AN ACTOR-PARTNER INTERDEPENDENCE MODEL OF ATTACHMENT
PROCESSES, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE ON
RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN A COMMUNITY SAMPLE OF HETEROSEXUAL
COUPLES

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The purpose of this study is to determine whether adult attachment style, psychological abuse in the marriage, conflict resolution strategies, and gender are associated with relational quality in childless couples in the early years of their marriage. Data were collected from 92 married couples who were recruited from university campuses, churches, and community organizations through e-mails, flyers, newspaper advertisements and mailings. Conceptualizing the interdependence of dyadic data from the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), multilevel linear modeling (MLM) was used to analyze differences within and between couples. It was hypothesized that higher levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance, psychological abuse, and maladaptive conflict resolution strategies would be associated with lower relational quality. Results indicated that attachment avoidance had stronger associations with relational quality than did attachment anxiety, and that higher levels of attachment avoidance were associated with lower relational quality. Additionally, findings indicated a direct negative relationship between both actor and partner psychological abuse and the actor’s relational quality. The discussion section addresses strengths and limitations of the present study as well as directions for future research.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY

John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), widely considered to be the father of modern attachment theory, posited that the relationship between children and their primary caregivers is of both immediate and long-term importance in determining children’s functioning. To develop a comprehensive theory of attachment relationships, Bowlby integrated concepts from the fields of ethology, psychiatry, evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, and cognitive science (Cassidy, 1999). He theorized that the primary function of the attachment bond formed between infants and caregivers is protection from harm. From these early care-giving experiences, children develop mental representations regarding the extent to which others are trustworthy and the self is lovable. He posited that children behave in significantly different ways based on the quality of early care-giving experiences.

In their landmark study, Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied Bowlby’s theory of infant attachment to romantic relationships in adulthood. Their research and the surge of other studies that followed provided strong evidence for the link between retrospective reports of early relationships with parents and attachment behavior in adult romantic relationships. Two general mechanisms have been proposed to link attachment style and relationship functioning: relationship skills or mate selection (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002). The first proposed mechanism involves the predisposition of individuals to “think, feel, and behave in ways that either facilitate or interfere with relationship functioning” (Collins et al., 2002; p. 970). This line of research has indicated that secure attachment is characterized by an ability to trust their partners (Pistole, 1993), regulate their emotions effectively (Kobak & Hazan, 1991), and resolve conflicts (Feeney, 1998), which results in higher levels of relationship quality, stability
and satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990). In contrast, the literature indicates that higher levels of insecure attachment are associated with less trust (Pistole, 1993), ineffective conflict resolution strategies (Creasey, Kershaw, Boston, 1999; Pistole & Arricale, 2003) and negative affect (Davila, Bradbury, & Fincham, 1998). These factors perhaps explain why insecure attachment has so frequently been associated with poor relationship outcomes (Collins et al., 2002). The second proposed mechanism linking attachment style to relationship functioning is selection of relationship partners. Some studies have found that secure individuals tend to partner with other secure individuals (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1994), while avoidant individuals tend to partner with anxious individuals (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Few studies have been able to examine both mechanisms of relationship skills and mate selection due either to a failure to include both members of the relationship dyad or due to limitations associated with statistical techniques used.

In one of the few studies to assess both proposed pathways, Collins et al. (2002) conducted a longitudinal study to determine prospectively the contribution of attachment processes to both relationship functioning and mate selection. Several important findings emerged: 1) attachment variables were differentially related to outcomes for men versus women (e.g., attachment avoidance was a stronger risk factor for poor relationship quality for men than for women); 2) respondents’ degree of attachment avoidance, more than attachment anxiety, was predictive of their relationship partner’s negative evaluation of relationship functioning six years later; 3) the influence of anxious-ambivalent attachment on relationship functioning was weak and depended on gender. The last finding contradicts the body of literature, which has demonstrated that anxious attachment is related to negative relationship outcomes. Despite its important contribution as the first prospective study of adult attachment over time, Collins et
al.’s (2002) methodology has some important limitations. First, hierarchical regression procedures assume independent observations, an assumption which was violated by the inclusion of relationship partners, rendering their results vulnerable to bias (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Little & Card, 2005). Second, because the data were collected in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the researchers were limited to one-item categorical attachment measures. Thus, while the Collins et al. (2002) study is clearly a noteworthy contribution to the literature, several methodological caveats are associated with their findings.

Some researchers have turned to the examination of conflict resolution skill deficits to explain the association between adult attachment and relational quality. Because conflict can be construed as a threat to the attachment bond with a romantic partner, attachment behaviors are thought to be strongly elicited during relationship conflicts (Bretherton, 1985; Pistole, 1989). Thus, the threat of abandonment implicit in some relationship conflicts may cause insecurely attached individuals to react negatively to normative conflict and become psychologically abusive. Although many studies have focused on the behavioral patterns differentiating couples with high levels of conflict from couples with low levels of conflict, less is understood about which variables may influence individual behavior during relationship conflicts (Cohn, Silver, Cowan & Pearson, 1992).

One manifestation of relational conflict can be verbal or psychological abuse. Psychological abuse has consistently been found to accompany or follow physical abuse, with the same variables predicting both the use of physical aggression and psychological aggression (Henning & Klesges, 2003; Tolman, 1989; Stets, 1990; Marshall, 1996; Murphy & O’Leary, 1989; Neufeld et al., 1999; O’Leary, Malone & Tyree, 1994; O’Leary, 2001). Yet, unless
psychological abuse occurs concurrently with physical violence, it is often overlooked by clinicians, researchers, and society as a whole (Loring, 1994).

Researchers have found that abuse in close relationships can take physical, sexual, and/or psychological forms and can be perpetrated by both genders (Gelles, 2000). With the growing evidence that relationship aggression is bidirectional, it has become increasingly clear that there is a need to study both male and female aggression in relationships (Holzworth-Munroe, 2005). Some researchers assert that psychological abuse involves a pattern of destructive interpersonal behavior on the part of both partners (Loring, 1994; Maiuro 2001), and that once these bidirectional patterns of psychological abuse are established in relationships, they are difficult to change (Murphy & O’Leary, 1989). Thus, couples may become stuck in destructive patterns of conflict resolution and psychological abuse, which in turn affect the security of the attachment bond and decreases relationship quality.

Little is known about the interrelationships among attachment processes, conflict resolution, psychological abuse and relational quality. Additionally, due to the difficulties associated with sampling both members of a marital dyad, most research has been conducted with individuals rather than with couples. Furthermore, most of the research examining links between attachment and psychological abuse has used single-item, categorical measures of adult attachment.

The current study contributes to the literature in a number of meaningful ways. First, the present study includes significant methodological advances over some of the previous research. The attachment and relational quality measures used in the present study have been widely used and demonstrate excellent psychometric properties. Additionally, the psychological abuse measure used in the present study is broader in its conceptualization than most other measures.
available at present. Second, a novel approach to conceptualize couples data called the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) was used and multilevel modeling (MLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) was used to analyze the data. This approach accounts for the interdependence of the data and allows for the prediction of actor, partner and interaction effects. Third, as the present study focuses on married couples in the community without explicit signs of distress or conflict, results from the current study should better inform researchers and clinicians as to how attachment processes, conflict resolution and psychological abuse are related to relationship quality among middle-class American couples.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter first reviews the empirical and theoretical literature on attachment theory, in order to provide a theoretical framework for the reader. Next, major developments in the relational quality literature are reviewed followed by a brief overview of the developments in the conflict resolution and psychological abuse literatures. Finally, the associations between relational quality, attachment, conflict resolution and psychological abuse are discussed, followed in Chapter 3 by a description of the research methods and statistical analyses relevant to the research.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1979) to explain the origins of social behavior and emotional experience in infants and children (Lewis, Fering, & Rosenthal, 2000). Heavily influenced by ethology and evolutionary psychology, Bowlby (1969) conceptualized infant behavior as driven by basic survival needs, such that infants are biologically predisposed to seek and maintain proximity to their caregivers who provide food, education, socialization, and most importantly, protection from predators. Caregivers serve as a “secure base” from which children venture forth to explore when safe and to which they return when distressed. Infant attachment behaviors such as smiling, vocalizing, cooing, crying were considered by Bowlby to be biologically adaptive because they are designed to establish and maintain proximity to the caregiver. The attachment system is activated by illness, fatigue, separation from the attachment figure, or perceived environmental threats, which cause the infant to cease exploration and return to the protection of the caregiver. In contrast, when the attachment system is deactivated by a sense of security with caregivers, children feel free to
explore. The attachment system is organized to respond to internal and external cues in a consistent way. Although specific behaviors used to achieve proximity to attachment figures may differ across time and contexts, their function in the organization of the attachment system will remain the same (Cassidy, 1999). Over time and with increasing cognitive capacity, children will begin to develop “internal working models” of the attachment figure, the environment, and the self. Children’s early experiences of the attachment figure’s availability and responsiveness contribute to the formation of expectations and representational models about the attachment figure. The internal working models formed during early attachment experiences will continue to inform how children interact with and relate to others, guiding perceptions and behaviors in later attachment relationships (Feeney, 1999).

**Parent-Child Attachment**

Building upon Bowlby’s theory, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall (1978) developed an empirical procedure designed to elicit attachment behaviors in infants. The “strange situation” involves separating infants from their mothers for brief periods in order to observe the infants’ reactions upon separating and reuniting with a primary attachment figure. From this research, Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified three categories of infant attachment: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant. Infants in the first group, approximately 60% of the total sample, actively explored in the mother’s presence and became distressed upon separation but were easily soothed upon their mother’s return. This group was classified as *secure* often demonstrating clingy but angry-resistant behaviors toward the mother. The second group of infants, approximately 20% of the sample, also actively sought proximity to their mothers; however, these infants showed intense anxiety upon separation and could not be soothed upon their mothers’ return. The second group was labeled *anxious-ambivalent* due to their extreme
anxiety when separated from attachment figures. The final group of infants, the remaining 20% of the sample, did not seek proximity to their attachment figures and because they appeared to avoid contact with their mothers upon return they were labeled *avoidant*. Infant behaviors during the strange predicted qualities of the infant-caregiver relationship at home. Specifically, mothers of secure infants were responsive and available, whereas mothers of anxious-ambivalent infants were inconsistent or at times intrusive, and mothers of avoidant infants were consistently rejecting of their infants.

Main and Solomon (1986) later extended Ainsworth’s work by identifying a fourth category of disorganized attachment to describe infants with no clear strategy for interacting with attachment figures. These infants behaved in contradictory ways, sometimes evidencing strong attachment behavior followed by sudden avoidance, freezing or dazed behavior (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). Research findings suggest that parental behavior that is either “frightened” or “frightening,” contributes to the development of disorganized attachment (Jacobvitz, Hazen & Riggs, 1998). Consistent with this idea, disorganized infant attachment is associated with child maltreatment, parental psychopathology (Lyons-Ruth et al., 1999), and parental lack of resolution to loss and/or trauma.

*Attachment Continuity: Adult Attachment*

According to Bowlby (1979), attachment processes influence and are influenced by new relational experiences throughout the lifespan. Attachment theory holds that because early attachment experiences are prototypes for future attachment relationships, models developed during infancy and childhood may be maintained into adulthood under stable conditions (Ammaniti, van IJzendoorn, Speranza & Tambelli, 2000). Research has demonstrated continuity of attachment organization from infancy through adolescence and early adulthood (Collins et al., 8
2002; Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell and Albersheim, 2000). For example, Waters et al. (2000) found that approximately 70% of the 21-year-olds in their sample maintained their infant attachment classification; however, change of attachment status was associated with major negative life events, such as parental loss or divorce and child abuse.

One criticism of attachment theory is that it overlooks sources of changes and variability in relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 1995); however, attachment processes are not deterministic and remain open to modification. Researchers and theorists have argued that because friendships and love relationships provide opportunities to revise internal working models of the self and others, there is potential for individuals’ internal working models to change over time (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Extending Bowlby’s theory of attachment further into the lifespan, Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied Ainsworth et al.’s infant attachment classification system to adult romantic attachment styles. Their landmark findings indicated roughly the same distribution of secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent adults (56%, 24%, and 20% respectively) as Ainsworth et al. (1978) found in infants (62%, 23%, and 15% respectively). Additionally, the researchers found that affective experiences and cognitive schemas were predictably correlated with specific attachment orientations. Secure respondents perceived their personal relationships as friendly, happy and trusting, while avoidant respondents reported fears of closeness in their relationships and anxious/ambivalent respondents perceived their relationships as jealous and emotionally volatile. In addition, secure respondents reported more positive descriptors of their parents than either anxious or avoidant respondents.

Based on Bowlby’s (1973) theory, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) developed a four-category model of adult romantic attachment style designed to replace Hazan and Shaver’s threefold typology (Brennan & Shaver, 1998). Emphasizing the two axes of working models of
self and other, Bartholomew (1990) defined four categories in terms of positive or negative models of self and others. The self and other models represent mental expectations about self-worth and the supportive availability of others in attachment relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), which were related to anxiety and avoidance, respectively (Levy & Blatt, 2003). An individual with a positive view of the self and a positive view of others is classified as *secure* (low anxiety about abandonment and low avoidance of intimacy), whereas a negative view of self with a positive view of others is characteristic of a *preoccupied* style (high anxiety and low avoidance). In contrast to Hazan and Shaver, Bartholomew differentiated between two types of avoidant attachment: fearful and dismissing avoidance. Bartholomew (1990) asserted that Hazan and Shaver’s avoidant type seemed too emotionally vulnerable and low in self-esteem compared to earlier research (Main, Kaplan, Cassidy, 1985) indicating a subtype of avoidant individuals who feared and seemed not to desire intimacy with others. *Fearful avoidant* adults possess a negative view of both self and other (high anxiety and high avoidance), and consequently both desire and fear intimacy with others. In contrast, *dismissing avoidant* adults possess a positive view of the self and negative view of others (low anxiety and high avoidance).

Secure attachment is thought to result from early care-giving experiences characterized by consistent accessibility and responsiveness of attachment figures (Bartholomew et al., 2001). From these early care-giving experiences, secure individuals learn to trust in attachment figures’ constancy and availability; they tend to handle negative affect and distress by acknowledging their feelings and turning to others for help and support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, 1999). Attachment security has been associated with good social skills, positive perceptions of attachment figures, and confidence in their lovability to others (Collins, et al., 2002).
In contrast to their secure counterparts, the early care-giving experiences of preoccupied individuals are thought to be characterized by inconsistently responsive attachment figures. Preoccupied individuals demonstrate intense anxiety over abandonment, and seem to heighten affect in order to maintain proximity to attachment figures. While preoccupied individuals have strong desires for closeness and intimacy, they also have an intense fear of rejection and abandonment by attachment figures (Collins & Feeney, 2000). These individuals are dependent upon their attachment figures for approval and are demanding of the attention of attachment figures (Bookwala, 2002). Some studies have shown that attachment anxiety is significantly predictive of both actor and partner relationship outcomes (Davila, Bradbury & Fincham, 1998) while other studies have indicated little or no association between attachment anxiety and overall relationship functioning for actors or partners (Collins et al., 2002). Further complicating the interpretation of research findings, some studies have found that gender moderates associations between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), while other studies have gender to have no effect on relationship quality (Davila & Bradbury, 2001).

In contrast to individuals with anxious or preoccupied attachment characteristics, individuals with dismissing attachment generally have a positive self-image, albeit a somewhat tenuous and defensive one (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Early attachment experiences are marked by rejecting or unavailable care-giving, and thus dismissing individuals develop internal working models of others as unavailable or rejecting. Due to these working models, dismissing adults have difficulty trusting and seeking nurturance from attachment figures in times of distress. Individuals with dismissing attachment tend to value their own self-reliance (Bookwala, 2002), and to regulate negative affect by minimizing or avoiding it (Pistole, 1993). Dismissing
individuals protect themselves from disappointment and rejection by avoiding intimacy in close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 2000; Feeney, 1999).

