works in intimate human relationships, particularly the parent-child relationship. Adult attachment style, as measured by the AAI, has been convincingly linked to child outcome, parenting behavior, and adult psychopathology. The results of this study provide further support for combining what is known about attachment from a developmental perspective, couple interaction from a behavioral perspective, and family therapy from an intergenerational perspective. Such an integration offers a potentially rich source of opportunities to improve existing couple therapy approaches and a strong basis for developing new ones.

The results of this study also suggest that, while a focus on family of origin is important, it may not be necessary for everyone. Half of the individuals in this study were classified as secure and in eight couples, both partners were classified as secure, yet these couples had sought therapy for relational problems. Present-oriented approaches, such as behavioral or Emotionally Focused Therapy, might be more effective with those who are secure, while intergenerational approaches might be needed for those who are insecure. Working through family-of-origin issues, either in individual or conjoint therapy may be necessary before lasting changes would be possible for the couple in which one or both partners are insecure. These are important issues for future research.

Finally, the AAI codes offer a rich source of examples for interactional processes that are markers for high and low coherence with respect to family-of-origin issues. Regardless of theoretical orientation, these markers of coherence could be useful as guidance for those times when the therapist needs to attend to unresolved issues from the family of origin.
that might be interfering with the couple relationship.

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