

The Role of Rejection Sensitivity in the Relations between Attachment and Aggression in High Risk Boys and Girls*

Ingrid V. Obsuth, Marlene M. Moretti, Andree R. Steiger
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC

Introduction

Research demonstrates that both attachment security and rejection sensitivity are important in the prediction of aggression. For example, Downey, Feldman, and Ayduk (2000) found that, among male college students, violence towards romantic partners was predicted by both higher relationship investment and anxious expectations of rejection. In a subsequent study, London, Downey, Bonica, and Paltin (2007) found that anxious rejection sensitivity and angry rejection sensitivity predicted distinct vulnerabilities for aggression among adolescents. These authors examined the role of attachment security in predicting individual differences in responses to perceived rejection.

The current study extends the work of these researchers by examining whether specific aspects of attachment security (anxiety and avoidance) and rejection sensitivity (anxious and angry expectations of rejection) *interact* to predict relationship aggression among adolescents at risk for aggressive and violent behavior. Sex differences in the level of self-reported rejection sensitivity and attachment security were expected. However, the interaction between these variables was not expected to differ significantly for boys and girls.

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 adolescents (60 males; 60 females) aged 13 – 18 at high-risk for aggressive behaviour. About 60 % were incarcerated at a youth custody centre and 40% were admitted to an assessment facility for mental health problems. Girls were on average 15.05 years of age, while boys were on average 15.58 years of age.

The majority identified themselves as Caucasian (65%), 22% as Aboriginal and 13% as other; 42% of youth were not in the legal care of their biological parents, 44% moved more than 10 times in their life, 55% used a weapon in a fight, 95% engaged in at least one fist fight. Further, 46% reported to have been physically abused and 66% reported to have observed inter-parental violence.

Measures

Adolescent Attachment Interview (AdAI). A 1- to 2-hour semi-structured interview coded by reliable coders based on Bartholomew^a coding system (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Based on youths' accounts of their experiences and feelings in family relationships, and coherence of their accounts, the coders rated the interviews on the degree of correspondence to each of four attachment prototypes – secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing on a scale ranging from 1 to 9 (no to excellent correspondence with prototype). Next, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance scores were computed following these formulas (Scharfe, 2002):

$$\text{Anxiety} = \text{Fearful} + \text{Preoccupied} - (\text{Secure} - \text{Dismissing})$$

$$\text{Avoidance} = \text{Fearful} + \text{Dismissing} - (\text{Secure} - \text{Preoccupied})$$

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire – Revised (RSQ-R). A revised version of the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998). Assesses the angry and anxious components of rejection sensitivity through 6 hypothetical situations in which rejection by a close friend and by a romantic partner are assessed on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Extremely*).

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-R). A broadly used questionnaire that assesses violence and aggression within relationships modified (CTS-R; Pepler & Craig, 1998) to include indices of verbal and physical forms of aggression both perpetrated and experienced within family, peer and romantic relationships. Participants were asked to rate six items on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 4 (*Always*) to indicate to what extent they had engaged in or experienced violence within each of these relationship contexts.

Results

Table 1. Zero order correlations (Girls & Boys).

	Att. Anxiety	Att. Avoidance	Anxious RS	Angry RS	Agg.
Att. Anxiety		-.345**	.275*	.468**	-.124
Att. Avoidance	-.314**		-.109	-.352**	-.125
Anxious RS	-.056	-.301*		.506**	.196
Angry RS	-.018	-.062	.704**		.150
Agg.	-.020	.285	-.048	.145	

Note: *p<.05, **p<.001

Hierarchical regression analyses were utilized to test for simple main effects and interaction effects.

Figure 1.
Girls

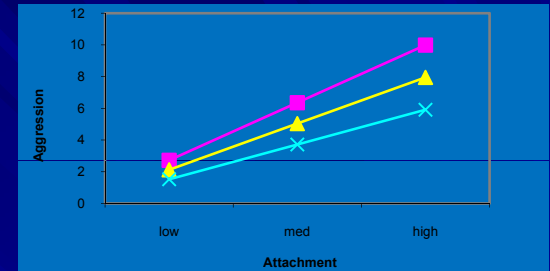
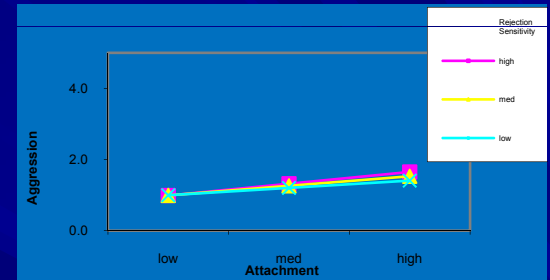


Figure 2.
Boys



Discussion

Thus, for girls rejection sensitivity moderates the relationship between attachment anxiety and aggression. This finding is consistent with our predictions, and with previous research suggesting that anxiously attached girls respond with aggression in situations where they feel threatened with rejection (Downey, Irwin, Ramsay, & Ayduk, 2004). Although our findings suggest that this moderation relationship does not generally hold true for boys, a more specific analysis of moderation in a sub-sample of boys *high* in rejection sensitivity revealed that the trend of relationships between these variables was similar for highly avoidant boys as for highly anxious girls (see Figure 2). Further investigation of moderation relationships between attachment and rejection sensitivity, with attention to gender differences and potential implications for intervention for youth at risk for aggression, is warranted.

*This research is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Institute of Gender and Health (IGH) through a New Emerging Team grant (#54020) and Operating Grant (#84567) awarded to Dr. M. Moretti. For further information see www.sfu.ca/gap or contact Dr. Moretti at moretti@sfu.ca.