Individuals exhibiting a fearful avoidant attachment style have negative models of both self and other and consequently are likely to show some characteristics of both preoccupied and dismissing attachment. Early attachment experiences of fearful individuals are likely to have involved rejecting or unavailable caregivers (Beyder-Kijou, 2005). Although fearful individuals desire closeness and acceptance by others like Preoccupied adults, they tend to have difficulties trusting others due to their fears of rejection like Dismissing adults (Bartholomew, 1994; Bartholomew et al., 2001). Fearful adults are more likely to maintain distance between themselves and potential attachment figures while simultaneously seeking to ensure they are not abandoned by attachment figures. Due to their internal working models of others as negative and unresponsive, fearful individuals are less likely to seek out help when in distress (Bartholomew et al., 2001).

Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) conceptualization of attachment categories has been very influential in the attachment literature, stimulating much research. Several studies have since established the stability of adult attachment characteristics from periods of 2 weeks to 2 years (Allen, McElhaney, Kuperminc, & Jodl, 2002; Collins & Read, 1990; Fuller & Fincham, 1995; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994), while other empirical evidence suggests an inconsistency of adult attachment characteristics over time (Ruvolo et al., 2001). Overall, although substantial continuity in security has been identified in the literature, some research has suggested that interpersonal or environmental stressors may predict individual declines in attachment security over time (Allen et al., 2002). Moreover, while attachment behavior is clearly evident in the
earliest stages of human development, attachment processes are also relevant over the course of the lifespan, especially during stressful conditions (Bretherton, 1985; Pistole & Arricale, 2003).

A major methodological improvement was made when Brennan, Shaver, and Tobey (1991) found a common two-dimensional structure underlying both of the major typologies of attachment, a finding which was subsequently replicated by a number of other studies (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998). Then, in 1998, Brennan et al. developed the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR) from 60 extant instruments measuring adult attachment. In factor analysis, two primary continuous dimensions of attachment emerged: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Because of the ability of this measure to produce both categorical classifications as well as continuous ratings on avoidance and anxiety scales, the ECR has become one of the most widely used attachment measures to date.

**Attachment and Relationship Functioning**

There is considerable evidence of a close association between adult attachment style and relationship satisfaction (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005). By young adulthood, most individuals have expanded the attachment network beyond parental attachment figures to peers and romantic partners, while continuing relationships with parents (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Gaines, Work, Johnson, Youn, & Lai, 2000). Because secure individuals learned from their early attachment experiences that others are trustworthy and the self is lovable, secure individuals are thought to be more comfortable with intimacy in close relationships. They tend to view their partners as safe havens from which to explore the world (Pistole & Arricale, 2003), and are confident than they are loved by others (Collins, et al., 2002).

In contrast, preoccupied individuals tend to have an exaggerated desire for closeness, perceiving their own emotional well-being as strongly dependent upon attachment relationships.
Because of this over-reliance on the attachment figure for identity and stability, preoccupied individuals may react to potential rejection with intense affect in order to engender guilt or remorse in a retreating attachment figure (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). There is some evidence to suggest that relationships including an anxious-ambivalent woman may be rated more negatively by both partners on measures of relationship outcomes such as satisfaction (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994) and have a greater likelihood of both experiencing and inflicting aggression in romantic relationships (Bookwala, 2002).

Dismissing individuals protect themselves from disappointment and rejection by avoiding intimacy in close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller; Feeney, 1999). Instead, they value their own self-reliance (Bookwala, 2002) and regulate negative affect by minimizing or avoiding it (Pistole, 1993). Research has indicated that males are more likely to report higher mean ratings of dismissing attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Shaver, & Tobey, 1991), but evidence regarding links between attachment avoidance and relationship quality has been somewhat mixed. Some research has suggested that male attachment avoidance is inversely related to relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990), while other research has indicated that avoidance in men is not associated with lower scores on relationship satisfaction (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). In their longitudinal study of 354 couples, Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) found that in couples in which the woman was classified as anxious, both partners rated the relationship negatively; however, in couples in which the man was classified as avoidant, the avoidant man, rather than his partner, rated the relationship negatively.

Unlike their dismissing counterparts, individuals reporting a fearful-avoidant attachment style long for intimacy and do tend to establish close relationships; however, they have
difficulties trusting the constancy and availability of attachment figures and consequently tend to keep their partners at a distance. When in distress, fearful-avoidant adults will have difficulties seeking out help but will also anxiously attempt to ensure their partners do not leave them (Bartholomew et al. 2001). Some research has indicated that men are more likely to be dismissive rather than fearful in relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Brennan et al., 1991).

Relational Quality

In the past several decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in studying variables that predict both the success and failure of marital relationships. One of the most frequently studied constructs has been the degree of happiness and satisfaction with the quality of one’s marriage. Terms such as marital adjustment, relational quality and marital satisfaction have been used interchangeably to refer to this concept; all these terms involve a subjective assessment of relational quality. The lack of consensus by researchers on the terminology, operational definition, and conceptualization of the relational quality construct has resulted in methodological problems related to investigation of this variable (Hicks & Platt, 1970). For the purposes of the present study, Lewis and Spanier’s (1979) definition of relational quality as a “subjective evaluation of a married couple’s relationship” (p. 269) will be used.

In the last 30 years, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) has become the most widely used measure of marital adjustment to date (Fisiloglu & Demir, 2000; Graham, Liu & Jeziorski, 2006; Rossier et al., 2006). The developer of the DAS, Spanier (1976), defined dyadic adjustment as “a process, the outcome of which is determined by the degree of 1) troublesome dyadic differences; 2) interpersonal tensions and personal anxiety; 3) dyadic satisfaction; 4) dyadic cohesion; 5) consensus on matters of importance to dyadic functioning” (p. 17). Although Spanier included scales of cohesion, expression of affect, consensus on matters
of importance, and marital satisfaction in the DAS, the measure also includes a total composite score. This composite score has been shown to discriminate well between distressed and non-distressed couples. The present study will use the composite total score of the DAS as the primary outcome variable.

*Factors associated with Relational Quality*

In spite of some of the methodological difficulties encountered by researchers, relational quality has been a consistent topic of interest among family researchers. Empirical evidence indicates that relational quality is an important mediator in both individual and family functioning (Fisiloglu & Demir, 2000). Overall life satisfaction (Ruvolo, 1998), mental health (Tesser & Beach, 1998), and physical health outcomes such as immune system functioning (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Schmaling & Sher, 2000) have all been shown to be associated with relational quality.

There is also growing evidence that relationship quality may have a lasting impact not only on relationship partners, but also children of the relationship partners. Several studies have suggested that parent’s relational quality is strongly associated with their children’s later relational quality (Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001) and with their children’s transition to parenthood (Perren, Von Wyl, Buergin, Simoni, & Klitzing, 2005). In their recent study on the inter-generational transmission of relational quality, Perren and colleagues (2005) found that couples’ relational quality is affected by family of origin recollections of both spouses, especially during early parenthood. Consistent with attachment theory, the researchers speculated that just as children form working models about how to be parents from their own parents, they also form working models about how to be a relationship partner by watching their parents interact as relationship partners.
In a recent study of 178 articles on relational quality published within the last 15 years, Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, and Lamke (2004) identified three broad subcategories of findings in the relational quality literature: positive emotions and behaviors (positivity), negative emotions and behaviors (negativity), and cognitions. Research on positive emotions and behaviors consistently indicated that emotional expressiveness, self-disclosure (Bogard & Spilka, 1996), positivity (Marshall, Honeycutt, & Weston, 2000) and spending time together (Aron, Norma, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000) were associated with high relational quality outcomes (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004). In contrast, research findings on negativity indicated that the more that couples experience negative emotions towards one another or engage in overt behavioral expressions of negativity, the lower their marital satisfaction (Dehle & Weiss, 2002; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001). Similarly, withdrawal, ignoring the partner, as well as contempt and dismissing attitudes towards one’s partner were found to predict declines in marital satisfaction (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Lastly, research on cognitions indicated that unrealistic or irrational beliefs about relationships were associated with lower relational quality, whereas positive attributions about spouse’s behavior were related to higher levels of marital satisfaction (Fincham, Harold, Gano-Phillips, 2000; Kurdek, 1998).

One challenge researcher’s face in examining the marital relationship is that relational quality varies over time and across the family life cycle. Changes in relational quality are associated with individual demographic (Belsky & Rovine, 1990) and personality characteristics (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005), division of childcare and household tasks (Levy-Shiff, 1994), and the planned or unplanned nature of pregnancy (Cox, Paley, Burchinal & Payne, 1999). It is well established that acutely stressful life events (e.g., death of a parent, unemployment, childbirth) and chronic life stressors (e.g., poverty, financial stress) negatively impact relationship quality.
(Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu & Needham, 2005). For example, one of the most dramatic changes in relational quality occurs immediately after becoming parents. In their meta-analysis on the influence of parenthood on marital satisfaction, Twenge, Campbell and Foster (2003) found that new parents reported lower marital satisfaction than non-parents. Results indicated that parenthood had a stronger negative impact on women’s marital satisfaction compared with men, and that this result was stronger for parents with infants, more children, or lower socioeconomic status.

The style of coping employed to manage these life stressors employed can be both predicted by and predictive of relational quality (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006). In a recent study, Bodenmann et al., (2006) found that while dyadic interaction patterns of coping were important to relational quality for both genders, husband’s supportive dyadic coping was more important for wives’ relational quality than vice versa. Generally, expressions of negative emotions and behaviors during conflict (e.g., angry outbursts, withdrawal, criticism) were found to be associated with low marital satisfaction. However, negative dyadic coping (e.g., sarcasm, minimizing, open disinterest, unwilling support) of husbands was related to relational quality for both partners, while wives’ negativity was not harmful to relational quality and in many cases was favorable. The researchers speculated that women may pay more attention to their partner’s behavior and that husband’s investment in the relationship may be especially critical for their wives’ satisfaction. Similarly, expressions of negative emotions and behaviors during conflict (e.g., angry outbursts, withdrawal, criticism) were found to be associated with low marital satisfaction. (Bodenmann et al., 2006).

In a study to examine the association of attachment insecurity and stable but unsatisfying marriages, Davila and Bradbury (2001) sampled 172 newlywed couples over a 4-year period
with multiple assessment points. Using hierarchical linear modeling to analyze actor and partner effects in the data, the researchers found that divorce attitudes, the presence of children, neuroticism and self-esteem were all less strongly associated with marital outcomes than were attachment variables of anxiety about abandonment and avoidance of intimacy. High anxiety about abandonment distinguished spouses who were unhappily married from those who were happily married and those who divorced. The researchers speculated that attachment anxiety may make their relationships unsatisfying while at the same time keeping them from leaving.

**Conflict Resolution**

With the link between adult attachment and marital satisfaction well established (Crowell & Treboux, 2001; Fuller & Fincham, 1995), researchers have begun to investigate the role of attachment processes in one of the most important factors in marital dissatisfaction, conflict resolution. Because conflict is a normal part of relationship development, it can contribute to the establishment of attachment bonds in close relationships, and may even be crucial for maintaining attachment relationships (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). There is some evidence that avoiding conflict can be harmful to a relationship (Markman, 1991). Gottman (1993) asserted that conflict management is the most important predictor of relationship dissolution. While some evidence suggests that occasional conflict can help to solidify attachments with romantic partners as well as friends (Laursen & Collings, 1994; Gottman & Krokov, 1989), unresolved conflicts over a long period can be detrimental to relationship security and satisfaction.

Because conflict involves an implicit or explicit threat of separation or rejection, attachment behaviors are activated to preserve the attachment relationship (Creasey et al., 1999; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994; Pistole, 1989). The attachment system is essentially a system
designed to cope with threat and regulate threat-related distress (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). In their model to explain how different attachment categories might be associated with problem-solving, Kobak and Duemmler (1994) asserted that intense conflict may increase an individual’s need for emotional support from an attachment figure, thereby activating the attachment system. Theoretically, under conflictual conditions, a secure individual would be likely to self-disclose, trusting a partner to be responsive and loving (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995) and to focus on resolutions satisfying both partners, while anxious individuals would be likely to oblige the partner in order to maintain the attachment relationship. In contrast, avoidant individuals would be unlikely to self-disclose for fear of rejection and would therefore be unable or unwilling to address the conflict directly to achieve resolution. While avoidant individuals seem to suppress the attachment system by choosing to be less conscious of threats (Fraley & Shaver, 1997) and generally show low levels of investment in romantic relationships (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1995), anxious individuals are hyper-vigilant to threats and are less able to regulate their negative affect (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Because individuals with all types of insecure attachment have negative expectations of at least one person in the relationship, they are likely to be less trusting, perceive more threat in conflict, and struggle more with negative affect regulation (Pistole & Arricale, 2003).

Some research has indicated that attachment anxiety may be predictive of conflict resolution styles. In one study of 448 undergraduates in serious relationships, Shi (2003) found that individuals with higher scores on attachment anxiety were more likely to resolve conflicts by attempting to either dominate or oblige the partner. Results also indicated that males were more avoidant of conflict, reporting low levels of attempts to satisfy their own concerns, and low levels of attempts to satisfy the concerns of others. In contrast, females were more integrative of
others’ opinions during conflict, reporting high levels of attempts to satisfy their own concerns, as well as high levels of attempting to satisfy the concerns of others. However, males and females were equally likely to utilize conflict resolution strategies of compromising or dominating a partner. Overall, Shi (2003) found that attachment style was a much stronger predictor of conflict resolution behaviors than gender.

In a related study, Pistole and Arricale (2003) examined the association between attachment classification, attachment-related feelings about conflict, and style of expressing conflict in a sample of undergraduate and graduate students. Results indicated that participants who endorsed a secure attachment style reported feeling less threatened by arguments than insecure participants. Also, secure participants reported less fighting and more effective arguing than those endorsing fearful or preoccupied attachment styles. Positive conflict resolution involves the partners putting aside fears and defensiveness, risking rejection to self-disclose to the other partner (Shi, 2003). Because insecurely attached individuals may not have learned critical conflict management skills from early attachment experiences, they may be less able to successfully navigate relationship conflict. Lacking the skills to successfully navigate normative relationship conflict, individuals with greater levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance may be experienced as more threatening and stressful.

There is some evidence to suggest that both attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with skill deficits in conflict management. Creasey et al. (1999) assessed conflict management with friends and romantic partners in a college population using the 30-item Relationship Styles Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Individuals high in attachment anxiety or avoidance evidenced deficits in critical conflict management skills (e.g., validation, editing, feedback), and reported being involved in more conflicts with attachment
figures. Highly anxious respondents were also more likely to report getting into disagreements that escalated out of control. In contrast, highly avoidant respondents reported more conflict withdrawal or alternatively, conflict escalation. Both anxious and avoidant participants reported difficulties regulating their negative affect, which may increase the likelihood of behaving impulsively during an argument, misinterpreting partner behaviors, or possibly feeling so overwhelmed as to be unable to communicate clearly and effectively. Creasey et al. (1999) concluded that insecurely attached individuals may have difficulties attending to their partner’s messages and altering their own behavior accordingly.

The lack of conflict management skills correlated with attachment insecurity seems to have important ramifications for relationship satisfaction. Pistole (1989) found that the securely attached adults were more likely to use a mutually focused conflict strategy and reported higher relationship satisfaction than insecure adults. In contrast, anxious/ambivalent adults were more likely to oblige during conflict, and reported the lowest relationship satisfaction, while the avoidantly attached adults were less able to integrate during conflict resolution and reported lower relationship satisfaction than secure adults, but higher satisfaction than the anxious adults. Overall, these results indicate that attachment insecurity seems to be associated with greater conflict resolution difficulties and lower relationship satisfaction than attachment security.

More recently, Creasey and Ladd (2005) conducted a study of female college students with their romantic partners to explore attachment processes in relation to conflict negotiation with partners. Results indicated that anxious-ambivalent and avoidant students were involved in conflicts with attachment figures (both friends and romantic partners) marked by high levels of general negativity. Results suggested that anxious-ambivalent individuals tend to attack during arguments while avoidant individuals withdraw from their partners during conflict. These
findings are consistent with the larger body of research on attachment and conflict resolution indicating that avoidant attachment is associated with withdrawing from conflict situations with attachment figures while anxious attachment is associated with overtly destructive conflict resolution strategies.

Psychological Abuse

Researchers have begun to show interest in the area of psychological abuse as it relates to relational quality. A growing body of literature suggests that psychological abuse correlates with relationship duration (Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002), relationship satisfaction (Hamby & Sugarman, 1999; Marshall, 1990; Sagestrano et al., 1999; Stets, 1991), and interaction patterns (Sagestrano et al., 1999). Research has indicated that the longer the relationship, the more psychological aggression likely to be displayed (Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002; Straight et al., 2003). Some researchers have speculated that as the relationship becomes more serious and longer in duration, issues of control and closeness are more likely to emerge (Kasian & Painter, 1992). Others have postulated that the length of time in a relationship increases the possibility that conflict might occur, and thus that psychological abuse might occur (Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002). Additionally, psychological abuse can occur in relational contexts where there is no physical violence (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Findings have indicated that men with lower marital adjustment use more psychological aggression (Brown, O’Leary & Feldblau, 1997). Research has also shown that husband demand/wife withdrawal patterns of interacting have are associated with increased levels of husbands’ psychological abuse towards their wives (Sagestrano et al., 1999).

Based on findings that psychological abuse is reported by a majority of individuals in intimate relationships, particularly when yelling or insulting behaviors are included in the
operational definition (Hamby & Sugarman, 1999), some recommend that studies on psychological abuse should not be limited to couples characterized by serious physical violence or conflict. Expanding the conceptualization of psychological abuse to include more covert or subtle ways in which an abuser can influence a victim’s sense of well-being might be useful to both clinicians and researchers working with couples at varying levels of distress (Loring, 1994). Additionally, some researchers have argued that definitions of psychological abuse should be independent of whether the victim recognizes the abuse or the abuser intends to harm (Marshall, 1999). By conceptualizing psychological abuse as a cluster of harmful behaviors, researchers hope to gain insight into relationship patterns both with and without conflict (Mairuo, 2001).

Due to differing conceptualizations of the construct of psychological abuse, consensus on an operational definition of psychological abuse has eluded researchers to date. According to some researchers, these difficulties in operationalizing and measuring the construct of psychological abuse have hindered progress in the research (Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995). Schumacher, Slep, and Heyman, (2001) asserted that the individual nature of a personal experience of psychological abuse may not lend itself to the notion of a universally accepted definition. Several researchers have limited their operational definitions to the verbally aggressive and controlling aspects of psychological abuse (e.g., Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002; O’Leary, 2001; Lebow-Keeler & Pipes, 1990). O’Hearn and Davis (1997) argued that emotional abuse constitutes those behaviors that serve to reduce a victim’s status and increase the abuser’s ability to control the victim. From this conceptualization, the outcome of effective abuse is that the victim’s self concept and self-esteem are lowered (O’Hearn & Davis, 1997), thus lessening the probability of the victim’s ability to leave an abusive relationship.
Based on a large body of social influence literature indicating that others can intentionally and unintentionally influence our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors without our awareness or theirs, Marshall (1994, 1996, 1999) has argued that definitions of psychological abuse must include subtle acts of abusers because it is possible for psychological abuse to occur without the abuser intending to harm; indeed, psychologically abusive language may be used in ways intended to be either loving, playful, or dominating. Such subtlety can make it difficult for either the abuser or the victim to identify the behavior as psychologically abusive. Marshall differentiated between overt psychological abuse (readily identified as harmful by both observers and the victim) and subtle psychological abuse (not readily identifiable by either observers or victims as harmful due to the caring or joking tone by the abuser). Whereas overt acts may be particularly geared towards harming a victim’s well-being in general or in specific areas, because subtle acts are more difficult to identify, their effects may be more far-reaching in harming a victim’s sense of self and mental health. Marshall asserted that once the necessity of intent and awareness are removed from conceptualizations of psychological abuse, researchers can begin to explore ways in which everyday interactions can negatively impact individuals in relationships. For the purposes of the current study, Marshall’s (1994; 1999) conceptualization of psychological abuse will be used.

To date, little is known about the risk factors for psychological abuse (Schumacher et al., 2001). However, a small but growing number of studies have focused on identifying predictors of psychological abuse in intimate relationships. Few studies have assessed the predictive value of family of origin variables on psychological abuse, and the limited evidence is mixed. Although witnessing parental physical aggression does not appear to be a risk factor for men’s tendency to psychologically abuse partners (Avakame, 1998), some empirical evidence suggests
that feeling rejected by one’s father is associated with male abusers’ attempts to dominate or isolate and emotionally abuse a relationship partner (Dutton, 1995).

Outcomes of Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse has been found to predict numerous physical and psychological problems among female victims. In fact, Tolman and Bhosley (1991) found that psychological abuse was more strongly predictive of psychological problems than actual physical violence or threats of violence. Reported outcomes include low self-esteem (Baldry, 2003), cognitive impairment (Straight, Harper & Arias, 2003), problem drinking (Arias, Street, & Brody, 1996), illegal drug use and negative health perceptions (Straight, Harper & Arias, 2003), and psychopathology (Arias, Street, & Brody, 1996; Vogel & Marshall, 2001).

Several studies have focused specifically on the association between psychological abuse and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Arias, & Pape, 1999; Street & Arias, 2001; Vitanza, Vogel, Marshall, 1995). High levels of PTSD symptoms have been found among women who experienced psychological abuse even in the absence of physical abuse (Kemp, Green, Hovanitz, & Rawlings, 1995). Moreover, Street and Arias (2001) found that only the emotional/verbal form of abuse (i.e., withholding emotional resources, verbal attacks, and behavior that degrades women) remained a significant explanatory variable in predicting PTSD symptomatology beyond physical abuse. The researchers concluded that emotional/verbal psychological abuse may be a more direct form of assault, thereby having the potential for greater impact on cognitions and affect.

Victims of severe psychological abuse may experience extreme self-doubt, confusion, depression, and an overall diminishment of sense of self (Sackett & Saunders, 2001). Some studies have indicated that ridicule was the most harmful form of psychological abuse
(Follingstad et al., 1990; Sackett & Saunders, 2001), while others have suggested that emotional control (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994) or dominance/isolation (Dutton & Painter, 1993) results in the most harmful effects. In their study of 60 battered women, Sackett and Saunders (2001) found that psychological abuse and physical abuse had independent effects on depression and self-esteem. Additionally, their results indicated that psychological abuse had a much stronger impact on victim’s fear than physical abuse. Sackett and Saunders suggested that the extent to which psychological abuse is internalized as denigrating for the victim’s self-esteem may be an important factor in predicting the severity of the psychological abuse.

Gender

Because awareness and interest in the phenomenon of psychological abuse originated in research with women, experts in the field of intimate partner violence have focused predominantly on male perpetrators and female victims of physical and psychological aggression (Fitzpatrick, Salgado, Suvak, King & King, 2004; Hammock et al., 2002). Some researchers have observed that this exclusive focus on male aggression constitutes a bias toward addressing male-to-female psychological abuse while neglecting female-to-male forms of abuse (Marshall, 1999). There is some empirical evidence that aggressive patterns in relationships are bi-directional (Kwong, Bartholomew, & Dutton, 1999), giving rise to discussion of the discussion of gender symmetry by intimate partner violence researchers (Gormley, 2005). Some research has indicated that males may also experience psychological abuse by their partners (Jezl et al., 1996; Molidar, 1995; Fitzpatrick et al., 2004).

Individual conflict management styles appear to interact with the likelihood of psychologically abusing partners. In a study of college students involved in romantic relationships, Hammock and O’Hearn (2002) found different models of prediction involving
conflict resolution skills for the amount of psychological abuse displayed by men and women. For women in this sample, who reported using more psychological aggression than the men, higher levels of obliging conflict management were predictive of higher levels of psychologically abusive behaviors. Individuals who tended to perceive threat in conflict situations were more likely to use psychologically abusive tactics with their partners. The seriousness of the relationship and the conflict management strategies utilized predicted psychological aggression in both men and women. Results indicated that psychologically aggressive males had been in their relationships for longer periods of time than non-psychologically aggressive males. Hammock and O’Hearn posited that psychologically aggressive men may be unable or unwilling to adapt their conflict management strategies, possibly due to their tendency to perceive threats in the environment. Similarly, the women in this sample who were psychologically aggressive towards their partners were more likely to perceive threat in others’ behaviors than non-psychologically aggressive women. Although these women did not avoid conflict, neither were they able to assert their own needs to their partners. The researchers theorized that over time, these women might become increasingly resentful which might lead to hyper-vigilance towards threat.

Integration

Relational Quality and Attachment

The link between relational quality and attachment processes has been well-established in the literature. In general, secure individuals display more positive, relationship-building behaviors than anxious or avoidant individuals. Research has consistently indicated that secure attachment shows a positive correlation with higher levels of relational quality and marital satisfaction. Some studies have shown associations between internal working models of
attachment relationships were associated with both laboratory and naturalistic observations of relationship quality (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan & Pearson, 1992). However, most research has included only one member of the marital dyad, or used statistical techniques that prevented attention to how individual attachment and behavior affects the partner. There is some evidence that anxiously attached individuals have the lowest marital satisfaction, and have a tendency both to inflict and experience aggression in romantic relationships (Creasey et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 1996). Other findings suggest that avoidant individuals may behave in ways to distance themselves from their partner, which elicits partner withdrawal (Creasey et al., 1999; Dozier & Kobak, 1992).

In a study with 104 heterosexual couples, Campbell, Simpson, Kashy and Rholes (2001) used videotaped couple interactions to examine the effects of one partner’s ideal standards of a relationship on their own and their partner’s relationship quality. They utilized the actor partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) which conceptualizes couples data as non-independent and therefore treats the dyad rather than the individual as the unit of analysis. APIM estimates the effect the respondent’s predictor variable has on their own outcome (actor effect) as well as the effect on their partner’s outcome (partner effect). Campbell et al.’s (2001) findings indicated both actor and partner effects. Attachment avoidance was associated with more irritability, negative affect, and criticism directed towards a partner. In general, results suggested that individuals not only used their ideal standards to evaluate their partners and their relationships (actor effects), but also that perceived relationship quality is uniquely affected by the degree to which individuals favorably compare with their partner’s ideal standards (partner effects). Greater attachment avoidance had a negative impact both on the avoidant individual and his or her spouse. The researchers speculated that the avoidant individual may play a role in
eliciting the types of rejection they expect from others. In contrast, attachment anxiety had little impact on partners. Anxious individuals criticized their partners less; however, partners reported more irritation with anxious/dependent partners than with avoidant partners. Results also indicated that individuals with more anxious-ambivalent partners tended to distance themselves from their partner more than did individuals with less anxious-ambivalent partners. Therefore, anxious-ambivalent individuals, like avoidant, seem to elicit greater distance from their partners, confirming their internal working model that attachment figures are inconsistently available. In sum, perceived relationship quality was poorest when partner discrepancies were large and individuals were less flexible, while relationship quality was highest when partners matched each other’s ideals of more closely and individuals were more flexible.

Furman and Simon (2006) sampled 65 high school senior couples involved in dating relationships of 6 months or more to examine the association between self-reported attachment styles and interview-based data on internal working models of attachment on late adolescents’ interactions with romantic partners. As one of the earliest studies to use the APIM approach, their results included 11 actor effects, 6 partner effects, and 6 dyad effects. In the APIM model, actor and partner effects are not confounded and co-variation between the two members of the dyad is controlled for. As predicted, actor effects were found in the association of attachment security with communication skills, affective expression and dyadic positivity. Partner effects indicated that an actor’s views were related not just to his or her own behavior, but also to different forms of behavior from the partner. Interestingly, results indicated important gender differences at every level of analysis. For example, there were gender differences in the mean levels of both interview-based and self-reported attachment styles (actor effects). There were
also more links between females working models of attachment and their partner’s behavior than vice versa.

In another recent study that examined dyadic composition of attachment styles, Ben-Ari and Lavee (2005) found that high levels of relational quality were reported not only by secure/secure dyads but also by couples in which both partners were insecure and by mixed secure/insecure dyads. However, this finding stands in contrast to other research in which secure/secure dyads have reported greater marital satisfaction than insecure/secure or insecure/insecure dyads (Mikulincer et al., 2002).

Overall, research indicates that self-reports of relational quality and satisfaction are significantly associated with individual attachment security, as well as the attachment security of relationship partners (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2005). However, most research has used attachment categories rather than continuous ratings of attachment anxiety and avoidance to assess the association between attachment and relational quality. Some studies have found that anxious individuals and their partners report the lowest relational quality, while others have reported that avoidant individuals and their partners have the lowest relational quality. Due to the mixed findings, more research is needed to clarify the role of attachment anxiety and avoidance in relational quality.

*Attachment and Conflict*

Research has indicated that conflict is a critical and unavoidable part of relationship functioning, and that the ratio of agreements to disagreements is greater than 1 for happy couples and less than 1 for unhappy couples (Fincham, 2003). It is clear that attachment theory has much to offer in the way of conceptualizing individuals’ usage of constructive, destructive and avoidant conflict resolution strategies. Conflict also offers valuable opportunities for partners to
learn about themselves and to exercise their communication skills (Simpson et al., 1996). However, if one’s early attachment relationships led to internal working models of attachment figures as inconsistent or unreliable, conflict can serve to activate attachment systems causing individuals to express unhealthy amounts of anger during relationship conflict (Kobak et al., 1993). Overall, research suggests that because insecure attachment is associated with deficits in conflict resolution skills, those with higher scores on attachment anxiety or avoidance are more likely to perceive conflict situations as threatening and react with destructive or avoidant conflict resolution strategies. However, more research should be conducted with continuous rather than categorical measures of attachment so that the association between internal working models of self and others and conflict resolution can be clarified.

Attachment and Psychological Abuse

Abuse or neglect by parents can damage the developing attachment system by preventing infants from developing a secure base from which to explore. When the attachment figure becomes abusive, the infant or child feels paradoxically drawn to the parent for safety, while simultaneously fearful of the parent as a threat, and thus is caught in an “irresolvable paradox” in which the parent is both the “source of and the solution to its alarm” (Main & Hesse, 1990, p. 163). Consequently, the attachment system becomes disorganized and maladaptive internal working models of the self and others are developed. Infants learn that others are untrustworthy as protectors and unreliable as nurturers, and they come to believe that they are unworthy of the protection and affection of attachment figures.

An increasing amount of empirical evidence suggests that attachment insecurity is associated with high levels of relationship dissatisfaction and conflict (Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). In interviews with undergraduates who reported having been
involved in at least one romantic relationship, O’Hearn and Davis (1997) examined the association between inflicting and receiving psychological abuse in romantic relationships. The researchers found that avoidant attachment was more strongly related to the infliction of psychological abuse on partners, while preoccupied attachment (high anxiety and low avoidance) was associated with both infliction and receipt of abuse. Results suggested that women high in attachment security were less likely to either inflict or receive psychological abuse. In contrast, women high in preoccupied attachment were likely both to receive and inflict psychological abuse. This finding is consistent with other literature indicating that preoccupied partners report high levels of conflict in their interpersonal relationships (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Results also indicated that the more fearful a woman’s attachment style (high anxiety and high avoidance), the more likely she was to report having received psychological abuse and the less likely she was to have inflicted it. However, O’Hearn and Davis were limited to utilizing a categorical measure of attachment because they did not have access yet to measures such as the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR; Brennan & Shaver, 1998). It is possible that the behavior of insecurely attached partners, who lack the skills to resolve relationship conflict effectively, elicits psychologically abusive behavior. It is equally possible, as some researchers assert, that psychologically abusive behavior may affect the internal working models of partners to induce insecure attachment.

Weston and Marshall (2002) sought to explore the association between attachment processes and psychological abuse. Using the 65-item version of the Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse Scale (SOPAS; 1999b) to measure psychological abuse, Weston and Marshall collected data from over 800 low-income women in serious relationships. Results indicated that psychological abuse and violence were most strongly predictive of attachment
anxiety, but suggested that psychological abuse affected attachment rather than the reverse. The researchers posited that psychologically abusive behaviors (e.g., isolation, belittling, and rejection) by women’s partners may result in harm to the attachment system comparable to abusive parental behaviors.

Beyder-Kamjou (2005) examined the association of attachment processes and psychological abuse and conflict resolution in a sample of married couples seeking marital therapy. Males in this sample were more likely to report a dismissing attachment style (high avoidance, low anxiety), while females were more likely to report a fearful-avoidant attachment style (high avoidance and high anxiety). Results indicated that dismissive and fearful individuals who perceived their relationships to be higher in conflict had a greater tendency to resort to hostile withdrawal conflict behaviors than their preoccupied counterparts. Preoccupied individuals, on the other hand, were found to use more restrictive engulfment and domination-intimidation tactics in order to keep attachment figures from abandoning them. However, contrary to predictions, results indicated that securely attached women utilized more psychologically abusive strategies than their secure male or insecure female counterparts during conflict resolution. Due to the clinical nature of the sample on which this data were collected, these results must be interpreted with caution. It is possible that the distress necessitating treatment influenced the perceived level of attachment security in the relationship. Although the clinical nature of this sample and the single-item measure of attachment used limit the generalizability of the findings of this study, Beyder-Kamjou’s mixed findings suggest that psychological abuse in married couple dyads are a worthwhile topic of further study.

There is growing evidence for the reciprocal nature of psychological abuse perpetration in relationships (O’Hearn & Davis, 1997; White & Koss, 1991). Bookwala and Zdaniuk (1998)
compared individuals in reciprocally aggressive relationships to individuals in non-aggressive relationships. Results were consistent with other findings that individuals in reciprocally aggressive relationships were more likely to endorse preoccupied attachment characteristics than those in non-aggressive relationships. Bookwala and Zdaniuk (1998) recommended that future studies investigate the role of the partner’s attachment style (both real and perceived) in the occurrence of aggression in intimate relationships.

In summary, findings have been somewhat inconsistent regarding the role of attachment processes in conflict resolution and psychological abuse perpetration and victimization. Most of the studies are limited by their reliance upon single, forced-choice items to measure attachment style, making replication with more psychometrically multi-item instruments desirable. Additionally, most studies examining the influence of attachment processes on conflict resolution and psychological abuse have included data from only one member of a couple. Although Beyder-Kamjou (2005) included both partners in her study, the participants were in distressed relationships seeking marital therapy. Thus, the influence of attachment, conflict resolution, psychological abuse on relationship quality remains unclear for non-clinical, married populations of couples.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations of attachment processes, conflict resolution strategies, and psychological abuse to relational adjustment. The present study extends the literature on relational quality in that it assessed both actor and partner effects present in the marital dyad. The current sample was composed of couples in both metropolitan and rural communities who were not seeking treatment for marital distress. These couples were recruited specifically because they had been married long enough for “honeymoon
effects” to have subsided (over 1 year), and did not have any children living in the home. To advance the empirical literature, the attachment instrument used in the current study is a highly recommended 36-item self-report, which is psychometrically sound and allowed for a more comprehensive assessment of the attachment constructs than the single-item measures used in the past. Furthermore, the psychological abuse measure includes items assessing both overt and subtle forms of abuse. Attachment insecurity, maladaptive conflict resolution strategies, and psychological abuse were predicted to be negatively associated with relational quality.

Preliminary analyses provided descriptive data and test associations between the outcome variable, relational quality, and demographic variables. Several hypotheses regarding direct associations among study variables were evaluated. Subsequently, four models were tested using APIM to examine relational quality in relation to adult attachment processes, and three conflict resolution styles or psychological abuse.

Hypotheses

Preliminary Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

1a. It is hypothesized that attachment avoidance will be positively correlated with psychological abuse.

1b. It is hypothesized that attachment anxiety will be positively correlated with psychological abuse.

1c. It is hypothesized that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety will be negatively correlated.

1d. It is hypothesized that gender differences will exist on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. It is predicted that men will evidence higher mean levels of
attachment avoidance while women will evidence higher mean levels of attachment anxiety.

*Model 1: Psychological Abuse*

Hypothesis 2: Actor effects

2a. It is hypothesized that higher levels of attachment avoidance will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

2b. It is hypothesized that higher levels of attachment anxiety will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

2c. It is hypothesized that higher levels of actor’s received psychological abuse will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 3: Partner effects

3a. It is hypothesized that higher partner anxiety will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

3b. It is hypothesized that higher partner avoidance will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

3c. It is hypothesized that higher partner reported psychological abuse will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 4: Interactions at Level 1

4a. It is hypothesized that actor attachment avoidance and actor attachment anxiety will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

4b. It is hypothesized that actor attachment anxiety and actor psychological abuse received will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.
4c. It is hypothesized that actor attachment avoidance and actor psychological abuse received will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 5: Interactions at Level 2

5a. It is hypothesized that actor attachment anxiety and partner attachment anxiety will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

5b. It is hypothesized that actor attachment avoidance and partner attachment avoidance will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

5c. It is predicted that actor psychological abuse and partner psychological abuse will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

Model 2: Destructive Conflict Resolution

Hypothesis 6: Actor effects

6. It is hypothesized that higher levels of self-reported actor destructive conflict resolution strategies will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 7: Partner effects

7. It is hypothesized that higher partner destructive conflict scores will be associated lower levels of actor relational quality.

Hypothesis 8: Interactions at Level 1

8a. It is predicted that actor destructive conflict and attachment anxiety will predict lower levels of relational quality.

8b. It is predicted that actor destructive conflict and attachment avoidance will predict lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 9: Interactions at Level 2
9. It is hypothesized that actor destructive conflict and partner destructive conflict will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

Model 3: Avoidant Conflict Resolution

Hypothesis 10: Actor effects

10. It is hypothesized that higher levels of self-reported actor avoidant conflict resolution scores will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 11: Partner effects

11. It is hypothesized that higher partner avoidant conflict resolution scores will be associated with lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 12: Interactions at Level 1

12a. It is hypothesized that actor avoidant conflict resolution scores and actor attachment anxiety will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

12b. It is hypothesized that actor avoidant conflict resolution scores and actor attachment avoidance scores will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 13: Interactions at Level 2

13. It is hypothesized that actor avoidant conflict resolution scores and partner avoidant conflict resolution scores will interact to predict lower levels of relational quality.

Model 4: Constructive Conflict Resolution

Hypothesis 14: Actor Effects

14. It is hypothesized that higher levels of self-reported actor constructive conflict resolution scores will be associated with higher levels of relational quality.
Hypothesis 15: Partner Effects

15. It is hypothesized that higher partner constructive conflict resolution scores will be associated with higher levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 16: Interactions at Level 1

16. It is hypothesized that actor constructive conflict resolution scores and actor anxiety scores will interact to predict higher levels of relational quality.

16b. It is hypothesized that actor constructive conflict resolution scores and actor attachment avoidance scores will interact to predict higher levels of relational quality.

Hypothesis 17: Interactions at Level 2

17. It is hypothesized that actor constructive conflict resolution scores and partner constructive conflict resolution scores will interact to predict higher levels of relational quality.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Participants

The current study was part of a larger study investigating attachment processes and marital functioning among 92 heterosexual married couples. In order to eliminate confounds of increased relationship satisfaction within the first year of marriage (Leonard & Roberts, 1998), and decreased relationship satisfaction after birth of the children (Twenge et al., 2003), individuals were excluded if they had been married for less than one year or more than five years had children living in the home, or were beyond the second trimester of pregnancy. Couples were recruited through flyers (in businesses, libraries, churches), advertisements in newspapers, mass mailings, and by referral from other participants over the course of 18 months. In addition, emails announcing the study on various e-mail listservs resulted in several out-of-state participants. Analyses indicated that the majority of the participants in the study were of an average age of 27.39 years, and reported European-American descent (89.7%). Most respondents were in their first marriage (83.9%), the mean reported length of which was 2.59 years. Only 2 respondents (1.2%) had children from previous relationships who did not reside with the participants. Sixty respondents (31.4%) reported their parents were divorced.

Measures

Background Information Questionnaire

The Background Information Questionnaire (see Appendix A) developed for this study includes 29 items asking participants for basic demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, number of marriages, length of marriages, number of children, level of education, occupation, income level). In addition, participants provided family background information
(e.g., number of siblings, adoption status, parental divorce, death of family members, relationship of parents, and mental health status of family members).

Table 1

*Frequency Characteristics of the Sample (N = 184)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-racial/Multi-racial</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/European American</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Status</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed Full time</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed Part-time</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Than HS Graduate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical/2 yr. Degree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors Degree</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate/Professional Degree</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976)

The DAS has been one of the most popular measures of relationship adjustment for the last 30 years. The DAS was developed on a sample of 218 married, heterosexual couples, with an average age of 35.1 years and an average length of marriage of 13.2 years (Spanier, 1976). The DAS was designed to be used as an assessment of relationship adjustment, and consists of four primary factors: Dyadic Consensus, 13 items assessing the frequency with which couples agree; Dyadic Satisfaction, 10 items assessing the frequency of arguments, discussions of separations, and negative interaction patterns; Dyadic Cohesion, 5 items assessing the frequency of shared activities; and Affectional Expression, 4 items assessing problems regarding expressions of love and sexual relations (Spanier, 1976). The response format varies such that when assessing agreement the scale is 0 = always disagree to 5 = always agree, whereas for frequency, 0 = all the time and 5 = never. For dichotomous ratings, 0 = yes, and 1 = no. Total scores on the DAS have been shown to discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples, and have identified couples with a high likelihood of divorce (Crane, Busby, & Larson, 1991; Spanier, 1988). In their meta-analysis on the usage of the DAS, Graham, Liu and Jeziorski (2006) found that the reliability of the total DAS score was strong, with a mean score of .915 across studies.

In a study of 538 heterosexual couples, 114 gay couples, and 83 lesbian couples, Kurdek (1992) found similar levels of internal consistency for the Consensus, Satisfaction, and Cohesion scores, and relatively low levels of internal consistency for the Affectional Expression scores. Kurdek’s (1992) results supported the four-factor model better than the one-factor model that some marital researchers had proposed, and the
Satisfaction score consistently accounted for the greatest portion of variance, with the other DAS scores adding only a small amount to the explained variance. Kurdek (1992) concluded that the Satisfaction subscale of the DAS is the most psychometrically valid, and could be used alone without significant loss of explained variance in relationship adjustment; however, he stated that the Cohesion score might be useful “as a measure of rewards derived, from the relationship, whereas the reverse-scored Consensus score could serve as a measure of costs to being in the relationship.” (Kurdek, 1992, p. 35) Use of the DAS has been broadened to include clinical (Kazak, Jarmas & Snitzer, 1988; Spanier, 1988) as well as non-clinical samples, and The DAS has been translated into many languages and validated with samples of married couples all over the world (Fisiloglu & Demir, 2000). The current study will use the DAS Total Adjustment scale, which showed a Cronbach alpha of .85.

*Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECR; Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998)*

The ECR was developed using 482 items and 60 constructs derived from 60 different instruments measuring adult attachment. After developers eliminated redundant items, the remaining 323 items were administered to undergraduate men and women (N = 1,086) ranging in age from 16 to 50, with a median age of 18. Factor analysis on the 60 attachment constructs resulted in the emergence of two primary factors that accounted for 62.8% of the variance, attachment avoidance and anxiety. Two 18-item scales assessing participant’s avoidance of intimacy and their anxiety about abandonment were constructed from the highest-loading 36 items. In accordance with Bartholomew’s (1990) 4-category conceptualization of attachment classifications, four attachment categories can be computed from combining the two higher order scales in weighted formulas derived
by the developers. The ECR has demonstrated excellent internal reliability (.94 and .91 for avoidance and anxiety, respectively), and equally strong test-retest reliability (.90 and .91 for avoidance and anxiety, respectively). Discriminant validity analyses indicated that the two scales, avoidance and anxiety, are unrelated ($r = .11$). The authors reported that both ECR scales correlated highly with other measures of attachment. In the current sample, both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance scales demonstrated good reliability, with alphas of .877 and .899, respectively.

*Interpersonal Conflict Tactics and Strategies Scale (ICTAS; Cupach, 1980)*

The ICTAS includes 54 items assessing the ways in which disagreements are handled with in close relationships. Participants are asked to describe their own behavior during arguments as well as their partners on a 7-point Likert scale assessing the frequency of specific behaviors during conflict. Factor analytic procedures revealed the emergence of three factors of conflict strategy categories: destructive strategies, avoidance strategies, and constructive strategies. The ICTAS has demonstrated good psychometric properties, with acceptable internal consistency and reliability statistics. The first factor, Destructive strategies, consists of 14 items and demonstrated reliability of .86. The second factor, Avoidance strategies, consists of 6 items and demonstrated reliability of .71. The final factor, Constructive strategies, consists of 7 items and demonstrated reliability of .75. The present study examined participants’ own responses on all three scales (e.g., destructive, avoidance, constructive strategies). In the present study, Cronbach alphas for all three subscales were in the acceptable range, with the Destructive subscale (.90), the Avoidant subscale (.81), and the Constructive subscale (.91).
**Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse Scales—Brief form. (SOPAS; Marshall, 1999)**

This instrument was developed for an ongoing longitudinal investigation of women’s health and replaces the Men’s Psychological Harm and Abuse in Relationships Measure—Overt and Subtle scales (MP-HARM-O) described in Marshall (1999). Based on data from 6 waves of interviews with low-income European-American, African-American and Latina-American women, the SOPAS—Long form was refined to consist of 65 items designed to assess both the subtle and the overt psychologically abusive behaviors used by partners. There are no reverse-coded items included in the measure. Factor analysis generated a four-factor solution for overt psychological abuse which accounted for 69% of the variance. A three-factor solution emerged for subtle psychological abuse which accounted for 67.7% of the variance. The measure has demonstrated excellent reliability, with alpha coefficients generally above .85 or above. Marshall (2000) reported stability scores across Waves 1 and 2 of .68. Barclay (2004) utilized the long version of the SOPAS and found that range of scores on the 65 item measure was 65 to 585, with a mean of 212.53, and a standard deviation of 206.77. The 65 items held together as a single scale, for which the coefficient alpha was .9963. The present study used the brief version of the SOPAS, which included 35 items measuring subtle and overt psychological abuse. The brief SOPAS yields one cumulative total score of the 35 items, which showed a Cronbach alpha of .94 in the present study.

**Procedure**

The current study was part of a larger study of 92 heterosexual couples married between one to five years without children. The study was advertised to prospective participants in local newspapers, community flyers, as well as through both on and off-
Interested participants contacted the project manager to set up an appointment time. After an appointment was scheduled, a graduate research assistant administered the surveys in person, generally at the participants’ homes if they resided in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. Before the surveys were administered, confidentiality and informed consent forms were explained to the participants, detailing potential risks and benefits of participation. Participants were provided with extra copies of the consent form. Participants were asked to complete a packet of instruments in separate locations in the house without discussion while the administrator was present. For those out of state participants who expressed interest via email or phone, packets were mailed to them with a pre-paid, return envelope enclosed and a separate sheet of instructions asking them to complete their packets separate from each other. Participants were given two options for incentives to participate: a $20 cashier’s check, or entrance into a drawing for a weekend getaway worth $300. If participants chose the latter option, a form was completed with the relevant contact information. Identifying information was immediately separated immediately from the couple data.

Data Analytic Strategy

In social sciences research, all data collected arguably exist within nested structures. Hierarchical data occur when the variables under examination can be classified into groups (deLeeuw & Kreft, 1995). For example, graduate students in the same program, members of the same family, workers in the same work-group, neighbors in the same neighborhood, all share some similar experiences. Any time the observations of two participants are correlated such that knowledge of one participant’s scores provides information about another participant’s score, the data are considered
interdependent (Cook & Kenny, 2005). Due to these shared experiences, observations based on these individuals are incompletely independent.

Independence of observations is assumed by the most commonly used data analytic procedures (e.g., ANOVA, multiple regression). When the assumption of independent observations is violated, test statistics and degrees of freedom are inaccurate, resulting in a biased estimate of statistical significance (Cook & Kenny, 2005). Data from husbands and wives has been recognized as non-independent by many researchers (Sanford & Rowatt, 2004; Barnett et al., 1993). Depending on the size and direction of the husband-wife correlation, violation of the independence assumption can bias statistical tests by seriously overestimating or underestimating $p$ values (Cook, 1998).

Cook argues that when traditional statistical techniques assume independence of observations with nested, couples data, they do so at the expense of learning important information on relationship dynamics. Until the advent of APIM and multilevel modeling techniques, researchers had few options for statistical methods capable of handling interdependent data. Consequently, investigators typically have analyzed data separately by gender without regard to the violations of independence (Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995). The irony of this data analytic approach is that it is inconsistent with the large body of theoretical and empirical literature asserting the importance of systems in individual functioning. Most procedures have failed to address this problem of non-independent or nested data, generating concerns about aggregation bias, misestimated precision, and the “unit of analysis” problem (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Sirotnik, 1980; Tetlock, 1986). The classic example explaining the “unit of analysis” problem is that of students in one classroom. Because a sample of graduate students was taught in the same
room, by the same professor, they will tend to be similar in their performance. As a result, these students would be a less rich source of data than if the same number of students had been taught in different classrooms, and by different professors. In this scenario, the basic unit of analysis should have been the professor rather than the student.

Actor Partner Interdependence Model

To address these and other methodological problems associated with research on nested data, the actor partner interdependence model (APIM: Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny & Cook, 1999) depicts dyadic relationships by integrating advanced statistical techniques with conceptualizations of interdependent data. Based on the Social Relations Model of dyadic behavior (SRM; Kenny, 1994; 1996), APIM assumes that people in dyadic relationships influence each other because they are part of the same interpersonal system. However, APIM also assumes that the measure of the husband’s relationship with his wife is not the same as the measure of the wife’s relationship to her husband (Cook, 1998). Therefore APIM treats the dyad, instead of the individual, as the unit of analysis. In so doing, APIM also allows for the simultaneous and independent estimation of the effect of each person’s self-reports on both his or her own behavior (an actor effect) and on the partner’s behavior (the partner effect) (Campbell & Kashey, 2002). Because a person’s behavior, thoughts or feelings may depend not only on individual characteristics but also on partner attributes (Kenny, 1996), three types of effects are estimated simultaneously, while controlling for each other: actor, partner and actor by partner interaction effects (Furman & Simon, 2006).

Three classes of independent variables that describe the level at which comparison occurs may be included in the APIM model: between-dyad variables, within-
dyad variables, mixed variables. Between-dyad variables are shared by the members of the couple, but may vary across dyads (e.g., length of marriage). Within-dyad variables vary across members of the couple, but each dyad would have the same total score as other dyads in the sample (e.g., gender), while mixed variables vary both within dyads and between dyads (e.g., age of each member). In the present study, the within-dyad variable is gender while the mixed variables are psychological abuse received, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, and three conflict resolution strategies of avoidant, constructive and destructive conflict.

Analytic Approaches for Dyadic Data

The originators of the APIM approach describe three ways in which to test dyadic models. One method is ordinary regression analysis conducting separate regression analyses predicting the outcomes of the two members of the dyad. For example, in the first regression analysis, the actor outcome variable would be regressed on the predictor variables of both the actor and partner. In a second regression analysis, the partner outcome variable would be regressed on the partner and actor predictor variables. The N would be the number of dyads rather than the number of individuals. The main drawback to this OLS approach is that it does not allow for a test of differences between two actor effects or partner effects (Cook & Kenny, 2005), and it is therefore limited in the types of questions it can answer about the dyad. For example, if a researcher wanted to examine whether the husband or wife had the larger effect or if the husband’s influence wives more than wives influence husbands, OLS cannot do so.

Another approach is structural equation modeling or SEM. In SEM, multiple equations can be tested simultaneously, and relationships between parameters can be
specified. The main advantage of SEM over OLS is that SEM is able to estimate model parameters, therefore answering the question of whether the actor or partner effect is larger. One can also compare parameters by actors or partners by comparing the chi-square goodness of fit value in a procedure called the chi-square difference test.

However, SEM requires that the number of dyads plus one must be twice as great as the number of variables (Olsen & Kenny, 2006); if sample size requirements are not met, parameter estimates would likely be inaccurate. Additionally, multivariate normality and linearity are always assumed in SEM, and there is little flexibility in model specification. Some studies have compared SEM and multilevel modeling techniques, and found that SEM analyses usually involve slightly inflated estimates of the standard error. Overall, although SEM is capable of accounting for the statistical non-independence of dyadic data, the rigorous assumptions and model specification make SEM a less desirable approach for the present study than MLM.

The third and final approach is hierarchical linear or multilevel linear modeling (MLM), which was used in the present study. Whereas SEM uses equations for each member of the dyad, MLM estimates all model parameters within a single equation implying a different data structure than SEM (Cook & Kenny, 2005). Several researchers have recommended multilevel modeling as a viable, more flexible alternative to structural equation modeling in the analysis of nested data (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Cook, 1998; Kenny, 1996; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Raudenbush, Brennan & Barnett, 1995). Multilevel models were developed to examine relationships between variables within a hierarchical structure (Pollack, 1998).
MLM uses a combination of maximum-likelihood and Bayesian procedures to estimate parameters, and in MLM parameter estimates from different levels of analysis are not independent (Nezlek & Zyzniewski, 1998). The more reliable the responses are in a group, the greater the weight assigned to the group mean in estimating variances. This is known as precision weighting, and is used by MLM to produce empirical bayesian estimates or EBEs of parameters. These EBEs allow MLM to separate fixed and random parameter variance, whereas these two sources of variance are combined in OLS (Nezlek & Zyzniewski, 1998).

Kenny (1996) identifies several advantages to using multilevel models with APIM: 1) missing data present no serious estimation difficulties for multilevel models; 2) constraints on design parameters can be easily estimated; and 3) terms can be easily dropped from a model if there is no evidence of an interaction. Another advantage of the MLM procedure is improved estimation of regression path coefficients for multilevel predictors (Pollack, 1998). MLM methodology can incorporate within-subject variability attributable to measurement error (Goldstein, 1987), thus yielding estimates in which variability due to measurement error had been accounted for (Barnett, Brennan & Marshall, 1994).

However, as is frequently the case with advances in statistical procedures, these advances are associated with some costs. While MLM models may more accurately mirror reality by making fewer assumptions, multilevel models are less parsimonious than traditional regression models. As the number of parameters within the model increase, the outcomes may become less externally valid. Additionally, there is some pressure for MLM researchers to use effect sizes to explain their results in a way
common to other statistical methods, but currently there is some debate about the appropriate measure of effect size in MLM (Kreft & deLeeuw, 1998). This is because negative effect sizes are possible.

Kenny, Kashy and Cook (2006) developed a formula a procedure called *pseudo* $R^2$ to determine the variance explained in a multilevel model where the estimates of variance and covariance from the full model are divided by the variance and covariance from the unrestricted model and subtracted from one. This procedure was used in the present study to determine the variance explained in each model.

Data Structure

As suggested by Cook and Kenny (2005), the data were structured so that each individual participant had their own scores listed (as the actor) and their partner’s scores listed (as partner). The actor-partner interdependence model assumes interdependence of dyadic data. To minimize multicollinearity among predictors, the data were centered around the grand mean, as is recommended by multilevel researchers (Kenny et al., 2006). Restricted maximum likelihood was used to produce unbiased estimates of variance and covariance parameters. Initial analyses examining residual differences between the observed values and model-predicted values for the basic assumptions of linearity, equal variance, and normality indicated that these basic assumptions were satisfied for each model tested.

The data were structured such that a single record (or row) in the database corresponded to a single individual. In other words, each couple occupied two rows in the database. The “couple ID” variable was used to determine which individuals were in the same couple. The final dataset contained 184 rows representing 92 couples. Within
each individual row, values were available for that individual’s attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, psychological abuse received (SOPAS), Destructive conflict resolution (DESTR), Avoidant conflict resolution (AVCR), and Constructive conflict resolution (CONC) as well as his or her partner’s scores on all of these dimensions. Variables representing the individual’s values were preceded with ACT_ for “actor” and variables representing his partner’s scores were preceded with PART_ for “partner”. Finally, each individual row contained the outcome measure, the individual’s rating of relational quality. The partner’s rating of relational quality was not reflected in the individual’s record. In addition to the quantitative variables listed above, two qualitative variables were recorded for each individual. First, the individual’s gender was recorded with “1” representing males and “0” representing females. Second, a variable indicating victim or perpetrator status was created. An individual was labeled as a victim (victim variable = “1”) if his or her Actor_SOPAS was greater than the Partner_SOPAS in the same record. There was one couple for which both SOPAS scores were equal, so neither individual was identified as a victim.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Statistical analysis for this project was performed using the MIXED procedure syntax in SPSS. In each of these models, couple ID was included as a second-level random effect to account for possible correlations in relational quality across individuals within the same couple. The fixed effects to be included in each model were determined using a combination of exploratory analysis and hypothesized relationships among variables based on previous research and theory. The fixed effects for hypothesis-testing included: gender, actor and partner anxiety, actor and partner avoidance, actor and partner psychological abuse or SOPAS, actor destructive conflict resolution, actor avoidant conflict resolution, and lastly, actor constructive conflict resolution. In addition, several interactions of these variables were included in the theoretically-driven portion of the model. Exploratory analysis identified two additional important variables: perpetrator/victim status (determined by difference in SOPAS scores as described above) and gender. These two dummy variables were included as main effects and interacted with all of the other main effects and interactions in the SOPAS model. No variable selection procedures were used for any of the model fitting; models were simply fit using all variables identified either for theoretical hypothesis testing reasons or via exploratory analysis.

The mathematical equation for model 1 can be expressed as follows:

Level1: \[ Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1}ACT\_ANX + \ldots + \beta_{p}PART\_SOPAS + \varepsilon_{ij} \]
Level2: \[ \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \nu_{0j}. \]
In this expression, $i$ indexes individuals, $j$ indexes couples, $\varepsilon_{ij}$ is a random error term, and $\nu_{0j}$ is a random couple effect. All of the covariates described in the previous paragraph are included in the first level of the equation. For all models, residuals were assessed for normality using a non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. In all cases, the $p$-value of the test was greater than 0.05 indicating no problems with the normality assumption of the multilevel model. The $p$-values for each model are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Residual K-S $p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>.506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Destructive Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>.471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Avoidant Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>.169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Constructive Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>.204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before performing statistical analyses, each quantitative independent variable was centered by subtracting the mean value across all individuals from each observation (Kenny, Kashy & Cook, 2006). This centering was performed to allow for more straightforward interpretation of main effects in the statistical models fitted to the data. The mean values subtracted from each variable were as follows: Avoidance: 2.0815, Anxiety: 2.8107, Psychological abuse: 47.28, Destructive Conflict Resolution: 37.23, Avoidant Conflict Resolution: 14.08, Constructive Conflict Resolution: 35.68, Conflict
Resolution Tactics: 15.64. See Table 3 for the descriptive statistics for predictor and outcome variables.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Predictor and Outcome Variables (N = 184)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>2.081</td>
<td>.8746</td>
<td>1-5.667</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>2.811</td>
<td>.9910</td>
<td>1-5.5</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>47.28</td>
<td>45.206</td>
<td>0-225</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive Conflict Scale</td>
<td>37.23</td>
<td>13.801</td>
<td>15-84</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant Conflict Scale</td>
<td>14.08</td>
<td>6.701</td>
<td>6-38</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive Conflict Scale</td>
<td>35.68</td>
<td>9.188</td>
<td>7-49</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Quality</td>
<td>112.67</td>
<td>10.725</td>
<td>73-147</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To examine the role of attachment, conflict resolution and psychological abuse in relationship satisfaction, four models were tested. The first model tested the contribution of each individual’s self-report of (actor) attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and received psychological abuse to the prediction of actor relational quality. The second model tested the contribution of each individual’s self-reported attachment avoidance and anxiety, and destructive conflict resolution scores to the prediction of actor relational quality. The third model tested the contribution of each individual’s self-reported
attachment avoidance and anxiety, and avoidant conflict resolution scores to the prediction of actor relational quality. The fourth and final model tested the contribution of each individual’s self-reported attachment avoidance and anxiety, and constructive conflict resolution scores to the prediction of actor relational quality. Finally, exploratory analyses were run to determine a final model that would best explain the data.

Preliminary Analyses

Pearson correlations indicated that the outcome variable of relational quality was not associated with any of the demographic variables of age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, occupational status, or the length of the marriage. However, results indicated that actor and partner marital adjustment were correlated, \( r = .561, p = .000 \), indicating dyadic interdependence and the need to conduct MLM for distinguishable data. Results further indicated that attachment anxiety, destructive conflict resolution, avoidant conflict resolution, and constructive conflict resolution were not significantly associated with any of the demographic variables. As shown in Table 4, attachment avoidance was found to be associated with age, \( r = .159, p = .028 \). Additionally, gender was associated with psychological abuse received \( r = -.205, p = .005 \), with men reporting more psychological abuse from their partners (\( M = 56.25, SD = 49.96 \)) than did women (\( M = 38.31, SD = 38.09 \)).

It was hypothesized that gender differences would also exist on attachment anxiety and avoidance; specifically, that men would evidence higher mean levels of attachment avoidance while women would demonstrate higher levels of attachment anxiety. Results indicated that attachment avoidance was found to be associated with gender, \( r = -.242, p < .001 \) with men reporting higher scores on avoidance (\( M = 2.30, SD \))
.949) than did women ($M = 1.86, SD = .734$). However, attachment anxiety was not found to be associated with gender at a statistically significant level ($r = .105, p = .146$).

Table 4

*Correlations between Demographic, Outcome, and Predictor Variables. (N = 184)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidant Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>.03</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.132</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constructive Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Quality</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.087</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

**Primary Analyses**

*Hypothesis 1:* Table 5 presents inter-correlations between the variables of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance (ECR avoidance subscale), psychological abuse (SOPAS total score), and the three types of conflict resolution (destructive, constructive, avoidant subscales). Pearson product-moment correlations were used to test the first preliminary hypothesis that attachment avoidance would be positively correlated with psychological abuse received. Results indicated that actor avoidance was positively correlated at a statistically significant level with actor psychological abuse received.
Pearson product-moment correlations were used to test the second preliminary hypothesis that attachment anxiety would be positively correlated with psychological abuse received. Actor anxiety was also positively correlated with actor psychological abuse \((r = .262, p = .000)\). Additionally, partner anxiety was also found to positively correlate with actor psychological abuse \((r = .227, p = .002)\); however, partner avoidance was not found to correlate at a statistically significant level with actor psychological abuse \((r = .092, p = .212)\). Pearson product-moment correlations were used to test the third preliminary hypothesis that attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety would be negatively correlated. Contrary to predictions, results indicated that actor avoidance was found to positively correlate with actor anxiety, \((r = .274, p = .000)\). Actor avoidance was also found to positively correlate with partner anxiety \((r = .208, p = .006)\). However, as expected, actor and partner avoidance, anxiety and psychological abuse were found to negatively correlate with the outcome variable of relational quality. Table 5 demonstrates these findings.
Table 5

*Intercorrelations between Subscales N = 184*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Actor Avoidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Actor Anxiety</td>
<td>.274**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Partner Avoidance</td>
<td>.191**</td>
<td>.208**</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Partner Anxiety</td>
<td>.208**</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.274**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Actor Psych Abuse</td>
<td>.281**</td>
<td>.262**</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>.227**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Partner Psych Abuse</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>.227**</td>
<td>.281**</td>
<td>.262**</td>
<td>.211**</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Destructive Conflict</td>
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<td>-.024</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>-.052</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Avoidant Conflict</td>
<td>-.029</td>
<td>-.028</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.397**</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Constructive Conflict</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>-.096</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.268**</td>
<td>.291**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Relational Quality</td>
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<td>-.310**</td>
<td>-.267**</td>
<td>-.222**</td>
<td>-.430**</td>
<td>-.395**</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* *p < .05, **p < .01*
As suggested by Cook and Kenny (2005), the data were structured so that each individual participant had their own scores listed (as the actor) and their partner’s scores listed (as partner). Initial analyses examining residual differences between the observed values and model-predicted values for the basic assumptions of linearity, equal variance, and normality indicated that these basic assumptions were satisfied for each model tested. To test the hypothesized predictions, APIM analyses were conducted using Fixed Effects in SPSS in which the outcome variable was the actor’s relational quality score. Gender was included in all models as the distinguishing within dyad factor. The predictor variables were both the actor’s scores and the partner’s scores attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, psychological abuse received, and the three forms of conflict resolution (e.g., avoidant conflict, destructive conflict, and constructive conflict). All of the predictor variables were centered prior to these analyses, based on mean scores calculated for the entire sample.

Model 1: Psychological Abuse

To test Model 1 predictions, an APIM analysis was conducted in which the outcome variable was the actor’s relational quality score. The fixed effects or predictor variables were gender, the actor’s scores and the partner’s scores on received psychological abuse, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety. Interaction terms were created for actor anxiety and avoidance, actor and partner anxiety, actor and partner avoidance, actor and partner psychological abuse, and actor psychological abuse with both actor anxiety and actor avoidance. Using the formula for pseudo $R^2$ provided by Kenny et al., (2006), it was determined that Model 1 explained 35.3% of the variance in the outcome variable. Table 6 is a summary of all variables included in Model 1, both the non-significant variables and the significant ones.
Table 6

Summary Table of All Variables Included in Model 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>.721</td>
<td>.473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>-1.736</td>
<td>.085</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td>.177</td>
<td>.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-2.10</td>
<td>-2.568</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-1.53</td>
<td>-1.876</td>
<td>.062</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>-.058</td>
<td>-3.372</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>-3.569</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Anxiety x Actor Avoidance</td>
<td>.847</td>
<td>1.079</td>
<td>.282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x Partner Anxiety</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.830</td>
<td>.159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x Partner Avoidance</td>
<td>.333</td>
<td>.311</td>
<td>.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x Partner Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>1.423</td>
<td>.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Psychological Abuse x Actor Anxiety</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>1.830</td>
<td>.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Psychological Abuse x Actor Avoidance</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>-1.937</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 2: It was hypothesized that higher levels of actor attachment avoidance, actor attachment anxiety, and actor psychological abuse would be associated with lower levels of relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis. (See Table 6) These analyses indicated that higher levels of actor attachment avoidance were significantly associated with lower levels of actor relational quality ($b = -2.10, p = .011$), supporting Hypothesis 2a. Higher levels of actor attachment anxiety
were marginally associated with lower levels of actor relational quality \((b = -1.29, p = .085)\), indicating a trend towards Hypothesis 2b rather than support for it. However, actor psychological abuse was found to be strongly associated with lower levels of actor relational quality \((b = -0.058, p = .001)\). Thus, strong support was found for Hypotheses 2a, and 2c, but only a trend towards Hypothesis 2b.

**Hypothesis 3**: It was hypothesized that higher levels of partner attachment anxiety, partner attachment avoidance, and partner psychological abuse would be associated with lower actor relational quality (See Table 6). Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis. Contrary to previous research, results indicated that partner attachment anxiety was not associated with relational quality \((b = .132, p = .860)\). Partner attachment avoidance was negatively associated with relational quality \((b = -1.53, p = .062)\), although not at a level reaching statistical significance. Furthermore, partner psychological abuse was strongly and negatively associated with relational quality \((b = -0.059, p = .000)\). Therefore, strong support was found for Hypothesis 3c, weak support was found for Hypothesis 3b, and no support was found for Hypothesis 3a.

**Hypothesis 4**: It was hypothesized that actor attachment avoidance and actor attachment anxiety would interact to predict lower levels of actor relational quality. An interaction term was formed by combining the product scores of actor attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis (See Table 6). These analyses indicated that the interaction between actor attachment anxiety and avoidance did not reach statistical significance \((b = .847, p = .282)\). It was also hypothesized that actor anxiety and actor psychological abuse would interact to predict lower relational quality. However, results of fixed effects modeling indicated that
the interaction between actor attachment anxiety and actor psychological abuse approached, but did not reach the .05 level of statistical significance ($b = .025, p = .069$).

It was further hypothesized that the interaction of actor avoidance and actor psychological abuse would be negatively associated with actor relational quality. Results indicated that actor avoidance and actor psychological abuse significantly interacted to predict lower relational quality ($b = -.033, p = .054$). For highly avoidant individuals, there was a negative relationship between actor psychological abuse and relational quality. However, this relationship became weaker as actor avoidance decreased. Individuals with very low attachment avoidance show almost no relationship between actor psychological abuse and relational quality (See Figure 1). Therefore, strong support was found for Hypothesis 4c, weak support was found for Hypothesis 4b, and no support was found for Hypothesis 4a.
Figure 1. The interaction of actor avoidance and actor psychological abuse on outcome.

Hypothesis 5: It was hypothesized that actor and partner attachment anxiety would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality, and furthermore that actor and partner attachment avoidance would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. Additionally, it was predicted that actor psychological abuse and partner psychological abuse would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test these hypotheses (See Table 6). These analyses indicated that all three interaction terms failed to reach statistical significance. The interaction of actor and partner psychological abuse \( (b = -0.09, p = 0.795) \) was not found to significantly correlate with relational quality. Additionally, neither the interaction of actor and partner attachment anxiety \( (b = 1.27, p = 0.159) \), nor the interaction of actor and partner avoidance \( (b = 0.333, p = 0.756) \) were found to be significantly associated with relational quality.

Therefore, support was not found for Hypotheses 5a, 5b, nor 5c.

Model 2: Destructive Conflict Resolution

To test Model 2 predictions, an APIM analysis was conducted in which the outcome variable was the actor’s relational quality score. The fixed effects were gender, the actor’s and the partner’s self-reported destructive conflict resolution, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety as well as gender. In this model, actor attachment avoidance \( (b = -3.17, p = 0.000) \) and actor attachment anxiety \( (b = -2.14, p = 0.006) \) were both strongly and negatively associated with relational quality. Additionally, partner attachment avoidance was negatively associated with relational quality \( (b = -1.71, p = 0.054) \) at a statistically significant level, while partner attachment anxiety was not \( (b = -1.07, p = 0.161) \). Using the formula for pseudo \( R^2 \) provided by Kenny et al., (2006), it was determined that Model 2 explained 21.3% of the variance in the outcome variable.
Table 7

*Summary Table of All Variables Included in Model 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>b</th>
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<th>p</th>
</tr>
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<td>.490</td>
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<td>Actor Attachment Anxiety</td>
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<td>.006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>-1.409</td>
<td>.161</td>
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<td>Actor Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-3.17</td>
<td>-3.607</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-1.71</td>
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<td>.054</td>
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<td>Actor Destructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Destructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>-.481</td>
<td>.631</td>
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<td>Actor x Partner Destructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>-1.059</td>
<td>.292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Destructive Conflict x Actor Anxiety</td>
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<td>.585</td>
<td>.560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Destructive Conflict x Actor Avoidance</td>
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<td>-2.918</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Hypothesis 6:* It was hypothesized that higher levels actor destructive conflict resolution would be associated with lower levels of relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis (See Table 7). Contrary to predictions, analyses indicated a positive association between actor destructive conflict resolution and actor relational quality \((b = .109, p = .032)\). This indicates that higher actor destructiveness is associated with higher relational quality. Results therefore indicated that Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

*Hypothesis 7:* It was hypothesized that higher self-reported partner destructive conflict scores would be associated with lower levels of actor relational quality. Tests of
fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis (See Table 7). These analyses indicated that while the correlation was in the direction predicted, the association between partner destructive conflict scores and actor relational quality did not reach statistical significance ($b = -0.024, p = .631$). Therefore, Hypothesis 7 was not supported.

**Hypothesis 8:** It was predicted that actor destructive conflict and actor attachment anxiety would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. It was further predicted that actor destructive conflict and actor attachment avoidance would interact to predict lower relational quality. To test these hypotheses, two interaction terms were created: one with actor anxiety and actor destructive conflict resolution, and another with actor avoidance and actor destructive conflict resolution. As shown in Table 7, tests of fixed effects indicated that the interaction of actor destructive conflict and actor attachment anxiety was not associated with relational quality at a statistically significant level ($b = .025, p = .560$), while the interaction of actor attachment avoidance with actor destructive conflict resolution was significantly and negatively associated with relational quality ($b = -0.147, p = .004$). Although increasing actor destructive conflict is independently associated with higher relational quality, the significant interaction term indicates that increasing actor destructiveness is associated with *decreasing* relational quality when actor avoidance is high (see Figure 2). Therefore, Hypothesis 8a was not supported while Hypothesis 8b was supported by the data. Figure 2 depicts the interaction actor destructiveness and actor avoidance predicted by Hypothesis 8b.
Figure 2. The interaction of actor avoidance and actor destructive conflict resolution on relational quality, as suggested by Hypothesis 8b.

Hypothesis 9: It was hypothesized that actor self-reported destructive conflict and partner self-reported destructive conflict resolution would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. To test this hypothesis, an interaction term was again created with both actor and partner destructive conflict, and tests of fixed effects were conducted. As shown in Table 7, results indicated that the interaction of actor and partner destructive conflict resolution did not reach statistical significance ($b = -.004, p = .292$). Therefore, Hypothesis 9 was not supported.
Model 3: Avoidant Conflict Resolution

To test Model 3 predictions, an APIM analysis was conducted in which the outcome variable was the actor’s relational quality score. The fixed effects were gender, the actor and partner avoidant conflict resolution, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety. In this model, actor attachment avoidance \((b = -2.58, p = .004)\) and actor attachment anxiety \((b = -2.41, p = .003)\) were both strongly and negatively associated with relational quality. Partner attachment avoidance was found to be strongly associated with relational quality \((b = -2.04, p = .025)\), while partner anxiety did not reach statistical significance \((b = -1.27, p = .108)\). Using the formula for pseudo \(R^2\) provided by Kenny et al., (2006), it was determined that Model 3 explained 22.6% of the variance in the outcome variable.

Table 8

*Summary Table of All Variables Included in Model 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>(p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>.358</td>
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<td>Actor Attachment Anxiety</td>
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<td>.003</td>
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<td>Partner Attachment Anxiety</td>
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<td>-1.617</td>
<td>.108</td>
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<td>Actor Attachment Avoidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Avoidance</td>
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<td>.675</td>
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<td>Partner Avoidant Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>-1.297</td>
<td>.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x Partner Avoidant Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>-.667</td>
<td>.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Avoidant Conflict Resolution x Actor Anxiety</td>
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<td>-.336</td>
<td>.737</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor Avoidant Conflict Resolution x Actor Avoidance</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hypothesis 10: It was hypothesized that higher levels of self-reported actor avoidant conflict would be associated with lower levels of relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis (See Table 8). Contrary to predictions, these analyses indicated a non-significant association between avoidant conflict resolution and relational quality \( (b = .046, p = .675) \). Therefore, support was not found for Hypothesis 10.

Hypothesis 11: It was hypothesized that higher levels of partner avoidant conflict would be associated with lower levels of relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis (See Table 8). These analyses indicated a non-significant association between partner avoidant conflict resolution and relational quality \( (b = -.143, p = .197) \). Therefore, support was not found for Hypothesis 11.

Hypothesis 12: It was hypothesized that actor avoidant conflict resolution scores and actor attachment anxiety would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. Additionally, it was hypothesized that actor avoidant conflict resolution scores and actor attachment avoidance would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. To test these hypotheses, two interaction terms were created: one with actor anxiety and actor avoidant conflict resolution, and another with actor avoidance and actor avoidant conflict resolution. As shown in Table 8, tests of fixed effects indicated that actor avoidant conflict and attachment anxiety did not interact to significantly predict relational quality \( (b = -.034, p = .737) \). The interaction of actor attachment avoidance with avoidant conflict resolution also was not significantly associated with relational quality \( (b = .005, p = .970) \). Therefore, neither Hypothesis 12a nor Hypothesis 12b was supported by the data.
Hypothesis 13: It was hypothesized that actor avoidant conflict resolution scores and partner avoidant conflict resolution would interact to predict lower levels of relational quality. To test this hypothesis, an interaction term was again created with both actor and partner avoidant conflict resolution, and tests of fixed effects were conducted (See Table 8). Results indicated that the interaction of actor and partner avoidant conflict resolution did not reach statistical significance ($b = -0.013, p = 0.507$). Therefore, Hypothesis 13 was not supported by the data.

Model 4: Constructive Conflict Resolution

To test Model 4 predictions, an APIM, multi-level analysis was conducted in which the outcome variable was the actor’s relational quality score. The predictor variables were gender, the actor’s scores and the partner’s scores on constructive conflict resolution, attachment avoidance, and attachment anxiety. In this model, actor attachment avoidance ($b = -3.06, \ p = 0.001$) and actor attachment anxiety ($b = -2.17, \ p = 0.006$) were both negatively associated with relational quality. This indicates actor attachment avoidance and anxiety are both associated with lower relational quality. Additionally, results indicated that higher levels of partner avoidance ($b = -2.25, \ p = 0.011$), but not partner anxiety ($b = -1.20, \ p = 0.121$), were associated with lower levels of relational quality. Using the formula for pseudo $R^2$ provided by Kenny et al., (2006), it was determined that Model 4 explained 20% of the variance in the outcome variable. See Table 9 for a summary of all of the predictor variables included in this model.
Table 9

*Summary Table of All Variables Included in Model 4*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<td>Partner Attachment Anxiety</td>
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<td>-1.561</td>
<td>.121</td>
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<td>Actor Attachment Avoidance</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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<td>Partner Attachment Avoidance</td>
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<td>.011</td>
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<td>Actor Constructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>.957</td>
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<td>Partner Constructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>-.300</td>
<td>.764</td>
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<td>Actor x Partner Constructive Conflict Resolution</td>
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<td>-1.060</td>
<td>.292</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor Constructive Conflict Resolution x Anxiety</td>
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<td>-2.866</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Constructive Conflict Resolution x Avoidance</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>1.446</td>
<td>.150</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Hypothesis 14**: It was hypothesized that higher levels of self-reported actor constructive conflict resolution would be associated with higher relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis (See Table 9). Contrary to predictions, these analyses indicated a non-significant association between constructive conflict resolution and relational quality ($b = .004$, $p = .957$). Therefore, support was not found for Hypothesis 14.

**Hypothesis 15**: It was hypothesized that higher levels of partner constructive conflict resolution would be associated with higher relational quality. Tests of fixed effects were performed to test this hypothesis. Like the previous finding, Table 9 shows that these analyses indicated a non-significant association between partner constructive
conflict resolution and relational quality \( (b = -.023, p = .764) \). Therefore, support was not found for Hypothesis 15.

**Hypothesis 16:** It was hypothesized that actor constructive conflict resolution scores and actor attachment anxiety would interact to predict relational quality. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that actor constructive conflict resolution scores and actor attachment avoidance would interact to predict relational quality. To test these hypotheses, two interaction terms were created: one with actor anxiety and actor constructive conflict resolution, and another with actor avoidance and actor constructive conflict resolution. As shown in Table 9, although constructive conflict was not an independent contributor, tests of fixed effects indicated that the interaction of actor constructive conflict and attachment anxiety was strongly and negatively associated with relational quality \( (b = -.187, p = .005) \). This finding suggests that when actor anxiety is low, actor constructive conflict is associated with *increasing* relational quality; however, this relationship is significantly different when actor anxiety is high, where actor constructive conflict is associated with *decreasing* relational quality. Figure 3 illustrates this interaction between actor constructive conflict resolution and actor anxiety on relational quality. However, the interaction of actor attachment avoidance with constructive conflict resolution did not reach statistical significance \( (b = .128, p = .150) \). Therefore, Hypothesis 16a was supported by the data while Hypothesis 16b was not supported by the data.
Hypothesis 17: It was hypothesized that actor constructive conflict resolution scores and partner constructive conflict resolution would interact to predict higher levels of relational quality. To test this hypothesis, an interaction term was again created with both actor and partner constructive conflict resolution, and tests of fixed effects were conducted. As shown in Table 9, results indicated that the association of this interaction with relational quality did not reach statistical significance ($b = -.010, p = .292$). Therefore, Hypothesis 17 was not supported by the data.

**Exploratory Analyses**

Results from the planned analyses suggested the strong association of the psychological abuse variable with the outcome variable of relational quality.
Consequently, post hoc exploratory analyses were conducted to examine psychological abuse victimization and perpetration. Specifically, a dichotomous variable was created based on which partner had the higher score of psychological abuse received. This analysis dichotomized partners into victims and perpetrators based on which partner had the highest self-reported psychological abuse received. All variables and interaction terms that were tested for the hypothesized models were entered into the exploratory model. Next, interaction terms were created with the new variable, victim status, and actor and partner anxiety, actor and partner avoidance, as well as actor and partner psychological abuse. Additionally, exploratory interaction terms were created with gender by actor anxiety, partner anxiety, actor avoidance, partner avoidance, actor psychological abuse received and partner psychological abuse received. Of the exploratory interaction terms created, only those that reached a .05 level of statistical significance were retained in the model. Using the formula for pseudo $R^2$ provided by Kenny et al., (2006), it was determined that the exploratory model explained 40% of the variance in the outcome variable. Table 10 includes all variables included in the exploratory model.

Tests of fixed effects were conducted to explore the effects of gender, psychological abuse victim status (e.g., victim or perpetrator), actor and partner attachment avoidance, actor and partner anxiety, as well as actor and partner psychological abuse received on actor relational quality, and Hypotheses 2 through 5 were re-run. Two interaction terms were created with gender and actor as well as partner attachment avoidance. Only results that reached statistical significance will be reported here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.184</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>.878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Attachment Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Anxiety</td>
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<td>.677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Attachment Avoidance</td>
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<td>1.453</td>
<td>.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-2.82</td>
<td>-2.820</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.348</td>
<td>.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>-.214</td>
<td>-3.865</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor anxiety x actor avoidance</td>
<td>.710</td>
<td>.844</td>
<td>.400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x partner anxiety</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.784</td>
<td>.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x partner avoidance</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>2.606</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor x partner psychological abuse</td>
<td>.0007</td>
<td>1.435</td>
<td>.155</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor psychological abuse x actor anxiety</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>1.895</td>
<td>.061</td>
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<td>Actor psychological abuse x actor avoidance</td>
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<td>-3.662</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender x actor attachment avoidance</td>
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<td>-3.608</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender x partner attachment avoidance</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>3.379</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim x partner psychological abuse</td>
<td>.211</td>
<td>2.883</td>
<td>.005</td>
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</table>
Exploratory analyses indicated victims (i.e., individuals reporting higher psychological abuse received) reported significantly lower relational quality than their perpetrating partners \( (b = 6.03, p = .000) \). For victims, their partner’s report of psychological abuse received (i.e., perpetrated by the victim on the partner) is significantly associated with lower relational quality \( (b = -.214, p = .000) \). This indicates that greater reciprocal psychological abuse (i.e., higher levels of psychological abuse received by both partners) is associated with lower relational quality. Results indicated that the main effect of partner avoidance on relational quality increased from the first analysis \( (b = -1.53, p = .062) \) to reach statistical significance in the exploratory analysis \( (b = -2.82, p = .006) \), thereby supporting Hypothesis 3b. Similarly, the interaction of actor avoidance and actor psychological abuse increased in significance from the initial analysis \( (b = -.033, p = .054) \) in the exploratory analyses, \( (b = -.07, p = .000) \). This finding provides stronger support for Hypothesis 4c.

Most notable was the greater support for Hypothesis 5b that actor and partner avoidance would interact to predict lower relational quality. The initial analysis indicated that actor and partner avoidance did not interact to predict relational quality \( (b = .333, p = .756) \). However, with the addition of the victimization variable into the exploratory model, the results of the actor and partner avoidance interaction term reached statistical significance \( (b = 3.34, p = .011) \). This indicates that at low levels of actor avoidance, increasing partner avoidance is associated with lower relational quality. However, this relationship becomes more positive as actor avoidance increases. At higher levels of actor avoidance, relational quality increases with partner avoidance. Although this finding suggests that if both partners demonstrate higher levels of avoidant attachment, reported
The interaction of actor and partner avoidance as predicted by Hypothesis 5b.

Additional interaction terms were created between gender and attachment avoidance, as well as gender and attachment anxiety to explore the influence of sex on attachment processes. Analyses indicated that increasing actor avoidance has a more negative impact on relational quality for females than for males ($b = -7.680$, $p = .000$). Similarly, increasing partner avoidance had a more negative impact on relational quality for females than for males ($b = 7.062$, $p = .001$).
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations of attachment processes, conflict resolution strategies, and psychological abuse to relational adjustment using the actor partner interdependence model to assess both actor and partner effects present in the marital dyad. Although previous researchers have investigated these associations, most existing studies are limited by their reliance upon single, forced-choice items to measure attachment style. Additionally, most studies examining the relationship of attachment processes to conflict resolution and psychological abuse have used college dating samples and included data from only one member of a couple. To address these limitations, the present study used a well-supported instrument of adult attachment style with a sample of middle class married couples in both metropolitan and rural communities who were not seeking treatment for marital distress. In addition, we used sophisticated new analytical techniques based on the Actor partner interdependence model (Kenny et al., 2006) to account for inter-dependent data and assess both actor and partner effects in the marital dyad. Findings suggested mixed support for hypothesized associations between the variables of attachment anxiety and avoidance, conflict resolution, psychological abuse and relational quality. This chapter will address findings of the specific hypotheses and exploratory analyses. Lastly, research and clinical implications will also be discussed.
Attachment Processes

Results indicated that while gender was not a significant predictor in the models hypothesized, it was nevertheless important to consider. Results indicated that males in this sample reported higher mean scores on attachment avoidance, while the findings for attachment anxiety were not significantly different for males and females. Findings also indicated that increasing actor attachment avoidance has a more negative impact on relational quality for females than males. Similarly, increasing partner avoidance has a more negative impact on relational quality for females than males.

Current findings supported the previous attachment research indicating that across cultures, males are more likely to report avoidant attachment behaviors than females (Schmitt, Alcalay, Allensworth, et al., 2003; Schmitt, 2008). This might be because male avoidance may be a socialized quality that fits a culturally acceptable social role for men to be more emotionally distant (Bem, 1993; Feingold, 1994). Brody and Hall (1993) reviewed the literature on gender and emotion, and found that men reported less emotional expressiveness than women. Likewise, research has found that across cultures, men are less nurturing of their social bonds, less trusting of others, and thus more socially isolated than their female counterparts (Feingold, 1994). Difficulties with interpersonal trust and closeness are highly similar to the characteristics of dismissing attachment (Schmitt, 2008) identified by Bowlby and other attachment researchers. Some researchers posit that given the preponderance of avoidant attachment behaviors of men across cultures, it can be suggested that male avoidance may be designed to serve an evolutionary function by increasing mating opportunities (Schmitt, 2003, 2005).
In contrast, the traditional female sex role is one of nurturing and caretaking (Geary, 1998), except in cases where female’s dismissing attachment become culturally contingent due to harsh physical environments or other environmental stressors (Belsky et al., 1991; Belsky, 1999) causing them to shift away from less avoidant, longer-term relational and mating strategies towards more dismissing and shorter-term relational approach (Chisholm, 1996). Findings further suggested that females’ attachment avoidance has a more negative impact on relational quality than males’ avoidance. According to gender studies researchers, women value connectedness more than men and therefore a partner’s avoidance may be inherently more dissatisfying to women than men (Gilligan, 1982; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995). In addition, because female avoidance is less culturally sanctioned, its existence may be more detrimental to heterosexual relationships, which consequently may lack the nurturing quality that is usually the female’s socialized role.

Present findings echo past research demonstrating that attachment avoidance is strongly and inversely related to relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Campbell, Simpson, Kashy & Rholes, 2001). Attachment avoidance reflects negative views of others and more protective, positive views of the self, and is associated with distancing during times of distress in order to inhibit affect and minimize the impact of attachment relationships (Creasey, 2005; Shi, 2003). Avoidant individuals are less comfortable with closeness and tend to withdraw from conflict. Not surprisingly, findings indicated that both actor and partner attachment avoidance independently were negatively associated with relational quality. Due to their withdrawal and fear of intimacy, avoidant individuals may be more likely to promote their spouse’s dissatisfaction, and
consequently, they may experience less satisfying marital relationships by eliciting the rejection they expect from their partners in intimate relationships (Pistole & Arricale, 2003).

A somewhat surprising and unexpected finding resulted when examining the interaction of partner attachment styles. Findings indicated at a statistically significant level that if respondents with higher avoidance had partners with higher avoidance, respondents’ relational quality increased. This suggests that partners matched by level of avoidance experience better relational quality than those who differ in attachment avoidance. It is possible that mutual avoidance of difficult topics and emotions may initially contribute to a stable, functioning marital system. However, the current sample was comprised of newlyweds and avoidant individuals may successfully repress or avoid conflict such that their relational quality was not yet affected in the early years of marriage. While this might be a helpful short-term solution, long-term consequences of avoiding conflict are most likely to be negative, leading to disengagement and distance between spouses. Alternatively, some researchers have argued that avoidant individuals may have a tendency to idealize themselves and unhealthy relationship patterns (Main, 1996; Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2002), and deactivate from their feelings in order to manage negative affect (Magai, 1999). Therefore, present findings may indicate that avoidant individuals and their partners may minimize problems and report idealized perceptions of a mutually disengaged relationship. Further research is needed to replicate current findings and explore these patterns among couples in later stages of the marital life cycle.
Current findings also indicate that actor attachment anxiety showed statistically significant main effects in three of five models, whereas partner attachment anxiety was uniformly non-significant. Research on the contribution of attachment anxiety to romantic relationship functioning has been equivocal. For example, some researchers have found that attachment anxiety had little impact on their partner’s relational quality (Campbell et al., 2001), while others have found that attachment anxiety is significantly predictive of actor and partner relationship outcomes (Davila, Bradbury & Fincham, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). Our results suggest that attachment anxiety has detrimental effects on marital functioning, likely due to more negative views of the self and worries that attachment figures will not be responsive or available when needed. During conflict, attachment anxiety is associated with greater hostility, perhaps in an attempt to transfer uncertainty from the self to the other (Creasey & Ladd, 2005), as well as greater emotional arousal and dissatisfaction with the partner (Simpson, Ickes & Grich, 1999). Attachment anxiety is usually therefore associated with greater conflict escalation (Creasey & Ladd, 2004); however, because they fear abandonment by their partner, individuals with greater attachment anxiety may have difficulties approaching a partner with a relationship problem while angrily complaining to others about the relationship problem.

However, overall actor and partner avoidance showed statistically stronger main effects than attachment anxiety in all but one model. It is possible that anxiety, while not positively associated with relational quality, is not as detrimental to the relationship as avoidance because attachment anxiety involves the fundamentally pro-relationship behavior of turning towards the partner. This suggests that partner’s avoidant attachment
behaviors (e.g., discomfort with closeness, discomfort with dependency), may have a stronger negative impact on the relationship than a partner’s anxious behaviors (e.g., worries about partner’s affection, intense desire for closeness). Individuals with high attachment anxiety are prone to internalize blame for problems in the relationship (Gormley, 2005), and excessively care-take based on their projections of their partner’s needs (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). In spite of their vulnerability to be perceived by their partners as clingy and dependent, individuals with high attachment anxiety are seen as responsive to their partners. In contrast, attachment avoidance involves one partner turning away from the other as a way to manage fears of losing connection (Shi, 2003), which may be experienced as rejection by the partner or at the very least non-responsiveness to partner needs (Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Furthermore, attachment avoidance also interferes with efforts to resolve conflict, as avoidant attachment is more likely to be associated with avoiding conflict (Pistole & Arricale, 2003) as a way to avoid vulnerability and rejection.

Psychological Abuse, Attachment Processes and Relational Quality

Attachment theory suggests that psychological abuse and other maladaptive conflict resolution strategies may be used as an attempt to manage differing needs for closeness and distance within the couple (Pistole, 1994). The present study contributes to the growing body of literature establishing the association between adult attachment style and relationship conflict (Ben-Ari- & Lavee, 2005; Collins & Read, 1990; Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002; Davila, Bradbury, & Fincham, 1998; Shi, 2003; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999) as well as relationship aggression (Bookwala, 2002;
Most relationships include some amount of verbal aggression (Busby, Holman, & Walker, 2008), which occurs in normal, everyday interactions (Marshall, 1999). Marshall also asserted that psychological abuse occurs regardless of the perpetrators intent to harm or the victim’s consciousness of the acts as abusive. The measure used in the present study was based on Marshall’s (1999) premise of a broader definition of psychological abuse than other instruments common in the literature focusing on overt verbal aggression (e.g., CTS; Straus, 1978; ISA; Hudson & McIntosh, 1981; PWMI; Tolman, 1989). In the present study, gender differences emerged indicating that males reported receiving more psychological abuse than females. Although some research suggests that males and females perpetrate similar amounts of psychological abuse, the current finding is congruent with other studies indicating that males report receiving more psychological abuse than their female counterparts (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004; Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002; Jezl et al., 1996; Molidar, 1995). Because the SOPAS focuses on both subtle and overt forms of psychological abuse that happen in everyday interactions, it could be that the increased incidence of female-perpetrated psychological abuse in the present study is indicative of what happens in households of non-clinical couples. Another explanation for the finding might be the broader definition of psychological abuse measured by the instrument used in the present study, the SOPAS (Marshall, 1999).

As expected from previous research, actor psychological abuse received was strongly associated with both actor avoidance and actor anxiety; however, while actor psychological abuse was also strongly associated with partner anxiety, it was not
associated at a statistically significant level with partner avoidance. This stands in contradiction to other research findings that partner avoidance is more strongly related to the infliction of psychological abuse (O’Hearn & Davis, 1997). However, the current study does support previous findings indicating that partner anxiety is associated with both the infliction and receipt of psychological abuse. This makes sense in light of attachment theorists’ assertion that individuals with attachment anxiety are hyper-vigilant to the availability of their attachment figures (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994), which can lead to hostile forms of conflict (Beyder-Kamjou, 2005).

Current findings for Model 1 indicated that consistent with past research, there was a main effect for both actor and partner psychological abuse and relational quality, suggesting that both the receipt and perpetration of psychological abuse detrimentally affects romantic relationship quality. Furthermore, although the interaction of actor psychological abuse with actor anxiety did not reach statistical significance, findings indicated that for individuals with high actor avoidance, there was a negative relationship between actor psychological abuse and relational quality; however, this association became weaker as actor avoidance decreased. These findings suggest that while psychological abuse receipt is directly associated with lower relational quality, particularly for highly avoidant individuals, less avoidant individuals, who also report receiving psychological abuse from their spouse do not perceive their marital relationship to be poorly adjusted. Low avoidance could indicate a more secure orientation, which may buffer the negative effects of overt or subtle psychological abuse from the spouse. Previous research has indicated that secure individuals are more likely to have positive cognitions about relational events (e.g., arguments) and provide optimistic explanations
for ambiguous relational events to minimize the potential negative impact (Collins, 1996; Collins & Feeney, 2004). Alternatively, if the abused individual is low on avoidance but also high on anxiety, this individual may still report positive relational quality due to the positive representations of others and persisting needs for closeness in spite of undesirable spousal behavior. In addition, internal models of the self as bad, unworthy, or incapable may engender self-blame for mistreatment, creating a greater likelihood of tolerating poor treatment by others (Liem & Boudewyn, 1999).

Exploratory analyses were conducted on the basis of findings from the theoretically driven hypotheses tested, which suggested that examining differences within the couple by separating victims and perpetrators contributed to the strength of the analyses. The exploratory model explained more of the variance than any of the hypothesized models. These analyses showed that for perpetrators, there was no relationship between their partner’s report of psychological abuse received and their own relational quality. Findings therefore indicate that the relational quality of perpetrators does not appear to be affected by their partner’s report of psychological abuse victimization. This might be because psychological abuse perpetrators might not recognize their behavior as abusive; rather, they might believe they are attempting to manage conflict by exercising control and in so doing, aggress against their partner.

Current findings of the exploratory analysis indicated that for actors who received psychological abuse from their partners, their partner’s receipt of psychological abuse was significantly associated with lower actor relational quality. Weston (2008) found that over the long term, higher levels of mutual psychological abuse present in the relationship are likely to be detrimental not just to relational quality, but also to the
attachment bond. As the actor receives psychological abuse and retaliates by perpetrating more psychological abuse against their partner, causing psychological abuse to escalate in the relationship, the attachment bond may deteriorate resulting in higher levels of abuse and lower relational quality. Weston’s findings, although limited by the exclusion of men in the study, suggest that as attachment security erodes due to increased psychological abuse both partners may resort to more psychological and emotional abuse rather than applying healthier conflict resolution strategies. However, further longitudinal research including both members of the dyad might be helpful in determining the cyclical association of attachment insecurity and psychological abuse.

Conflict Resolution, Attachment and Relational Quality

Marital researchers have documented the link between attachment processes and conflict resolution strategies (Creasey et al., 1999; Pistole, 1994), as well as between conflict resolution and relationship functioning (Fincham, 2003; Gottman, 1994; Rahim, 1983). The present study utilized a less well-known measure of conflict style that included a destructive conflict subscale (14 items), an avoidant conflict resolution (6 items), while the final 7 items represented constructive conflict resolution. There were some puzzling issues with the results from this measure. First, there was a high degree of positive correlation between subscales which should have been inversely related (i.e., destructive and constructive conflict). Thus, it appeared that the participants were reporting approximately the same levels of constructive as destructive conflict resolution. Second, items on the scales that might be interpreted as normative (e.g., “how often in conflict do you get angry” or “lose your temper”) might have impacted the construct validity of the scale. Third, while the scales correlated highly with each other, they were
not associated at a statistically significant level with the outcome variable, or indeed with any of the other predictor variables that would be theoretically predictable (e.g., avoidant conflict resolution behaviors correlated with attachment avoidance). It should be noted that attachment avoidance and anxiety, both at the actor and partner levels, reached or approached statistical significance in each of the three conflict resolution models (e.g., Destructive, Avoidant, Constructive). This suggests as the literature indicates, that attachment processes are particularly relevant when examining the impact of conflict resolution on relational quality. Due to the issues raised above, findings with the conflict resolution scales were interpreted with extreme caution.

As was the case in Model 1, actor avoidance was significantly associated with lower actor relational quality across all conflict models. Additionally, the trends found for actor attachment anxiety and partner avoidance in the psychological abuse model increased to significance in all 3 models. Contrary to predictions, however, results in the destructive conflict model indicated that higher actor destructive conflict resolution was associated with higher actor relational quality. This counter-intuitive finding suggests that couples more comfortable with reporting destructive conflict resolution behaviors may in fact experience greater relational quality. This may be due to the participants’ belief that such behavior might be constructive or normative during conflict, and thus contributing to a positive marital relationship. For example, items such as “lose your temper” might be perceived as normative behaviors by couples more comfortable with reporting behaviors considered by researchers as destructive. This might make sense in light of clinical observations that an absence of conflict is indicative of emotional disengagement, which may be equally or more detrimental to the relationship as destructive conflict.
Although findings from the present study suggested no direct associations of destructive conflict strategies with either attachment anxiety or avoidance, an interaction effect was noted indicating that increasing actor avoidance was associated with decreased relational quality when actor destructive conflict was high. This suggests that the combination of greater avoidance with greater destructive conflict was detrimental to the relationship. Given that destructive conflict was directly related to higher relational quality, these results suggest a complex relationship between attachment processes and conflict resolution strategies, such that actor destructive conflict has opposing effects depending on the level of attachment avoidance. Specifically, in the context of an avoidant attachment style, destructive conflict style appears to have a negative impact on the marital relationship whereas the reverse is true for less avoidant individuals. This finding suggests that conflict resolution strategies may work differently for different people depending on their underlying attachment processes. Alternatively, results might indicate a perceptual bias associated with avoidant attachment to interpret partner behavior negatively (Collins & Feeney, 1994). Dismissing/avoidant adults tend to avoid or withdraw from conflict, generally demonstrating low levels of obliging, compromising and integrating behavior (Corcoran, Mallinkrodt, 2000; Creasey et al., 1999; Shi, 2003). Thus, when they do make proactive efforts to resolve conflict, they may perceive that their partner is rejecting their attempts, which then could decrease their satisfaction with the relationship.

Results from the avoidant conflict resolution model only yielded main effects with actor avoidance, anxiety and partner avoidance with no interactions between avoidant conflict and the outcome variable. This is perhaps surprising in light of marital
conflict research and theory which has indicated that an avoidance of or disengagement/withdrawal from conflict is a distinct pattern of maladaptive coping behavior (e.g., Rahim, 1983; Fincham, 2003). Other studies have found significant associations between attachment avoidance and conflict withdrawal (Creasey et al., 1999; Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Current findings might be explained by individuals, whether anxious or avoidant, not perceiving themselves as avoiding or withdrawing from conflict; instead, the participants in the present sample seemed to report higher means of both destructive and constructive conflict resolution. It should also be noted that the avoidant conflict resolution scale was comprised of the fewest items of the measure, which may indicate the necessity of a broadening of the construct of avoidant conflict on the instrument.

Results from the constructive conflict resolution model also indicated main effects with actor and partner avoidance and actor anxiety. However, as with the previous models, no statistically significant main effects were found with partner anxiety. Findings from the current study also indicate that greater actor attachment avoidance and anxiety are both associated with lower relational quality. However, findings indicated that when actor anxiety is high, increasing constructive conflict resolution is associated with lower relational quality. This may be because attachment anxiety is associated with a heightened concern with closeness, and these individuals are vigilant to threats to the relationship which conflict represents. Anxious/preoccupied individuals are thus more likely to respond to any type of conflict with increased stress and agitation (Simpson, Rholes & Phillips, 1996), as well as redoubled efforts to maintain the connection to the partner. Therefore, individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety may demonstrate
increased constructive conflict behavior when threatened and fearing abandonment, which would be associated with decreased relational quality that could either precede or follow the conflict behavior. This overall pattern of findings suggests that attachment processes may outweigh conflict resolution styles in the contribution to relational quality, and may in fact be more critical to relationship functioning than previously thought (Shi, 2003).

The counter-intuitive findings regarding conflict resolution in the present study may make sense in the context of a growing body of research which suggests that positive and negative forms of couple interactions are not highly correlated with each other (Beyder-Kamjou, 2005; Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Indeed, the literature has been mixed regarding couples usage of constructive conflict. Theoretical articles have proposed that secure individuals should be more capable than insecure individuals when dealing with conflict, without resorting to psychological abuse of their partners (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994; Pistole & Arricale, 2003). However, in a recent study by Beyder-Kamjou of couples seeking treatment for marital conflict, no differences were found between secure and insecure couples use of constructive conflict resolution, and secure individuals reported using more psychologically abusive conflict strategies than their insecure counterparts. Beyder-Kamjou concluded that her counter-intuitive findings might be due to the clinical nature of her sample; however, findings of the present study on couples not seeking treatment for marital distress seem to imply that the association between attachment and conflict resolution behaviors in couples may be more complex than previously thought.
Researchers and clinicians alike agree that conflict in intimate relationships is inevitable. However, many individuals never learned in their family of origin how to successfully resolve conflict, and instead resort to psychological abuse, avoidance and other forms of destructive approaches to conflict which can harm the relationship irreparably (Markman, 1991). The findings of the present study highlight the need for researchers and theorists alike to develop a theory of marital conflict (Fincham & Beach, 1999), taking into account the significant contribution attachment theory has made to relationship conflict research. While there is a substantial body of research on attachment and relational conflict, most attachment researchers have used self-report methods but have only included one member of the couple dyad. In contrast, while many marital conflict researchers have been able to include both members of the marital dyad in their studies, their methodology has centered on observational (e.g., Gottman & Driver, 2005) rather than self-report data. It is clear that more work needs to be done on both theory development and empirical validation to more fully understand the complex association of attachment, psychological abuse and conflict behavior in couples.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several important and noteworthy strengths when compared to other studies of marital relationships. First and most significantly is the use of dyadic, rather than individual, data. The current study extends past research which has largely been conducted with one member, rather than both members, of the couple. By studying couples rather than individuals in romantic relationships, the analyses could account for the interdependence of the dyadic data. The sample included couples in the community who volunteered, and were presumably not in enough distress to be seeking treatment.
Therefore, the results reported above may be generalizeable to populations of non-clinical couples. Additionally, use of multilevel modeling procedures and the Actor partner interdependence model allowed for within-dyad and between-dyad analyses. Furthermore, use of the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) inventory allowed for the examination of the continuous variables of attachment avoidance and anxiety. The ECR has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across studies, and has become one of the most widely used and respected instruments in attachment research.

In spite of these important strengths of the present study, there are also several important limitations. First, the sample was composed predominantly of Caucasian-American participants of high educational attainment in a large metropolitan area in the Southeast. Thus, findings of the present study may be less applicable to samples of more diverse cultural, ethnic, and educational backgrounds in other areas of the country. Furthermore, considering the dearth of research on gay and lesbian relationships, it would be extremely beneficial to replicate this study with homosexual relationship partners in order to determine if the same processes of attachment and psychological abuse are relevant to lesbian and gay relational quality.

Second, although the conflict resolution measure used in the present study exhibited appropriate internal validity, the results of the present study make the construct validity of the measure somewhat uncertain. A well-established measure of conflict resolution such as Rahim’s (1983) Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983) might provide more insight into the association between attachment processes, psychological abuse, and conflict resolution on relational quality. The ROCI-II has two dimensions that might be particularly relevant to attachment researchers: attempts to
satisfy their own concerns, and attempts to satisfy other’s concerns. Additionally, the ROCI-II categorizes partners into one of five styles of resolving conflict: integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising. Another well-known and more recent measure of conflict resolution in couples is Kurdek’s (1996) Conflict Resolution Style Inventory, which assesses negative problem solving, conflict engagement, and withdrawal behaviors as well as an ineffective arguing scale. Either of these measures might contribute to and extend the body of literature on attachment and conflict resolution.

Third, the psychological abuse measure used in the present study, the Brief Subtle and Overt Psychological Abuse Scale (SOPAS; Marshall) produced two scales of subtle and overt psychological abuse that were so highly correlated as to call into question their existence as separate constructs. Therefore the total score was used as the measure of psychological abuse. While this measure is in the process of further validation, it may be beneficial to administer the SOPAS with additional psychological abuse measures. Additionally, in future revisions of the SOPAS and other psychological abuse measures, it would be beneficial to include items addressing technological advances (e.g., texting, Facebook, email). These technological advances have widened the scope of psychologically abusive behaviors beyond face-to-face conversations to public forums where greater victim harassment, humiliation and coercion is possible by perpetrators using non-physical forms of aggression to control their partners.

Fourth, the current study relied on self-report, which are subject to social desirability bias. However, with respect to psychological abuse, this is somewhat offset by examining respondent’s perceptions of their partner’s psychologically aggressive
behavior towards them, rather than the respondent’s report of their own behavior. Additionally, a measure including other forms of relationship abuse (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse) may be beneficial in order to examine additional factors of poor relational quality.

Fifth, the current study was limited to non-clinical populations of married couples married 1-5 years without children. It might be beneficial to extend the research to a cross-section of couples married longer than 5 years, to married couples with children, and to clinical populations of married couples in distress and seeking treatment.

Clinical Implications

The present study has important implications for clinicians as well as researchers. The findings from the present study underscore the critical importance of attending to emotionally and psychologically abusive behaviors in intimate relationships. In individual therapy sessions, clinicians should be sensitive to the presence of both subtle and overt psychological abuse in their client’s relationships, and provide psycho-education about what it is and how it can impact relationship functioning over time. In couples and family therapy sessions, clinicians should be vigilant to psychologically abusive language in the room, and work to identify it as abusive for both partners so that more effective forms of communication can be facilitated. Similarly, findings of the present study highlight the significance of attachment avoidance in relationship functioning. Individual therapists can assist clients toward developing more secure attachment strategies by addressing deficits in affect regulation skills and reconstructing negative internal working models of self and other. Couples therapists who identify
insecure patterns of relating can work toward increasing responsiveness to partner needs, and improving conflict resolution strategies.

Conclusions

In interpreting the results of the present study, some general conclusions can be drawn about the importance of attachment processes, psychological abuse, conflict resolution and relational quality. The first important point is the relative importance of attachment avoidance in relational quality. Across models, both actor and partner avoidance appeared to be strongly associated with relational quality, while actor and partner anxiety performed less dependably. The second critical point is that the current study underscores the importance of examining relationship abuse with both members of the couple rather than individuals. The consistent performance of the psychological abuse variable in relation to relational quality suggests that subtle as well as overt forms of psychological abuse are important to measure, and provide support for Marshall’s tenet that psychological abuse should be defined more broadly, considering both subtle and overt ways psychological abuse can be perpetrated in everyday interactions. The third conclusion drawn from the present study is the necessity of using multilevel, analytic approaches such as the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) to account for interdependence in dyadic data. While the data structure is somewhat difficult to organize initially, the APIM framework provides a language with which the researcher can explain and more readily interpret findings. As researchers persist in their efforts to understand the contribution of attachment processes and relationship abuse on intimate relationships, it will be increasingly important to continue developing methodological and statistical approaches capable of handling the complexities of dyadic data.
REFERENCES


